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Gilgo Beach killings: Victims memorialized on park benches near where remains were found



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'My heart's always been with the families'

The original makeshift memorial could not hold up to the elements through the years, but West Islip's Sara Ferro wanted to change that. NewsdayTV's Virginia Huie reports. Credit: Newsday/Photojournalist: Joseph Sperber, Drew Singh

By Lorena Mongelli

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The Gilgo Beach homicide victims will be permanently remembered on park benches that bear their names, alongside a quiet seaside stretch of Ocean Parkway that once served as a graveyard for their remains.

Three memorial benches are perched along the 13.7-mile-long Ocean Parkway Coastal Greenway bike path on the barrier island near Gilgo Beach. The roughly \$6,300 effort completed last fall was funded by the Town of Babylon, said Thomas Stay, the town's chief of staff.

"It hopefully sends a message to the family that 'you're not alone,' " Stay said, adding that the town also collaborated with the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office and New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. "It's a simple thing, but we hope it goes a long way for those families and anyone else that has been affected by these crimes."



Gilgo Beach victims, clockwise from top: Amber Lynn Costello, Megan Waterman, Melissa Barthelmy and Maureen Brainard-Barnes. Credit: Newsday composite

Relatives of four of the women killed praised and thanked officials for publicly recognizing their loved ones, hoping the public seating offers a respite for those passing through and perhaps invites others to linger and reflect on the lives lost.

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **Three memorial benches** along the Ocean Parkway Coastal Greenway bike path honor the Gilgo Beach homicide victims.
- **Several relatives** of the victims thanked the Town of Babylon for the effort, which provides a lasting tribute to their loved ones.

- **A town official** hopes the memorial benches make the families feel supported in their grief.

Millions of visitors

Amanda Funderburg, whose sister Melissa Barthelemy was killed, was grateful for the "beautiful tribute," which will help ease some of their pain, she said in a statement provided by Los Angeles-based attorney Gloria Allred, who is representing some family members of victims found in Gilgo. The benches are at path mile markers 7.25, 8 and 8.25 off a scenic path that runs from Captree State Park in Bay Shore to Jones Beach State Park. The beaches in the area attract millions of visitors each summer.

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"For those visiting Gilgo Beach, they'll find beauty in a place where we the families once experienced heartbreak. But these benches bring a warm light to the loss of our loved ones that we've endured," Funderburg's statement continues.



Nassau resident Neil O'Halloran takes a break on a Gilgo Beach victims memorial bench after bike riding on Ocean Parkway. Credit: Joseph Sperber

On an overcast Friday morning, a few people biked past the sites, but cyclist Neil O'Halloran, 66, of Nassau County, took a short sitting break. "I think it's a great idea. It was on the news for a long time," he said.

The Gilgo Four

In 2010, the search for Shannan Gilbert in Oak Beach led to the discovery of 10 other sets of remains on the barrier island, including the first victims known as the Gilgo Four: Maureen Brainard-Barnes, 25, of Norwich, Connecticut; Barthelemy, 24, of the Bronx; Megan Waterman, 22, of Scarborough, Maine; and Amber Lynn Costello, 27, of West Babylon. All were located within a quarter mile of one another near Gilgo Beach in December 2010.



Alleged Gilgo Beach serial killer Rex A. Heuermann, right, with his lawyer, Michael Brown, during a court hearing in December. Credit: Newsday/James Carbone

Around the time of those discoveries, authorities began to suspect the deaths were the work of a serial killer, but it would take over a decade to link someone to the slayings. In 2023, [authorities first arrested](#) Rex A. Heuermann, 61, of Massapequa Park, for three killings. He has since been charged in the killings of seven women, including the Gilgo Four and Sandra Costilla, 28; Jessica Taylor, 20; and Valerie Mack, 24. He has [pleaded not guilty](#) to the charges. Authorities have said most of the victims were sex workers.



Valerie Mack, 24, went missing in 2000. Credit: SCPD

A memorial for the victims

Discussions about a memorial for the Gilgo victims began with park officials in 2020, but the pandemic caused delays, according to a statement provided by Brainard-Barnes' sister, Melissa (Missy) Cann. Several of the families of the deceased collaborated "to create an area where the victims would be able to be remembered and to bring positive beauty back to the area," Cann said in a statement provided by attorney Allred. "I am very grateful and forever appreciative to the town for these benches. It means so much to us as the families."



Jessica Taylor in an undated photograph. Credit: John Ray Law via AP

Jasmine Robinson, Taylor's cousin, also said in a statement: "I'm grateful to all who helped to push for these memorial benches. It brings me peace of mind to know that none of the victims will ever be forgotten."

More than a decade ago, family and friends would stop by the Gilgo scene and leave flowers or other handmade tributes, such as makeshift crosses. But those tributes didn't withstand the passing of time, or the weather.

In 2011, the remains of Taylor and Mack were found on that stretch on Ocean Parkway. [The remains of](#) Tanya Denise Jackson, 26, and her daughter Tania Marie Dykes, 2, who were most recently identified, were also found scattered there, along with that of Karen Vergata, Newsday previously reported. An unidentified Asian male "John Doe" was also discovered. All are believed to be homicide victims.



Sara Ferro, of West Islip, helped spearhead the effort to have the Town of Babylon set up three memorial benches on Ocean Parkway to honor the Gilgo Beach victims. Credit: Joseph Sperber

'These girls deserve respect'

In the ensuing years, the Gilgo Beach killings would garner national attention. The cases gripped West Islip resident Sara Ferro, who would drive by the area and stop to pay respects at the handmade tributes that she said wouldn't last. Feeling that an official memorial was needed, she started a Change.org petition in 2022, requesting it have a "unified location." She even met with elected and town officials and befriended some of the families of the women found dead.

"My heart's always been with the families and the tragedies that they suffered," Ferro said. "These girls deserve respect and reflection and remembrance and love, and that's what this project was for."

A bench for Shannan

A Babylon Town spokesman said a memorial bench will later be added for Gilbert in Oak Beach, where she was found. Her official cause of death was found to be undetermined, and she is not considered part of the Gilgo group of victims. Sherre Gilbert said in a statement she was "happy" that the town would also recognize her sister Shannan.

Costilla was found in a wooded area in North Sea in the Hamptons in 1993 and is linked to the alleged Gilgo serial killer but is not included in this memorial.



Sandra Costilla was found dead in the woods in Southampton Nov. 1993. Credit: SCPD

Some of the killings in the area still remain unsolved.

In another statement provided by Allred, Waterman's aunt and daughter, Elizabeth Meserve and Liliana Waterman, said they hoped the memorial would make everyone think about "what we can do in the future to help keep all safe from the evil that entered into our lives."

Newsday's Grant Parpan contributed to this story.

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