

# Young Forensic Scientists Forum *Newsletter*

**AMERICAN ACADEMY OF FORENSIC SCIENCES**

September 2004

Editor: Sheila Estacio Dennis, MS

## From The Editor

The YFSF has been busy preparing for the Special Session in New Orleans. Planning began as soon the 2004 sessions in Dallas ended. The Planning Committee has been soliciting speakers, funding and donations, and producing a quality session thanks to your suggestions.

YFSF President **Claire Shepard** has been working on submitting the new bylaws for the YFSF in addition to the Mid-Year Report to the AAFS. Remember, the only requirement to be a member of the YFSF is to be a member of the Academy, whether as a Student Affiliate, Trainee Affiliate, or Associate Member. Your involvement benefits others in your membership group. Members and Fellows are always welcome to participate and contribute to the future of forensic science!

— *Sheila Estacio Dennis, MS*  
*smedennis@yahoo.com*

## 2005 AAFS Annual Meeting

Here we are, about six months until the 2005 AAFS Meeting in New Orleans, and all of the events and speakers for the Young Forensic Scientists Forum Special Session have been confirmed. This year's theme is *Forensic Science Outside the Box*. The Planning Committee has been hard at work creating YFSF events that will have something for everyone. **Karly Buras** and **Allison Curran** have planned a multifaceted academic session with speakers from various disciplines within the field of forensic science. **Jeannette Perr** has been re-developing the YFSF Bring Your Own Slides, and **Marrah Lachowicz** has been sending the word out to universities around the country encouraging participation in the 2nd Annual Bring Your Own Poster Session. **Amanda Frohwein** has also planned a case study to be presented at the breakfast meeting along with a resumé critique.

The 2005 academic session will begin traditionally with a welcome address from current AAFS President **Ronald Singer**. The 4th Annual Emerging Forensic Scientist winner,

**Jeannette Perr**, is going to speak about her research into the detection of organic high explosives. **Jerome Podorski** and **James DiSarno**, from the DEA Mid-Atlantic and Northeast Laboratories, will give a team talk on the processing of clandestine labs. The academic session is chock full of speakers from different disciplines within the Academy with **Robert Barsley** from Louisiana State University who will be giving a presentation on forensic odontology and his experiences in the field. Also from LSU, **Mary Manhein** will be speaking about forensic anthropology and facial reconstruction. **Kenneth Goddard** will speak about the National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory. **Vahid Majidi**, the Chief Science Advisor for the United States Department of Justice, will be discussing the role of science and technology in Homeland Security. The academic session closes with a panel discussion, entitled *Forensic Science in Louisiana*, and look forward to the poster session to finish out the day.

The 2005 YFSF Planning Committee hopes to see some new faces as well as some old ones in "The Big Easy" this coming February. See you soon!

— *Allison M. Curran, MS*

## YFSF Bring Your Own Slides Update

YFSF Bring Your Own Slides (BYOS) is an informal opportunity for a "young" forensic scientist to give a presentation on any forensic topic. Just in case, "young" for YFSF is a student, someone new to the field, or in the field five years and under. This year the BYOS will feature presentations by young forensic scientist currently working for different federal government laboratories, including the FBI and the DEA, state and local laboratories, and those in academia. This is a great opportunity to network with other young forensic scientists and to find out about different areas of forensic science. Everyone is encouraged to participate and there is still room for presenters. If you are interested in presenting, please send an email to [jeannette.perr@fiu.edu](mailto:jeannette.perr@fiu.edu).

— *Jeannette M. Perr, BS*

## Forensic Science in Louisiana

The 2005 AAFS meeting will be held in New Orleans, which means a lot of fun, a lot of sights, and a lot of great speakers for the Young Forensic Scientists Forum. This year, *Forensic Science in Louisiana* is the theme of the discussion panel for the Special Session.

**Mary Manhein**, faculty member at Louisiana State University and AAFS Fellow, will be one of the panel members. As a forensic anthropologist with more than 20 years' experience working in Louisiana, she will discuss some of the unusual cases from the more than 700 on which she has consulted. From burning industrial plants to clandestine burials along the bayous, from prehistoric human remains to historic soldiers' graves, Manhein's varied experience offers a glimpse of the broad scope of forensic anthropology in a state where reality is often stranger than fiction.

**Robert Barsley** is a member of the LSU School of Dentistry and currently serves as the Director of Dental Health Resources and Director of Hospital Affairs. He is a Fellow and two-time Board of Directors member of the AAFS. Dr. Barsley will be giving an introduction to forensic dentistry and discussing some of the more interesting aspects of the field.

**Adam Becnel** is the third member of the panel. He has worked as a forensic scientist for the Louisiana State Police Crime Lab since 1998. He is Past President of the Louisiana Association of Forensic Scientists, training coordinator of the Louisiana Association of Scientific Crime Investigators, a member of the American Board of Criminalistics and of the AAFS. He'll discuss everything from firearms to fingerprints as a member of the state's Physical Evidence Unit.

— *Karly Buras, BS*

## What Was The Jury Thinking?

It was a cold and windy day. Not exactly dark and stormy, but cold..... and windy. Did I mention that? Perhaps that is the reason I remember this particular case so vividly. Or maybe it was because it actually went to trial. Or maybe it is because it was a Sunday and I would have rather been anywhere but work. Nevertheless, it was a December day, a few weeks before Christmas and I was off to fulfill my duties as a Crime Scene Investigator (CSI) processing a vehicle that had been carjacked. These vehicles are stored at a secure wrecker lot, and calls such as these definitely rank at the bottom of the food chain. I can tell you I was not looking forward to interrupting an otherwise quiet Sunday to brave the elements. When I arrived at the wrecker lot, I discovered I was the only one there besides a dispatcher. Apparently it had been a while since I had worked weekends and was not used to the stillness of the normally bustling lot. I had to bang on the door to get in the office and have the dispatcher unlock the gate and locate the vehicle.

After this usually uncomplicated task was complete, I began processing the vehicle. I started, as I always do, with the exterior driver's side door of this gold Excursion. I made my way around the vehicle – driver's side rear door, cargo door, passenger side rear door, and so on. My hair and fingerprint powder blowing in my face was enough to point my day in a new direction, not to mention fingerprint cards blowing across the parking lot, and the shivering cold. Once I completed processing the exterior of the SUV, I tried to open the front driver's door. Locked. I proceeded to try rest of the doors. All locked. On a weekday the lot would have been bustling with plenty of people ready to brandish their Slim-Jims and open the Excursion. But it was Sunday, and recall it was just me and the dispatcher.

I had to do some sort of combination gymnastics and theatrics act to get his attention. Once I finally got him to notice me jumping up and down and flailing my arms, I asked him if there was someone that could open the doors of the vehicle. Of course there wasn't. So, I told him I would come back the next day to finish processing the car. Now, you have to understand something here, processing a car is my least favorite thing to do CSI wise, so to have to make two calls was not my idea of a good time. However, I guess I was filled with Christmas cheer because I did not seem to mind coming back.

On Monday, after handling the normal rush of business burglaries, I went to the wrecker lot to finish processing the car. The lot was bustling with activity and as soon as I pulled up I had several employees acknowledge that I was there and need the Excursion to be open. Within a couple of minutes the vehicle was open and the car alarm was blaring. Again, they rushed over to disable it and I began working. I processed the interior of the vehicle, again following my normal pattern starting with the driver's side front door. I processed all the windows and doors and various items inside including a Taco Bell plastic cup. My work here was done and I expected this case to go like the hundreds of other vehicles I had processed before, and therefore I would never hear about it again. Just one of the reasons this call is at the bottom on the food chain.

I called the detective, told him I had printed the vehicle, and he went to the lot and collected various items of evidence from inside the Excursion that he knew did not belong to the victim. A couple of weeks later I was in the robbery division and the above mentioned detective told me that I had gotten an AFIS hit off a fingerprint I had lifted at the scene. Although he previously did not have any suspects, he had arrested the man whose fingerprint was found in the vehicle. I was overjoyed and extremely glad that I had taken the initiative to process the interior of the vehicle.

Several months went by when I got word this case was going to trial. Why?, I wondered. Not only did I lift a print that matched the defendant, a skull cap collected by the detective was submitted to the crime lab. The DNA found on the cap matched the DNA of the defendant. Additionally, the defendant had been previously arrested and convicted of a felony. This type of evidence was more than we could ask for and more than we often had. The majority of cases in the county plead out and we all wondered why this one was not pleading as well.

So, we went to trial. The jury was presented with all the evidence: the defendant's DNA in the carjacked vehicle, his fingerprint on a Taco Bell cup in the front console (even perps have to eat), prior felony convictions, and so on. We all thought it was a no brainer. The defense attorney was ruthless and persistent. He kept asking why I only lifted a print from the cup when there were several other items in the vehicle from which I did not lift prints. He asked why I had to return to process the inside of the vehicle and questioned whether the scene was secure. Even with all of this, I was sure the jury would understand that this man's fingerprint and DNA were inside a carjacked vehicle, to which he, under normal circumstances, would not have access to. I left the courthouse that day without a single doubt of a conviction.

A few days later, I went to see the detective to ask him about his testimony and find out the defendant's sentence. As the detective spoke, my mouth dropped open and I braced myself on his cubicle. I just had to start laughing because I knew if I did not I was going to be extremely angry. The detective told me the defendant was acquitted. How? Why? What was the jury thinking? Was something wrong with my testimony? Did something go wrong with the detective's testimony?

With the advent of "CSI" and other law enforcement TV shows, all we have heard juries and victims of crimes ask for

is physical evidence. They have no idea how we get DNA or fingerprints or what the conditions must be for each of them to be obtained or preserved, but they want to see them in every case. Now, we finally had a case where we had both. What more did they want? Many cases have gone to trial where we have had no physical evidence and just witness testimony or a confession and the jury wants to see physical evidence. The defense attorney then makes it a point to clarify that we have no physical evidence for whatever reason and the verdicts vary. But now what? Would they rather have had a confession? Or did they really believe this defendant was simply riding in the Excursion and did not have any part in the carjacking AND had no prior knowledge of the carjacking? I do not know, and more importantly, I do not understand. I think the latter is the worst part.

The jury did convict the defendant of possession of a firearm by a convicted felon because when he was arrested he was in possession of a gun. Apparently, that could not be disputed. The assistant district attorney did not worry too much about the verdict or polling the jury because the defendant was sentenced to 10 years on that charge alone and a conviction is a conviction. However, since my job is based on physical evidence this case still disturbs me and I just want to ask the jury, "What were you thinking? What more did you want?"

— Claire Shepard, MS

## Participate in the YFSF Poster Session!

Tuesday, February 22, 2005  
6:30-8:00 pm (Tentative)

- Undergraduate/Graduate Students, Emerging Forensic Scientists, and Veterans to the field are welcome
- Introduce your ideas in a comfortable and educational environment
- Present your undergraduate/graduate research or papers
- Share unique or educational cases encountered in the field
- YFSF Poster Session to follow the Annual YFSF Meeting at the AAFS Meeting February 2005, in New Orleans
- All relevant subjects from all forensic disciplines are welcome: DNA/Serology, Forensic Anthropology, Forensic Pathology/Medicine, Forensic Investigation, Forensic Computer Science, Odontology, Case Studies, Forensic Nursing, Forensic Psychiatry/Psychology and the Law, etc.
- Already presenting in another AAFS Session? Present your poster for the YFSF!

Contact Marrah E. Lachowicz BA, MFS, GCCP, to participate or for more information:  
[Gradpath@aol.com](mailto:Gradpath@aol.com)