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The bone detective

Harris County's forensic anthropologist Dr. Jennifer Love explains the real-world of CSI work.



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On the cover...

Dr. Jennifer Love joined the Harris County Medical Examiner's office just over three years ago. Her team of forensic anthropologists specializes in examining bones from crime and accident scenes to help investigators reconstruct important details and, often, to identify victims.

Photo by Rob Bishop



Putting the pieces together

By Rodney Crouther

Becoming a crime-busting super sleuth wasn't on Dr. Jennifer Love's mind when she began graduate school in 1995. She started along the career path that would lead her to a medical examiner's lab by just following her natural scientific curiosity.

Like the Hollywood-styled investigators of "C.S.I." and "N.C.I.S.," she spends her days examining the details of human remains in her job as the director of the Harris County Medical Examiner's forensic anthropology division.

Unlike those TV characters, she doesn't grill suspects alongside gruff detectives or squeeze confessions out of cunning killers by throwing lab results in their faces. Her

public about what I do," Love said. "We get a lot of requests for information from students, saying, 'Hey, I want to be a forensic anthropologist.'"

Her division specializes in studying human bones to answer a variety of questions. They help identify victims of accidents, fires or violent crimes where a positive identity can't be made through fingerprints, as well as trying to identify skeletal

"We get a lot of requests ... from students, saying 'Hey, I want to be a forensic anthropologist.'"

job does, however, include examining crime scenes and trying to determine people's identities from skeletal remains that may be months or even years old.

The recent popularity of forensic investigation TV shows, she says, does have one big effect on her real-world job, though.

"I get a lot more questions from the pub-

lic remains. It's a very specialized role and a part of a larger medical examiner team.

"These are cases that come in to investigation with no form of ID or the ID is wrong. It's not searching dental records — those go to a forensic dentist," she said.

The identification aspect of her work is one of the most powerful ways in which she con-

nects with the community, Love says. There are thousands of families across the nation searching for lost loved ones and thousands of cases of unidentified human remains in police files.

She recalls one case of a father who had been searching for his son without finding a trace.

“The case was several years old. He had suspicions, but he really didn’t know that his son was dead,” she said. “His son was an adult. He’d been in trouble. They hadn’t seen each other for a long time, but the son had always called the dad on Father’s Day, every year.”

One year, the calls stopped. A few months earlier, Harris County had recovered a decomposed body with no identification. Using DNA matching and the online missing persons database NamUs, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, Love was able to positively identify the son and give the family a chance, at least, to reach some measure of closure.

“You have to call people and give them the worst news they can receive, that a loved one has passed. I don’t know that it brings closure, but at the same time, it’s better ... to know it and not have to wonder,” she said.

The rise of websites such as NamUs (www.namus.gov) has been invaluable in closing cases like this in recent years, Love says. Families can even submit DNA samples for free to reach a national network of police and medical examiner investigators.

“With these sites we’re harnessing

the power of the public. If you have a missing loved one, you’re going to be on that site looking for information,” she said.

Beyond searching for identities, she and her team also study injuries to bones — injuries sustained either before or after death — to help determine how a person might have died.

Her findings in such cases can help determine whether someone died in an accident or a violent attack, or was the victim of long-term abuse.

Overall, her department takes on between 250 and 275 cases per year. Some cases can be resolved quickly; others, especially the unidentified remains cases, may take months or years to resolve.

Working for the county in the medical examiner’s office was not the career goal Love had in mind when she was a teenager in Pennsylvania.

At left: Dr. Love’s work often begins in the field, since the position and condition of remains when found are important details. Above: All remains are examined more thoroughly back at the lab.

“Actually, I started out studying cultural anthropology. I was an exchange student and went to Indonesia in my 11th grade year of high school. That’s what got me interested in it,” she said.

While still a student at Penn State University, she started moving toward archaeology — more Indiana Jones than CSI. Her true fascina-



tion with bones began while she was working on a field project to study a little known religious sect that lived generations ago in rural Pennsylvania called the Cloisters. She unearthed a grave at the site, her first such experience.

“It wasn’t that it was a big discovery

scientifically. They were just a small group, with a little community,” Love said.

But studying those bones sparked an interest in biology, which steered her toward her current career. It was the hands-on work, rather than TV or movies, that fueled her ambition for forensics.

She finished school at the University of Tennessee (the other “UT,” Love said) and worked as a medical examiner in that state, before coming to Harris County in 2006.

In her earlier studies, Love had expected she would end up teaching in a university, but she’s happy spending her days at the medical examiner’s lab, instead of in a classroom or studying ancient civilizations.

“It has a real connection to your everyday society. When you’re working on past societies, you’re pretty much removed,” Love said.

Like most in her profession, she doesn’t watch a lot of the TV crime dramas, only sampling one episode of the aptly named show “Bones.”

At the end of the day, however, she says she likes her TV time to be completely bone-free.

“When you live it, you don’t need to watch it at night. I’d rather watch HGTV,” she said. ★

