

UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | THE SALSA QUEEN MURDER
S1E3 TRANSCRIPT

LIZ PACHECO: We got to the door and it was locked. My sister didn't lock her door. My sister was very infamous for losing her keys and her cell phone, credit cards, all those things. And so, she would leave her door unlocked. I turn my head so that I can put my right ear to the door. And it just, it felt so silent. It was such a loud silence. It was the loudest silence of my life. I was like, oh my God. This doesn't feel good. There's something wrong.

NARRATION:

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31ST, 2009 IS A RAINY HALLOWEEN NIGHT IN WASHINGTON D.C. BUT THAT DOESN'T STOP 38-YEAR-OLD NORI AMAYA FROM DRESSING UP AND HEADING OUT TO GO SALSA DANCING. NORI IS UNMATCHED ON THE DANCE FLOOR. HER PRECISE MOVEMENTS AND UNIQUE STYLE HAVE EARNED HER THE NICKNAME "THE SALSA QUEEN." NORI SEEMS TO BE HAVING A GREAT TIME UNTIL ABOUT 2AM WHEN SHE SUDDENLY LEAVES THE DANCE FLOOR, CLEARLY UPSET. ONE FRIEND EVEN RECALLS SEEING TEARS BEHIND HER HALLOWEEN MASK. NORI GETS IN A TAXI AND HEADS HOME ALONE. WHAT HAPPENS IN THE NEXT TWO DAYS IS A REAL-LIFE HALLOWEEN HORROR STORY.

I'M YOUR HOST STEVE FRENCH. THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "THE SALSA QUEEN MURDER."

NARRATION:

IT'S SUNDAY, THE DAY AFTER HALLOWEEN IN 2009. NORI AMAYA IS SCHEDULED TO WORK A PARTY AT THE RESTAURANT SHE OWNS WITH HER BROTHER, CARLOS AMAYA. BUT SHE DOESN'T SHOW. CARLOS KNOWS HE CAN'T REACH NORI ON HER CELL PHONE. A CAB COMPANY HAS CALLED TO SAY THAT SHE LEFT IT IN A TAXI ON HALLOWEEN NIGHT.

CARLOS AMAYA: We had booked a party for maybe 100 people or so, so a pretty big party. And my sister Nori, she didn't show up to work. It was strange, but I thought well, I've got her phone. She's probably at home sleeping. And I had to get this party taken care of. So, the following day, Monday, we also had a catering event in the morning and, again, she didn't show up. So, I stopped all the cooking and I was upset. It was, like, nine in the morning and so I drove up to her apartment building and went upstairs and knocked on the door. And there was no answer. She had a little mail slot, so I opened the mail slot and there was just, I remember very clearly, very dark. No lights were on and I felt this gust of air just hit my face. And I thought, maybe she's sleeping.

NARRATION:

CARLOS IS ANNOYED. HE ASSUMES THAT NORI IS STILL RECOVERING FROM HER LATE NIGHT OF HALLOWEEN PARTYING. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, HE'S STARTING TO GROW CONCERNED. IT ISN'T LIKE NORI TO BE OUT OF TOUCH FOR TWO DAYS. LATER THAT DAY, WHEN THE RESTAURANT OPENS AT 5 O'CLOCK, SHE STILL HASN'T SHOWN UP.

CARLOS AMAYA: It just didn't feel right anymore. I felt worried. So, I ended up calling my younger sister Elizabeth, and I said, "Hey, listen, your sister's missing."

NARRATION:

CARLOS AND HIS SISTER, LIZ PACHECO, MEET AT THE RESTAURANT, THEN DRIVE THE ONE-AND-A-HALF MILES TO THE WOODNER APARTMENT COMPLEX WHERE NORI LIVES ON THE 11TH FLOOR. THE DOOR IS STILL LOCKED, AND NORI DOESN'T ANSWER WHEN THEY KNOCK.

LIZ PACHECO: I was like, "Let's talk to security and see if they'll let us in." And so, my brother spoke to the security guard and said that we haven't heard from my sister and we just want to make sure that she's okay.

CARLOS AMAYA: So, the security guy came with us and we went to the door. Knock, knock, knock, no answer. So, the security officer grabbed the key, whatever master key they have, and he opened up the door. The apartment was completely dark.

LIZ PACHECO: I was the last one to enter the apartment. And I was the one who turned on the light. So, when you walked into the apartment, the light switch was on the right side, so I reached over with my left hand and I turned it on.

CARLOS AMAYA: And we walked in through the door, turned the lights on. I saw half of her hair hanging out, her left hand hanging out underneath the covers. And then, I noticed there were lines on her neck. As I approached her, I called her name and I briefly looked at the security officer. He grabbed her toe and shook it. And it was surreal because then I turned around, and I uncovered her, and she was partially nude and blue, had all kinds of colorations on her body.

LIZ PACHECO: That's when I heard my brother yell out, "No." And it felt like somebody went and just tore right through me. And I continued to walk into the room and my brother was just, like, his hands went up on his head and he just kept saying, "No, no, no, no, no."

CARLOS AMAYA: And in my mind, one of the first thoughts that came in was like, did she commit suicide? But as I cleared my mind, right in front of me, I realized she had been choked to death.

LIZ PACHECO: You know, I'm thinking if I just, like, touch her... If I just touch her skin, if I can just feel her, she'll wake up. And I put my hand on her and I've never felt something that cold before. 'Till this day, I still feel like I can put ice, snow, in my hand, and it's still warmer than what I felt when I touched her. And I jumped back after that and my brother kind of just grabbed me, like he held on to me. It felt like our legs just gave out. We ended up on the floor and it was... it was unreal.

CARLOS AMAYA: Something overcame me and I felt overpowered and I couldn't breathe. I closed my eyes for two seconds and the apartment is full with police.

NARRATION:

WHO MURDERED NORI AMAYA, AND WHY? WHAT HAPPENED IN THE TIME LEADING UP TO HER DEATH? AND, PERHAPS THE MOST AGONIZING QUESTION FOR CARLOS AND LIZ, WHAT IF THE KILLER IS HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT? THESE ARE THE QUESTIONS THAT HAVE HAUNTED CARLOS AND LIZ FOR MORE THAN A DECADE. HOW COULD SOMETHING LIKE THIS HAPPEN TO SOMEONE LIKE NORI AMAYA?

CARLOS AMAYA: My sister Nori was about 5'4. 120. Red hair, freckled face, pale white. Huge eyes. And she was a vibrant, energetic person that had this energy that you gravitated towards. We grew up together. We migrated to this country young. Our mother was always working while we were young, so we never saw our mom, and it was just me and her, Nori. We were very close from doing everything every day, going out to the same school. That connection was pretty deep.

LIZ PACHECO: So, I am about 17 years apart from my sister and 15 from my brother. Obviously, they're my older siblings, but to me, they were also my elders, and also my parental figures, cause my mom worked a lot of jobs. They were the ones that took care of me.

NARRATION:

WHEN NORI WAS 32, SHE WAS WORKING IN HOTEL MANAGEMENT. CARLOS, WHO WAS TWO YEARS YOUNGER, HAD PURCHASED AN ITALIAN RESTAURANT CALLED COPPI'S, AND NEEDED HELP RUNNING THE PLACE. WHEN HE INVITED NORI TO ASSIST HIM, SHE QUIT HER JOB AND WAS THERE THE NEXT DAY. NORI WASN'T THE TYPE OF PERSON TO SHY AWAY FROM CHALLENGES. IN HER LATE 20'S, SHE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH A BRAIN TUMOR THAT REQUIRED PAINFUL SURGERIES. IT WAS A LONG AND DIFFICULT REHAB AND SALSA DANCING HELPED WITH HER RECOVERY.

LIZ PACHECO: Dance. She actually used it as a form of therapy after her brain surgery to kind of just help her get back into things. But she really dominated the floor. Once she got out there, that was it. It was game over. You might as well just step to the side. She was our salsa queen.

NARRATION:

NORI'S JOB AT THE RESTAURANT FIT PERFECTLY INTO HER DREAM LIFESTYLE. SHE COULD GO DANCING EVERY NIGHT AFTER WORK, WITHOUT HAVING TO WORRY ABOUT WAKING UP EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. AND HALLOWEEN NIGHT, 2009, WAS NO EXCEPTION. THE HOLIDAY FELL ON A SATURDAY— PERFECT FOR NORI TO GET DRESSED UP AND SALSA DANCE 'TIL THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING.

LIZ PACHECO: Halloween was definitely one of her favorite nights out. She loved dressing up. Sometimes she'd have these crazy ideas for dancing outfits. So, Halloween was always a big deal, especially because, you know, it was like guaranteed, you are going to go out and you were going to go dancing and she was just going to have a really good time.

NARRATION:

BUT THIS HALLOWEEN IS DIFFERENT. NORI HAS RECENTLY BROKEN UP WITH SOMEONE SHE'S BEEN DATING FOR ABOUT A YEAR. IT WAS HER CHOICE TO END THE RELATIONSHIP, BUT SHE'S FEELING DOWN AND SAD ABOUT THE SPLIT.

CARLOS AMAYA: She didn't have an outfit for the first time simply because she had this rocky relationship and she hadn't focused on it. She would make her own costumes. They were pretty lavish, but this time it wasn't in her. And so, I made one for her. I had an old Venetian mask upstairs in our office that I tore apart and put some feathers on it, and she wore that, that Halloween night. We sat and had dinner at the bar like we did every night and she drank her favorite bottle of wine, and then after that, she went out salsa dancing. The last thing she said was, "I'll reach out to you later and see what you're up to." Usually, I would go and follow her to wherever she went dancing. So that was the idea that night too, but I didn't do it. And oftentimes when I think about it... wow. Should have said yes. But that is what she said. And she's like, "I'll, I'll see you later. I'll check in with you later."

NEWS REPORT: A popular D.C. restaurant owner found dead in her apartment. Tonight, police say she was murdered, found strangled to death.

NEWS REPORT: People who live in this 16th Street apartment complex are still in shock that their neighbor, Nori Amaya, was strangled to death inside her apartment. They are still stunned that this type of violence happened so close to home, and in such a secure place.

NARRATION:

WHEN CARLOS AMAYA AND LIZ PACHECO DISCOVER THEIR SISTER, NORI AMAYA, DEAD IN HER APARTMENT, THEY CALL THE D.C. METROPOLITAN POLICE. THE HOMICIDE TEAM RESPONDS IMMEDIATELY. DETECTIVE TONY PATTERSON IS ASSIGNED AS THE LEAD INVESTIGATOR.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: We got on the scene. We identified her brother and her sister, who found her. Her apartment had not been ransacked. Looks like when she came into her apartment, she took her clothes off when she entered, because her, the dress that she had on was still in the front room. Mask was still there. Mask was in the living room as well, on the couch, so it looked like she disrobed when she entered her apartment and went directly to her bedroom. She was found, she was on her back clad in underwear. That's all she had on was her underwear. She just had ligature marks on her neck. So, we know, we know that she was strangled. She had some bruising, some scratches, just below her lip. I remember some, uh, contusions on her arms as if a knee or something was placed on both her arms, like she may have been pinned down.

NARRATION:

NORI'S HANDS PROVIDE ANOTHER DISTURBING PIECE OF EVIDENCE. HER SISTER, LIZ, POINTS SPECIFICALLY TO NORI'S FINGERNAILS.

LIZ PACHECO: My sister was very well known for her beautiful long nails. So, to see them short was really weird. Why are her nails so short?

DET. TONY PATTERSON: It looked like they had been cut to the quick, if you will. We never found the fingernails. And I believe that she scratched the individual and that's why they cut her fingernails.

NARRATION:

THE MEDICAL EXAMINER CONCLUDES THAT SHE WAS STRANGLED WITH A SINGLE LIGATURE. THE POLICE FIND A USB CABLE AT THE SCENE, BUT NORI'S DNA ISN'T ON IT. THAT LEAVES INVESTIGATORS WITHOUT A MURDER WEAPON, AND THEY CAN FIND NO FINGERPRINTS THAT BELONG TO THE KILLER. WHOEVER MURDERED NORI WAS CAREFUL TO COVER HIS TRACKS. BUT HE DID LEAVE BEHIND ONE SIGNIFICANT CLUE: HIS DNA.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: We found there was male DNA on Nori's body, two areas of her body. So right now, it's just unknown male DNA.

NARRATION:

THE POLICE BEGIN TRACKING NORI'S MOVEMENTS ON HALLOWEEN, THE LAST NIGHT THAT SHE WAS SEEN ALIVE. THEY INTERVIEW FRIENDS WHO REPORT THAT SHE SPENT THE ENTIRE EVENING DANCING AT SEVERAL DIFFERENT CLUBS.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: Halloween night, we know where Nori was up to and after midnight. She had gone to a club in the Northwest section of Washington, D.C., and we were able to pull video footage from that club. At around 2:00 AM, she leaves that club, and then we later have video of her as she arrived at her apartment building. Around 2:30 in the morning, a cab pulls up. Nori exits the cab, comes into the lobby of her apartment building. She stops briefly and talks to the security guard at the front desk. And then she proceeds to walk through the lobby and that's the last time that she's seen alive.

NARRATION:

THE WOODNER APARTMENTS WHERE NORI LIVED IS WASHINGTON D.C.'S LARGEST APARTMENT COMPLEX, WITH 12 FLOORS, AND OVER 1,100 UNITS. THE FRONT DESK IS MANNED 24-HOURS A DAY. KEY CARDS ARE REQUIRED TO ENTER, AND VISITORS NEED TO SIGN IN AT THE FRONT DESK. THERE ARE SECURITY CAMERAS THROUGHOUT THE BUILDING AND THE GARAGE. DETECTIVE PATTERSON IS CONFIDENT THAT HIS TEAM WILL BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY NORI'S KILLER ON THE SECURITY FOOTAGE.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: Her apartment building is huge. We pulled the surveillance from probably six different cameras in the lobby of her building. But, because it was Halloween, any and everybody that was coming in and out of the building was wearing a mask. Everybody was masked up. I mean, the next day, people were still coming into the building wearing masks. So, I was just never able to identify any of her known associates. I never saw anybody that she had been hanging out with earlier come into the building.

NARRATION:

THE SECURITY FOOTAGE IS NO HELP, BUT THEN DETECTIVE PATTERSON GETS WHAT HE THINKS MIGHT BE A BREAK IN THE CASE. SOMEONE ADMITS TO ENTERING NORI'S APARTMENT THE MORNING THAT HER BODY WAS FOUND.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: On the morning of Monday the 2nd, an exterminator had come into her apartment and treats the whole apartment, but he doesn't see her. There's nobody in there when he, well she's there, but of course, she's dead. So, we had to go out, we brought him in, got DNA from him, and none of it ever came back positive. I had to explain to him why I needed his DNA and I told him, I said, "Man, when you were in there doing your thing, that young lady was dead in the bed." He was a little upset, if you will.

NARRATION:

WITH NO SUSPECTS IDENTIFIED ON THE SECURITY FOOTAGE AND NO SUSPICIOUS SIGN-INS ON THE GUEST LOG, THE HOMICIDE TEAM SEARCHES FOR A SUSPECT WHO MIGHT BE A RESIDENT IN THE BUILDING. BUT AGAIN, THEY COME UP EMPTY. IT'S TIME TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT NORI'S FRIENDS.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: I felt that whoever killed her was someone that she knew, because people who kill you, if they don't know you, they aren't worried about how you look, or someone finding you. This is someone who definitely knew her. And they, just, probably after killing her, they didn't, they couldn't look at her body and they just, they covered her up. That's been my experience.

NARRATION:

DETECTIVES INTERVIEW EVERYONE THAT NORI AMAYA INTERACTED WITH ON HALLOWEEN NIGHT. THEIR ONLY SIGNIFICANT CLUE IS THE MALE DNA, AND THEY'RE HOPING TO FIND A MATCH. INVESTIGATORS START WITH NORI'S EX-BOYFRIEND. THE TWO HAD ONLY RECENTLY BROKEN UP. DETECTIVES LEARN THAT HE WAS AT THE CLUB WHERE NORI WAS LAST DANCING, AND HE IS THE REASON SHE BECAME UPSET AND LEFT EARLY. HE HAD BEEN IGNORING HER.

LIZ PACHECO: Something else happened, and it had to have been so big that it truly upset her for her to cut out early on a night of dancing. She didn't do that.

CARLOS AMAYA: She was in love with him, and he was married. So, the relationship wasn't working. The gentleman didn't seem like he knew where he was going or wanted to. And at that time, my sister

wanted to settle down. She wanted a husband and a kid, but the gentleman made it clear that there was a wife still involved.

LIZ PACHECO: And then when I found out that the guy's wife had called the restaurant, asking to speak to my sister, and I was like, okay, well... you can't really underestimate the power of jealousy, anger and resentment.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: We interviewed that individual probably three or four different times. We also interviewed his wife and, of course, they had numerous alibis. I mean, there were people who placed them at different locations throughout the night. We got DNA from him, and got DNA from his wife as well. And the results came back as being negative.

NARRATION:

ANOTHER CLOSE FRIEND OF NORI'S QUICKLY RISES TO THE TOP OF THE SUSPECT LIST. WHEN ASKED IF HE HAS A KEY TO NORI'S APARTMENT, HE SAYS "NO." BUT HE'S LYING.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: I later learned that he in fact did have a key to her apartment. He was also one of the individuals who was seen with her on the surveillance cameras at the club where she was prior to going home. He also admitted that he walked her out of the club and hailed a cab for her. And she got in the cab. And, according to him, told him that she was going home. When looking at the footage from her apartment building, I was trying to see if I could spot him coming in the building, or going out of the building, because I knew the clothing that he was wearing, but never saw him. The DNA that we recovered from Nori's body did not come back to this individual. What troubled me about him was the fact that he lied about having a key to her apartment. To this day, I honestly still think that he had some involvement. That's just my gut.

NARRATION:

THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT TIES THE MAN TO NORI'S MURDER. BUT THERE'S A THIRD SUSPECT WHO COMES UNDER SUSPICION. HE'S AN ACQUAINTANCE OF NORI'S, WHO ABRUPTLY AND MYSTERIOUSLY LEFT THE COUNTRY WITHIN DAYS OF HER DEATH.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: He worked at the club that Nori was hanging at on Halloween night. Well shortly after she's found dead, he told a few people that his father had died and that he was leaving the country to go back to Argentina to bury his dad, which we thought was suspicious. We flew to Argentina and we were able to get DNA samples from this person as well. We brought it back and it turned out not to be him. I got DNA from probably 10 different individuals, to include her brother. And none of it ever came back positive. So, we don't know, to this day, who the killer is.

NARRATION:

IT'S BEEN MORE THAN 10 YEARS SINCE NORI AMAYA'S MURDER AND THIS CASE IS NO CLOSER TO BEING SOLVED THAN IT WAS THE DAY HER BODY WAS FOUND. OTHER THAN DNA, ALL INVESTIGATORS HAVE ARE THEORIES, AND THEY DON'T BELIEVE HER DEATH WAS A RANDOM ACT OF VIOLENCE.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: I felt like whoever killed her was someone that she knew. Whoever did this, I don't think they went there with the intent. I don't think it was their intention to kill her. I think something happened after they got there, and she was killed.

LIZ PACHECO: My sister definitely had a pretty big circle of friends. Most of them were from dancing, but you know, they'd been friends for years and have gone out dancing for years. So, you just, you kind of build that bond and you know, like, that's your crew. That's who you go out and party with, and have fun with, and share good times with. And I think that somebody in that group is responsible, but I don't think that it was just one person in that group that did it. I've thought of the possibility that someone hired someone to do this. I don't think I would be surprised if it ever surfaced that this was arranged.

CARLOS AMAYA: Someone is not being honest out of that group. Someone is obviously holding back, and I don't blame them. They murdered my sister. I just hope that they're living a horrible life because what they did was horrible. There is DNA available and that DNA is consistent to a male. So, it's just trying to figure out how to get a match for that DNA is the key to solving this crime.

DET. TONY PATTERSON: I'm hopeful that at some point there will be a DNA hit. Or others who may have been involved will have a change of heart, come forward and admit their involvement. I came into homicide with the attitude that, every one of my cases, I was gonna solve it, but you quickly learn that you can't solve them all. But there was something about this particular case that... I don't want to send this case to cold case. You know, Nori's reward poster hangs on the wall in my office to this day. I see it every day when I go in. They always say you have that one case that kind of haunts you, and that's... Nori's case is that particular case.

LIZ PACHECO: I don't think that I will ever be able to really capture the loss of my sister. I think that's something that is probably going to take me the rest of my life. She's not going to be there. I can't call her. I can't hear her voice again. Because she was murdered. It's agony. And there's nothing that you can do or say to alleviate any of that.

CARLOS AMAYA: They're out there. He's out there. Has he done this to someone else? I don't know. But he's out there. And that's the reality. I mean, this person could be looking at me and my family every day. And just kind of "oh, I got away with it." That is the suckiest part of it because it could be someone right down the street. Or someone I may know. It could be right under my nose.

LIZ PACHECO: I do have very high hopes that we will get answers. I do believe that her case will get solved. I do think that whatever happened, the person who killed her, the persons who killed her, whether it was direct or indirect involvement, it's going to come out. When? I don't know.

NARRATION:

NORI AMAYA WAS MURDERED ON OCTOBER 31ST, 2009, IN WASHINGTON D.C. A \$25,000 REWARD IS BEING OFFERED FOR INFORMATION THAT LEADS TO THE ARREST AND CONVICTION OF HER KILLER. IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS CASE, PLEASE CONTACT THE METROPOLITAN HOMICIDE DEPARTMENT AT 202-645-9600, OR SUBMIT A TIP AT [UNSOLVED.COM](https://www.amsolved.com).

NEXT ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES...

FANNY MANZELLA: I had an immediate response to it. I was immediately terrified, filled with dread, and it was facing me, facing the road. I could see its face, but I couldn't make its features out, but I felt that it had seen me, and I did not want to be there any longer.

NARRATION:

Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13. It is executive produced by Terry Dunn Meurer and Chris Corcoran. Produced by Lloyd Lochridge, Christine Lenig, Courtney Ennis, and Paige Hymson. The Story Producer for this episode was Cynthia Bowles and it was edited by Charles Olivier. From Cadence 13, editing, mixing and mastering by Chris Basil, Andy Jaskiewicz and Bill Schultz. Production support by Sean Cherry and Ian Mandt. Artwork and design is by Curt Courtenay. Publicity by Josefina Francis and Hillary Schupf. The original theme music was composed by Gary Malkin and Michael Boyd.

THANKS FOR LISTENING TO EPISODE 3 OF UNSOLVED MYSTERIES.