

Man's burial brings closure

Man who died mysteriously motivated by religious beliefs

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Larry Franco's lifelong journey into the mysteries of God began young.

Anita Franco, his widow, recalls that he spoke of becoming a priest at an age when most young boys worry more about cars or chasing girls.

Once, in his youth, Franco asked his grandfather to drop him off in a pasture so he could venture into the wilderness and "go talk to God alone."

The experience would prove to be transformative. During his quest he ran across a family who offered him something to eat, and existed on the kindness of strangers until someone offered him a ride into town — after threatening him with a loaded shotgun.

Instead of fear or violence, Anita Franco



Franco

See FRANCO, Page 5

from PAGE 1

said Larry simply spoke to him about God.

The man slowly realized Larry, with his hair grown long, was harmless. He put Larry in his truck and drove him back to Brownfield, Texas.

For Franco, the experience left a lifelong impression.

"I remember him saying that God did open the sky for him," Anita Franco said. "He said it was something the he never told anybody before, that he spoke to God out there."

Anita Franco said religion and service to God form a common theme in Larry Franco's family — several of his relatives, including a nephew, have pursued the priesthood or other forms of service with the church.

That service took such an extreme turn with Larry Franco that some questioned whether he was a prophet or a just mentally ill. Either way, his desire for understanding would unwittingly lead to his death after going off once again into the woods—leaving his wife and children behind—to speak once again with God.

Larry Franco disappeared in 1998, just as public fears about the Y2K problem and the Second Coming were reaching their peak.

"A lot of people were saying the world was going to end in the year 2000," Anita Franco said.

For Larry Franco, the approach of the year 2000 brought back memories of his youthful desire to enter the priesthood and serve God. He also wanted to resume his preaching and searching for God.

"He started saying he needed to go back and finish what he started back then," Anita Franco said. "And if he wouldn't that he wasn't going to make it to heaven. And he just told me he eventually he was going to have to leave us — me and his children — to go back and finish what he hadn't."

Franco left his home and went into a patch of woods, without food or adequate clothing.

Anita Franco said she tried repeatedly to find help for her husband, but that he resisted.

"I knew there was something wrong with him, I tried getting him help but he would get mad at me if I tried getting help," Franco said.

Anita reports that on more than one occasion the Fort Worth, Texas Police Department brought her husband home — including the days just prior to his disappearance.

"He had been found in Fort Worth on Sunday that week preaching in downtown Fort Worth," Anita Franco said. "The police brought him to me. He went to work that Monday. He couldn't work; I guess he was preaching to the employees there."

Larry Franco walked out of the home he shared with Anita and their children, and disappeared.

Anita Franco said some of the earliest reports of Larry Franco and his disappearance, which were first reported in the Hood County News, contained some painful inaccuracies. For example, noting that her husband had gone out to a bar just before he went off.

"He never went to a bar with a friend," Anita Franco said.

She also added, that she and Larry weren't arguing the night he disappeared.

"We weren't arguing the

night he left," Anita Franco said, "At that moment when I realized he wasn't in the house we went looking for him. We went everywhere and we could not find him."

She had no way of knowing where he had gone, or how imperiled he was.

Some hikers found his badly decomposed body near Acton, Texas, in November 1998. His body would remain unidentified for nearly two years while authorities struggled to identify what to them was a mystery body. He was buried in a Juan Doe grave in Granbury, Texas, until being identified in 2000.

Deciding whether Larry Franco really was a prophet, or merely a madman, lies beyond the realm of journalism, science or even good police work.

But police work and science would eventually lead authorities to identify the mystery body lying in a Juan Doe grave in Granbury, and bring a tragic answer to Anita's search for her missing husband.

A forensic anthropologist used the skull from the mystery body to construct a clay sculpture of Franco. A photograph of the sculpture was circulated among law enforcement agencies across the United States, and eventually Larry Franco's brother — a Sheriff's Department employee at Brownfield near Lubbock, saw the photo. He was sure it was his missing brother and alerted other family members.

Eventually Anita Franco brought Larry to Hobbs for burial because he had requested that he be buried along side her. While planning arrangements for a relative of her husbands, she asked him where he wanted to be buried.

"He turned around and looked at me and asked 'where do you want to be buried?'" Anita Franco recalled. "And I told him in Hobbs because that's where I have some of my family and my son's buried there. And he goes, 'well, that's where I would want to be buried, with you.'"

She added that, contrary to earlier reports, she has never been married before but did have a son — who later died — from a previous relationship. Franco also added that contrary to those earlier reports, she had never visited the area where her husband was found. Earlier reports had said she and Larry went there for fishing trips. Anita said her husband had gone fishing there with a friend, and she had been to a nearby lake, but had no knowledge of the exact spot.

The positive identification of Larry Franco's remains brought a bittersweet closure for Anita.

Until dental records confirmed the identification, she continued to hope that her husband would one day wander back home.

"I would stop and think maybe he's out there watching us," Franco said. "I did not even know he was dead. Now that we have buried him the proper way we've got a closure."

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