Catching Bad Guys

A talent for drawing—and
drawing out witnesses—helps
Maryville Police Department's
David Graves catch criminals.

As the hitchhiker walked to the couple's car, he brushed his hair back with his hand, then got in. A short while later, the husband and wife learned of the strangulation death of a nurse. Her body was found in her vehicle, which was mired in mud on the side of the road near where they'd picked up the stranger. The couple called the police to report their suspicions.

At that point, the police had no leads, no evidence, and no witness to the violent crime. Enter Lt. David Graves, an investigator with the Maryville Police Department. David, 39, is one of about 30 forensic artists in the world certified by the International Association for Identification.

As a child, David put pencil to bulletins as he sat next to his grandmother in church. In high school, he helped his art instructor teach drawing. Yet, he'd always wanted to be a police officer. When he learned of police forensic art, the field seemed tailormade for him. In the course of his 15 years with the department, he's served as an undercover narcotics officer, a patrol officer, a detective, and now a lieutenant who is one of five investigators within the 50-officer Maryville police force.

"The type of work that he does in the art field by no means overshadows his abilities as an investigator," police department chief Terry Nichols said in a *Knoxville News-Sentinel* article when David received his forensic art certification in 1996. But his specialty does come in handy. "I'm loaned out [as a forensic artist] to all the surrounding agencies," David explains.

In the case of the murdered nurse, he prodded the memories of the husband and wife in separate interviews, drawing two composite sketches from their descriptions. In both, the emerging face of the suspect looked remarkably similar—except for the hair. A quick check with the witnessing couple explained the difference. The husband's strongest visual memory of the stranger was of the man walking to the car, threading his fingers through his hair. The wife remembered the man best as he sat in the car, hair back in place.

"They had nothing to go on except the drawing," says David. The composite was released to area police and news outlets. With the help of David's drawing, the hitchhiker was arrested and convicted.

"That's what forensic art is all about, when it all comes together and you find one—especially when they don't have anything else to work with," says David. He's quick to credit citizens who provide details for his illustrations. "You can draw like Michelangelo, but whether or not the drawing will look like the offender is totally up to the witness," he says.

Knowing how to guide these witnesses is part of the training he's re-

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> David Graves

ceived at more than 30 specialized police training schools. He first determines a general description: sex, race, height, weight, hair and eye coloring, using the witnesses' perceptions about David's own 5'10", 160-pound frame to gauge their accuracy at estimating physical attributes. Then, he has witnesses flip through mug shot books, looking for the perpetrator's features. Occasionally, the offender's photo is already on file. If not, the books give witnesses a gallery of features from which to choose.
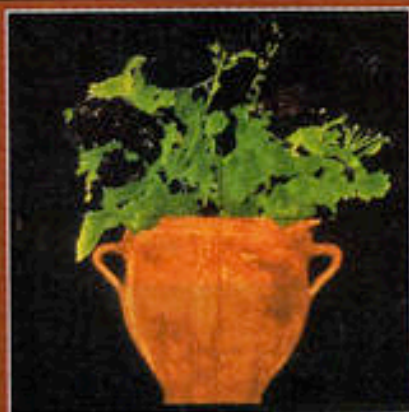
As witnesses jog their memories, David begins drawing, following their directions. "After all the features are picked out, I start adding tone to the face, bringing the features out more," he continues. The advantage of David's method over the facial feature overlay kits and computer graphics used by the majority of police departments is that although kits and computers produce drawings faster, the processes limit specific detail.

Even with David's skill, "We'll never make it picture-perfect because memory is not picture-perfect," he says. "What we're trying to do is capture the essence." In David's book of captured crooks, mug shots line up next to almost identical sketches. So accurate are many of David's drawings, defense attorneys have implied police officers who already have a suspect in mind have led the artist. Witnesses who collaborated with David quickly dispute the charges.

After all, they watched in awe as David, armed only with a pencil and some penetrating questions, gently nudged their memories until the face plaguing their minds came spilling out of their thoughts and took form before their very eyes.

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