



E28 “Detective, I Swear I’ve Never Seen That Woman Before:” How a Killer’s Denials Plus DNA Put Him Away for Life

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn how new DNA collection methods enabled criminalists to develop evidence from fingernail clippings collected in a 25-year-old unsolved homicide.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating how a new method employed by the OCME of NYC developed evidence that led to the reopening of a cold homicide case, and how prosecutors dealt with problems inherent in cases where most of the witnesses had died.

The killing happened in the dead of night. As the sun rose, a park worker found the woman, sprawled face down by the playground climbing blocks, her jeans pulled down and off one leg. He ran to find a telephone to call the police. When detectives turned her body over, they saw she was bleeding from her face. The Medical Examiner found three stab wounds that went through her cheek and into her mouth. The Cause of death was manual strangulation.

It was 1986 and there were over 1,900 homicides in New York City that year. The pathologist took body cavity swabs, clipped her fingernails, bagged her clothes, and went on to the next cadaver. Police investigated, but the case was closed with all leads exhausted. The murder of Antoinette Bennett was another case gone cold.

Law enforcement recently began looking to science to see whether new DNA technology could recover evidence in “up close and personal” murders like this one. In 2010, the Cold Case Unit of the OCME’s Forensic Biology lab used a new technique to process fingernail clippings for DNA. Instead of swabbing the nails, criminalists put the whole clipping into a test tube and used a method called “sonication” that uses sound energy to literally shake the DNA off the nail and into the solution, where the cells get disrupted even before extraction.

Using this method, the criminalists developed a full male profile from those fingernails, which hit in CODIS to a 50-year-old man. As it turns out, Antoinette Bennett wasn’t his first victim. Steven Carter had raped, beaten, and choked his teacher into unconsciousness when he was only 16.

After detectives spoke to Carter in prison, prosecutors asked a new pathologist to examine old autopsy reports and photos, and cold case criminalists worked off lab reports completed decades earlier to bring this case out of the cold and into a courtroom.

Learn how prosecutors presented a 25-year-old homicide in a modern courtroom, when witnesses who did important work on the case were no longer available to testify. Watch interviews of the detectives, criminalists, and pathologist who testified at Steven Carter’s murder trial, and see the crime scene photos that were as compelling at trial in 2011 as they were the day they were taken.

DNA, Fingernails, Cold Case