

Officials piece together clues, skull of man washed ashore

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A skull with a mouth full of gold fillings and deep-set eye sockets is the only clue investigators have to the probable murder of a man found washed up on Fire Island a year ago.

But the nameless, faceless skeleton will not tell detectives much until they can figure out who the skull and set of torso bones once belonged to.

That is where forensic artist David Weaver comes in. From a cubicle in the back of the Alaska Scientific Detection Laboratory in Anchorage, Weaver examines a section of rust-colored clay where an apple-sized piece of the cranium is missing.

With assistance from two archeologists from the state Department of Natural Resources, Weaver has reconstructed the missing bone pieces with clay so that he can begin building a face that might unlock the mystery to the identity of the skull.

It is a long, painstaking process that just might end right where it began — with no clues to the dead man's identity. But Weaver has to take that chance, he said.

"If you don't try, you'll never know," he explained. "To me it's a mystery; it's the intrigue of catching a bad guy — of putting some dirtbag in jail. That does it for me."

Forensic art, a term not known a decade ago, involves recreating clues in an effort to solve crime. It includes the composites that artists draw of suspects from the memory of witnesses. And it involves reconstructions such as this

See Clues, back page



Times photo by DOUGLAS VAN REETH

Forensic artist David Weaver has been called upon by investigators to piece together this skull in hopes of solving the mystery of a man washed onto Fire Island in 1989.