



THE WOMAN IN THE WOODS
Bender sits in his Philadelphia studio beside what will be his last work: the bust of an unidentified murder victim.

HIS LAST CASE

HE BRINGS BACK THE DEAD

Forensic sculptor Frank Bender wants to help one last victim before he dies **BY NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN**

The Philadelphia medical examiner had run out of ideas and feared he might never be able to identify the badly decomposed body of a woman who'd been dumped at the airport. Then in walked Frank Bender, an eager art student visiting the office to get a quick anatomy lesson. Bender studied the remains for a few minutes and suddenly announced, "I know what she looks like." Impressed, an assistant medical examiner asked if Bender thought he could create a bust of the woman's face. Bender did,

a photo of the bust landed in the local papers, and eventually the body was identified. "I just see the image in my head, then I let my fingers do the sculpting," says Bender.

Since that first case in October 1977, Bender, now 70, has built a worldwide reputation as a forensic sculptor with an eerie ability to reconstruct what a murder victim might have looked like—even when he has nothing more to work with than a skull and a few strands of hair. He has helped solve dozens of murders and catch numerous fugitives. But his storied career



THE FIRST JANE DOE

After Bender's bust helped identify Anna Duval, police tracked down her killer, a mob hit man named John Martini, who was convicted and is now on death row.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY FRANK BENDER; COURTESY DUVAL FAMILY

is rapidly nearing its end; he is dying of mesothelioma, a rare chest cancer. Even so, Bender enthusiastically agreed last year when Northampton County Coroner Zachary Lysek asked Bender to take on what will be his last case, that of a woman whose skeleton was found in the woods near Easton, Pa., in 2001. For years Lysek had tried to identify the woman, but computer searches based on dental records and her DNA failed to turn up a match. Bender was his last hope. "There aren't many in the world that can do what he does," says Lysek. Bender's thoracic surgeon Dr. Joseph Friedberg says his patient, who has been in and out of hospice over the past month, should have been dead a year ago. "I'm completely baffled as to how he has remained so functional through what must be an unimaginable degree of pain," he says. "That is courage." For Bender, who believes identifying the victim will help authorities find the killer, what keeps him going is simple: "This is my last case. I want to see it solved before I die."



THE GIRL WITH NO FACE

Bender says his most challenging case was a skull found in Manlius, N.Y., in 1997, that was missing most of its face. The bust appeared in the local news and was identified as Lorean Quincy Weaver, 25, of Rochester, N.Y.



THE GIRL THE HUNTER FOUND

A hunter found the bones of a woman on the hilltop of a farm outside Slatington, Pa., in 1979. Two years later Bender created this bust, which was identified by the victim's father as Linda Keyes. Despite Bender's efforts, the cause of death is still a mystery to authorities.



THE GIRL WHO VANISHED

Lois Brown was at work in February 1990 when she spotted a newspaper article about Bender's new exhibit at a local museum, with pictures of some of his busts. One looked a lot like her grandniece Rosella Atkinson, 18, who'd vanished in Philadelphia in 1987. Dental records proved she was right. The identification led to the capture of Rosella's killer.