

Classroom in the Woods

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As forensic science professional, it is obvious that the work we perform on a daily basis is far different from that portrayed on primetime television. Relaying this message to forensic science students however, can be difficult. Should a student not complete an internship, their only relevant practical experiences may come from processing mock crime scenes. While valuable teaching tools, mock scenes do not capture the essence of a real crime scene. Consequently, some applicant for crime scene technical positions have never handled “real”: evidence. Nor have they faced the traumatic experience of being present when families and friends learn that a loved one was seriously injured or has died. These are part of the job as a crime scene investigator that cannot be taught – they must be experienced. In the winter of 2010, an unusual opportunity arose for undergraduate and graduate students at Towson University in Maryland to participate in a search for human remains in the woods of Vermont.

On May 16, 2005 William Michael (Mike) Hogan was reported missing from Spring Lake Ranch (SLR) in Shrewsbury, Vermont. The Ranch is a therapeutic community and treatment facility for individuals that suffer from mental illness and substance abuse. Michael had been receiving supervised treatment at the Ranch for severe obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The afternoon of his disappearance Mike was scheduled to answer telephones at the ranch office. When he failed to show up for his afternoon job a Missing Person’s Report was filed with the Vermont State Police in the town of Rutland. Over four years passed with no sign of Mr. Hogan.

During these 4 years his family suffered through a nationwide missing person’s search that offered some false hope but no sure results. In the fall of 2990, a skull and other bones were found in the woods just off the camp property near Rutland, Vermont. Dental records showed this to be the remains of Mike Hogan. But these remains recovered by the Vermont State police did not allow a determination as to the cause and manner of his death. The victim’s parents wanted to have closure regarding how and why their son died. When the Vermont State Police exhausted their efforts and closed the case as an undetermined cause of death the Hogans sought help elsewhere. They contacted Towson University Anthropology Professor Dr. Dana Kollmann in the spring of 2010, who along with Forensic Program Director Mark Profili and 34 students from Towson University combed the Vermont woods for additional remains that might help in providing the Hogans answers regarding their son’s demise.

This case presented an excellent service-learning opportunity for students interested in a career in archaeology, anthropology, criminal justice, and forensic science. The presentation will depict through photographs and forensic reports the methods used to find and identify the remains, the examination of the remains by the Vermont Medical Examiner’s Office and the Smithsonian Institute and the unfortunate conclusions drawn from these examinations. Student and parent testimonials regarding this learning and human experience will also be presented.