

DAILY NEWS

Decades of pain and mystery come to an end as Rex Heuermann admits being the Gilgo Beach killer



Rex Heuermann (main) is pictured before pleading guilty to murdering eight women (inset) in a string of long-unsolved crimes known as the Gilgo Beach killings, at a court hearing in Suffolk County Court in Riverhead, N.Y., Wednesday, April 8, 2026. (Suffolk County Police Department; James Carbone / Newsday)

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A case that terrorized the New York metro area for decades came to a close in a matter of minutes this week when 62-year-old suburban father and architectural consultant Rex Heuermann admitted in a Riverhead, L.I. courtroom to killing eight women.

“This defendant walked among us play-acting as a normal suburban dad. When, in reality, all along he was obsessively targeting innocent women for death,” [Suffolk County District](#)

[Attorney Raymond Tierney](#) said Wednesday. “He thought that by killing them, he could silence them forever and get away with murder. But he was wrong...”

A killing spree begins

The [long-unsolved case](#) dates back to November 1993 when two hunters found the remains of [28-year-old Sandra Costilla](#) in a wooded area in Southampton, L.I. Costilla, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, is believed to be Rex Heuermann’s earliest victim.

Costilla lived in Ridgewood, Queens, until around 1992, police said. She was murdered sometime between Nov. 19 and 20, 1993, according to court records.

Unlike the seven other women Heuermann has admitted killing, officials have never described her as a sex worker.

Authorities would later discover [remains of Karen Vergata](#), Tanya Jackson, Valerie Mack and Jessica Taylor between 1996 and 2003 in different locations on Long Island.



A stretch of beach sits empty at Gilgo Beach on Long Island on April 8, 2026, near where murder victims were discovered decades ago in Gilgo Beach, New York. (Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

Vergata, a 34-year-old mother of two, remained unidentified, only known as “Fire Island Jane Doe” to investigators until they identified her in 2022 using genetic genealogy review.

Vergata, who is believed to have been working as an escort in Manhattan at the time of her disappearance on Valentine’s Day 1996, struggled with addiction and was estranged from

her family. As the years went by and no one heard from her, they became increasingly worried.

“You never know when it’s going to be the last time you see someone,” her stepsister Brenda said at the time. “We wondered what happened to her. But she had a habit of just not being in contact. We just assumed [she was dead]. No one heard from her in 20 years.”

Jackson, 26, was a [U.S. Army veteran who was living in Brooklyn](#) at the time she disappeared in June 1997. Investigators referred to her as “Peaches,” because of a tattoo on her body, up until 2025 when they identified her.

Before Mack disappeared she had been working as an escort in Philadelphia and was last seen by her family in the spring or summer of 2000 in Port Republic, N.J. Mack, who was 24 at the time she died, left behind a 6-year-old son.

[Taylor, a 20-year-old sex worker](#), grew up in Poughkeepsie and lived in New York City before she disappeared. She was last seen alive at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Authorities said Taylor, a sex worker, died between July 21 and July 26, 2003.

The discovery of the ‘Gilgo Four’

Investigators discovered the bodies of Melissa Barthelemy, Megan Waterman, Maureen Brainard-Barnes and Amber Lynn Costello wrapped in burlap within a quarter mile of each other along Ocean Parkway in December 2010.

It wasn’t until they found the four bodies, [designated as the “Gilgo Four,”](#) that investigators announced a serial killer may have been responsible.

The four victims were found while cops searched for the remains of another [missing sex worker, Shannan Gilbert](#).

Barthelemy, 24, worked as an escort and was last seen at her Bronx apartment on July 12, 2009, when she told a friend she was going to see a man and would return the next morning. She never did. Phone location data puts her last known location on Long Island.

Four days later, Barthelemy’s younger sister, Amanda, began receiving menacing calls from an unidentified male caller. The man taunted her, saying chillingly, “Do you know what your sister is doing? She’s a whore,” [the Daily News previously reported](#).



Top row, from left: Maureen Brainard-Barnes, Melissa Barthelemy, Megan Waterman, and Amber Lynn Costello. Bottom row, from left: Sandra Costilla, Jessica Taylor, Valerie Mack, and Karen Vergata. (Suffolk County Police Department)

The youngest of the “Gilgo Four,” 22-year-old Waterman of Scarborough, Maine, disappeared on June 6, 2010. Waterman worked as a sex worker and was last seen on surveillance footage at a motel in Hauppauge, L.I. She was the mother of a 3-year-old daughter.

Brainard-Barnes, a 25-year-old mother of two, was reported missing in July 2007. The young sex worker had traveled from her home in Norwich, Conn., to New York to meet with a customer.

She was last heard from by a friend. She said she was leaving her hotel to meet a client. Investigators later say cell-phone records showed her phone was last used on Long Island.

Brainard-Barnes’ daughter remembers her as a sweet woman who read to her every night before bed.

“I was only 7 years old when my mother was murdered,” Nicolette Brainard-Barnes said at a 2024 news conference. “There are countless times I needed her and she was not there. I wish she was here today, but she was taken from us.”



Gloria Allred, an attorney representing the Brainard-Barnes family and other victims' families, holds a photo of Maureen Brainard-Barnes and her daughter (also pictured at right) for reporters to see following a hearing at Suffolk County Court on January 16, 2024, in Riverhead, New York. (Emma Seiwell / New York Daily News)

Costello, 27, was living in West Babylon, L.I., when she disappeared on September 2, 2010. She struggled with heroin addiction and was working as an escort to fund her habit. Costello went missing after heading off on foot to meet a customer.

In spring 2011, investigators continued finding partial remains of several victims along Ocean Parkway, along with the remains of a 2-year-old girl, later identified as Tanya Jackson's daughter, Tatiana Dykes, and remains of an Asian man. He has never been identified.

In December 2011, investigators found Gilbert's remains in a marsh near Oak Beach. Suffolk police ruled her death an accidental drowning. Her family still believes she was murdered by a serial killer.

The case then went cold for the majority of the next decade. It wasn't until 2022 when Tierney put together a new task force dedicated to the case that the investigation picked up steam again.

A break in the case

Police said it was a pimp — and pizza crust DNA — that steered investigators toward Heuermann, a husband and father of two who had been living quietly in the suburbs and commuting to Manhattan, where he worked as an architectural consultant.

Victim Amber Lynn Costello's pimp described her client's green Chevrolet Avalanche to investigators in spring 2022, telling them, "You might want to look at him," then-Suffolk County Police Commissioner Rodney [Harrison told The News after Heuermann's arrest.](#)

"The turning point was the car," Harrison said. "Once we got that car, who it connected to, that's when the investigation got legs."

Heuermann's DNA was also found on a pizza crust he discarded in a Manhattan garbage can near his work office that cops retrieved. Through that DNA, authorities linked the suspect to a hair of his found in a piece of burlap used to move the corpse of victim Megan Waterman, officials said.



Gilgo Beach serial killer Rex Heuermann was identified after his DNA was found on discarded pizza box, pictured here.

Court papers detail how investigators also used cell-phone site data to track his whereabouts during the times of the slayings, and discovered burner phones employed by Heuermann to arrange his meetings with the victims.

The hulking suspect, who [lived in Massapequa Park, L.I.](#), was arrested on a Midtown Manhattan street on July 13, 2023, for the [slayings of Barthelemy, Waterman and Costello.](#)

As investigators mined a trove of electronic devices recovered from Heuermann's cluttered home, they discovered harrowing "pre-prep" and "post-event" checklist documents revealing how he methodically planned out his kills — which he described as "hunts," according to prosecutors.

Prosecutors later charged Heuermann in the deaths of Brainard-Barnes, Costilla, Taylor and Mack. He was never charged in Vergata's death.

Following his arrest, Heuermann appeared in court numerous times, pleading not guilty to the seven murders he'd been charged with.



Gilgo Beach serial killer suspect Rex Heuermann was identified after his DNA was found on discarded pizza in this trash can.

A plea brings closure

In a stunning reversal, on Wednesday, inside a drab Riverhead courtroom, as victims' family members, Heuermann's ex-wife and daughter and reporters looked on, Heuermann finally [admitted killing the seven women](#), as well as Karen Vergata,

When asked by State Supreme Court Justice Timothy Mazzei if he was pleading guilty voluntarily and of his own free will, Heuermann, who wore a dark suit, white shirt and a blue patterned tie, replied, "Yes," while nodding his head.

He faces life in prison without possibility of parole and will be sentenced June 17.

Following the hearing, Heuermann's attorney, Michael Brown, told reporters that making the guilty pleas — to three counts of first-degree murder and four counts of second-degree murder— was a decision Heuermann made on his own.

"There came a point in this defense where Rex said, 'I want to plead guilty,'" he said, adding that one of Heuermann's concerns was sparing his own family and the victims' families the ordeal of having the case going to trial. Brown also acknowledged damning DNA evidence that contributed to the reversal.

As part of his plea deal, Heuermann agreed to cooperate fully with the [FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit](#), which investigates offenders' motivation, victim selection and other aspects of violent crimes, including serial crimes.



Alleged Gilgo Beach serial killer Rex Heuermann (R) appears for a hearing in front of Judge Tim Mazzei alongside his attorney Michael J. Brown (L) at Suffolk County Court on January 13, 2026, in Riverhead, New York. (Photo by James Carbone-Pool/Getty Images)

Tierney, [speaking at a press conference](#) after the court appearance, credited the victims' family members for their help in solving the case.

“When we started, the victims were nothing but names on a blotter, black-and-white writing on investigative reports,” he said. “But once we spoke to the victims’ [families] they provided us with the color of these women.

“We got to know them as the wonderful mothers, sisters, friends and daughters that they were. And that inspired us even more to close this case.”

Attorney Gloria Allred, who represents several of the victims’ families, spoke of the hardships the victims faced, many being young mothers at the time they were killed.

“Because many did not have the funds to go to college or get a decent job that would help them to provide adequate support for their children, they turned to sex work in order to help their families,” she said. “It wasn’t what they wanted to do but it was what they felt forced to do.

“Little did they know, Rex Heuermann did not care about their hopes and dreams or that they had families and friends who loved them. He appeared to care only for himself.”

In a quiet voice, Jessica Taylor’s mother, Elizabeth Baczkiel, told reporters, “I am glad that this is over, as far as him pleading guilty. It took a big chunk of stress off of me and my family.”



Victims' family members, including Elizabeth Baczkiel (left), mother of victim Jessica Taylor, are pictured during a press conference to discuss the guilty plea of Gilgo Beach serial killer Rex Heuermann on Wednesday, April 8, 2026, in Riverhead, New York. (Barry Williams/ New York Daily News)

Diane Doherty, the adoptive mother of Karen Vergata’s two sons, said she was “thankful that we came to a conclusion that brought peace to everybody.”

Several other victims’ family members said they “accepted” the guilty plea, in lieu of enduring a long trial where new details of the brutal slayings would have come out.

Maureen Brainard-Barnes’ sister Melissa Cann said the plea brought her “solace” and “a sense of relief.”

“Nineteen years, I lived in the space between heartbreak and hope,” she said. “Throughout these years, I searched for answers, for truth, for justice. There were moments when the weight felt unbearable but I never gave up. Maureen was never forgotten, not for a single

moment. From the day she went missing until today, she has been carried in every breath, every memory, every fight for answers.”

“Justice has finally found its way to you,” she added. “This moment is not the end but a reminder that love endures, truth prevails and hope never fades. Because even in the darkest moments, justice will find its way.”