

## Real-Life 'CSI' Isn't Sexy

America loves its crime dramas. But as our reporter found out, the reality of crime-scene investigation is often more gross than sexy.

WEB EXCLUSIVE

By Raina Kelley

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Feb. 27, 2007 - I love forensics. I love cops and prosecutors and defense attorneys. I read true crime and false crime and any old kind of mystery. For me, a television show isn't worth watching if there isn't a dead body before the first commercial break. My DVR is a blur of "Law and Order: Criminal Intent," "CSI," "CSI: Miami" and "Cold Case."

So I didn't hesitate to take on the assignment of covering the annual meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Science (AAFS) in San Antonio, Texas. I'd get to interview those nutty people who love criminalists and coroners so much that they'll travel thousands of miles to meet their heroes. People like Dr. Michael Baden, chief forensic pathologist of the New York State Police and host of HBO's "Autopsy"; Dr. G., Medical Examiner, from the self-titled show on Discovery Health; and of course, Dr. Henry Lee, chief emeritus of the Connecticut State Police, founder and professor of the Forensic Science Program at the University of New Haven and star of "Trace Evidence: The Case Files of Dr. Henry Lee." So imagine my surprise when the only "CSI" groupie I could identify at the conference was me.

I should have known my obsession with crime drama had a date with reality the minute I walked into the registration line at the Henry Gonzalez Convention Center. It was distressingly low-tech: no fingerprint checks, no cheek swabs, not even a retinal scan. Then they hit me with the next blow . . . no audio or video recording was allowed at the meeting. There were undercover cops milling about, apparently, and talk of open legal cases. And to make it worse, they were disturbingly unmoved by my enthusiasm. Turns out they're annoyed by all this TV-inspired love.

It didn't take me long to figure out why. The criminal justice system and the forensic science community that serves it just are not sexy. It's slow and verbose and in a word, gross. I wandered through sessions and seminars and workshops and lectures and nearly vomited every time. On day 1, I learned that arterial spray is a complete misnomer unless you call what comes out of a fire hydrant spray. Day 2 brought hard proof in black and white of what a bullet actually does to the human head. I guess the reason we only see the entry wound on TV is because a big bullet takes most of the head with it on its way out. On my third day, I got a quick tutorial on the host of bugs that move into our bodies after we leave them and well, I just couldn't take it. I had to walk out. I always thought I had an iron-clad stomach because I could watch forensic television, but no, I can watch it because it's fake. I know it's fake, it looks fake and the reality of violent death is so much worse. They must style those maggots on CSI because those buggers are much more numerous and aggressive in real life.

And slowly, as I learned from these sessions, I began to rage (silently) at my favorite shows. Why don't they cover their hair or wear masks to avoid contaminating any DNA they might find? It takes weeks to get a toxicology report, not the 45 seconds (with musical accompaniment) you see on TV. DNA? That takes even longer and is a real budget buster. That is, if they can find it in the first place . . . apparently criminals don't blithely leave their DNA around and even if they do, there's the problem of contamination. And fingerprints? Don't even get me started. Do you know how hard it is to find a useable print? I found out in San Antonio.

And let's talk computers and all those other high-end gadgets you see during the prime-crime time. Real-life CSIs spend lots of time poring through old-fashioned textbooks and looking into microscopes for hours. According to the law-enforcement officials I spoke to at the conference, the average police department doesn't have money in its budget for the officers they need, never mind ballistic databases, photo-enhancing software and an in-Hummer scanner that match fingerprints at the crime scene.

Which bring me to my next point: forensic science is well, science. I went to the session on "Bones, Bugs, Trace and More" and could only understand every third word. At a minimum, you need a biology or chemistry degree, and every member of the Young Forensic Science Forum that I met was well on his or her way to an M.S. or an M.D. And it turns out; young CSIs populated the majority of the volunteer

ranks. It's a rapidly growing field, everyone agrees, but there just aren't enough jobs for the hundreds of fresh faces graduating every year, and it certainly isn't for the faint of heart or mind.

Did I really know that forensic science is nothing like it's portrayed on TV? Yes, I did. Even the most casual observer of a criminal trial knows that. Remember the O. J. Simpson trial and what happened near Duke University? Justice is messy and can be really, really hard to find. My respect and enthusiasm for these professionals only grew, even as my schoolgirl giggling stopped. So next year, when the AAFS holds its 60th meeting in Washington, D.C., I'll be ready. Good thing I got my "Forensics for Dummies" book.