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No bones about it: Harris County forensics scientist gets down to nitty-gritty to solve crimes

By DENISE HOEPFNER
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If Hollywood were to cast Michele Hunt in the role of a forensic investigator, some people might have a hard time believing Hunt — with her long airbrushed fingernails, highlighted hair and perfectly applied make-up — would actually hold that type of job.

They would be wrong.

Hunt, daughter of Michael and Wanda Hunt of Lufkin, not only works as a Harris County forensic investigator, she excels at it. In her 5-1/2 years working for the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office, she has been instrumental in departmental changes and has gone on to earn a "Fellow" certification with the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (F-ABMDI) — just one of six in the state who hold the certification.

Hunt, a former member of the Panther Pride drill team, graduated from Lufkin High School in 1994. While in high school, she earned her cosmetology license and began cutting hair.

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Michele Hunt works on documenting remains as part of her job as a death investigator. Hunt has worked on cases involving notorious murderers, including assisting in the recovery of the remains of Colleen Reed, a victim of serial killer Kenneth Allen McDuff.



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Michele Hunt, daughter of Michael and Wanda Hunt of Lufkin, recently earned a "Fellow" certification with the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. Hunt works for the Harris County Medical Examiners Office in Houston. She is the only death investigator in Houston who holds that certification, and just one of six in Texas.

After graduating, Hunt began attending Angelina College for her basic courses, and became a Roadrunner cheerleader.

After she had 60 college credits under her belt, Hunt decided to enroll at Baylor University.

With no idea of what degree she wanted to pursue, she by chance sat in on a forensics course taught by Anthropology Director Susan Maki-Wallace, who at the time was one of just four forensic anthropologists in Texas. It was there, under Maki-Wallace's tutelage, that she found her calling.

"During my first semester at Baylor, I was watching crime shows similar to CSI, and I thought that it looked interesting," Hunt said. Because she occasionally did hair for a local funeral home, she was not afraid to work with the deceased.

At the time, Baylor did not offer an undergraduate degree in forensic science, so she took science- and math-based classes recommended by Maki-Wallace like anthropology, osteology and calculus. When in 1999 Baylor began offering a forensic science undergraduate degree, Hunt was among the first to declare it as a major. She also served as president of the Baylor Forensic Society during her junior and senior years.

A serial killer

A deal struck by a serial killer on death row, to provide the location of the body of one of his victims, led to an opportunity for Hunt and some of her classmates to get true "in the field" experience at recovering human remains.

In 1968, Kenneth Allen McDuff was sentenced to death for shooting two teenaged boys and a raping and strangling a 16-year-old girl. When in 1972 the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the death penalty as unconstitutional, McDuff's sentence was commuted to life in prison. He had a second stroke of luck when in 1989 overcrowding in Texas prisons caused him and thousands of other newly-convicted inmates to be paroled early to free up prison space.

Just a few years after being released, McDuff, a lifelong criminal, became the subject of a nationwide manhunt for the murder of two women. The remains of one of the women, Melissa Ann Northrup, 22, of Waco, were recovered weeks after she was abducted from the convenience store where she worked.

The remains of the second woman, Colleen Reed, a 28-year-old Austin accountant abducted from a car wash in 1991, were still unaccounted for at the time of McDuff's arrest in 1992.

McDuff was again sentenced to death, this time for the murder of Northrup, and became the only inmate in the nation with two death row inmate numbers.

In 1998, the Austin American-Statesman reported that McDuff struck a deal with authorities to provide the location of Reed's remains in exchange for a reduced sentence for a nephew who had been convicted of drug dealing. When maps drawn by McDuff failed to lead authorities to the remains, McDuff was secretly taken out of prison late one night to lead them to the place he buried Reed — an area along the Brazos River, just outside of Marlin.

There, authorities found Reed's remains, along with the bodies of two other women.

Maki-Wallace was called in to assist in the recovery of the remains.

Hands-on experience

"Dr. Maki-Wallace was notified by the authorities and the Texas Rangers that McDuff had come out to the area to show where he had buried the body because the maps he had drawn were not a good enough description to lead them to the body," Hunt said. "After a little digging it was evident that there were human remains, so myself and a few other students were contacted and arrived at the scene to assist in the recovery and documentation with Dr. Maki-Wallace."

Maki-Wallace had previously loaned her time and expertise to law enforcement in other cases.

"If at anytime the professor was called out on a recovery, she would contact some of her students to assist her if they were available," Hunt said. "It gives her students hands-on

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practice of skeletal recovery with her supervision," Hunt said.

McDuff was put to death by lethal injection in November 1998.

As part of her degree requirements, Hunt interned with the Waco Police Department and the Travis County Medical Examiner's Office in Austin.

She graduated from Baylor University in May 2001, one of fewer than a dozen graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Forensic Science at that time.

In January 2002, Hunt was hired as a death investigator for the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office. Today she works in the Forensic Investigations Division under Chief Investigator Beverly Begay.

What she does

Forensic investigators are responsible for conducting death investigations by developing organized, concise and accurate death reports, according to the departmental Web site.

As an "on the scene" death investigator, Hunt is responsible for documenting the scene of death through photographs, temperature readings and written documentation after the police have finished their investigation.

"We take possession of the body and determine cause and manner of death," Hunt said. "I've been in hostile situations. You just do what you have to do."

Unlike what is portrayed on some popular television shows, investigations can take weeks, months and even years to complete, depending on the circumstances, Hunt said.

"There's no case that's going to be cut and dried, where you're going to know everything within 30 minutes," she said.

The HCMEO has a deputy chief investigator, 11 forensic nurse investigators and 12 forensic investigators. The staff works 10 hour shifts, and the office remains open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"We never have a slow day," Hunt said. "We have to do so much follow-up, getting additional information, taking death and medical records over the phone. The office is constantly busy."

Hunt says the best part of her job is when she is able to give a family closure on why their loved one died.

"The worst part of the job is notifying the family," she said. "I always make sure someone is with them. If they're present at the scene, then we sit and talk with them and see if they can give us any more information.

"When it comes time for the questions to be answered, they're looking to the investigator," she said.

More serial killers

It was while working with the remains of three unidentified victims of Dean "The Candy Man" Corll, Elmer Wayne Henley and David Brooks, serial killers responsible for the deaths of 26 young men in Houston and the surrounding area, that Hunt gathered statistics documenting the need for a forensic anthropologist.

Her documentation led to the formation of the Anthropology Division, headed by Dr. Jennifer Love, and the addition of two forensic anthropologists and an identification specialist to identify victims of "cold cases."

Hunt also co-authored, with Sharon M. Derrick and Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Luis A. Sanchez, an abstract detailing the challenges of working on cold cases such as the Henley/Brooks/Corll murders, and the need for on-staff forensic anthropologists.

How she copes

Hunt handles death, in some way, shape or form, on a daily basis. Because of this, she has to find a way to separate her emotions from her job.

"I don't take my work home with me," Hunt said. "If you do, it will affect your daily life."

She says she finds comfort knowing she did everything she could to help family members of those who died.

"I leave work wondering, 'Did I do everything possible to assist the family?'"

Forensic science today

There are now about 300 declared forensic science majors at Baylor University, Hunt said.

To graduate, students must take all the premedical requirements, as well as forensic entomology, forensic anthropology, forensic toxicology, psychological profiling, hostage negotiation, crime scene investigation, criminology, death scene investigation, firearms evidence, medicolegal investigation and forensic pathology.

"Students also have the opportunity to travel to forensic cases that the professors are involved with," Hunt said. "They get to see firsthand how to handle the collection of human remains and accustom themselves to working with decomposing bodies."

Hunt's most recent certification was not easy to come by, explaining why she is the only one in Houston, and one of just six statewide, who holds it.

To receive "Fellow" certification, a person must hold a Diplomate certification, have a degree from a recognized secondary institution and have 4,000 hours of employment and training with a medical examiners office.

The test, Hunt said, is extremely difficult and takes six hours to complete.

She passed it on her first try.

For more information about careers with the Harris County Medical Examiners Office: www.co.harris.tx.us/me.

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