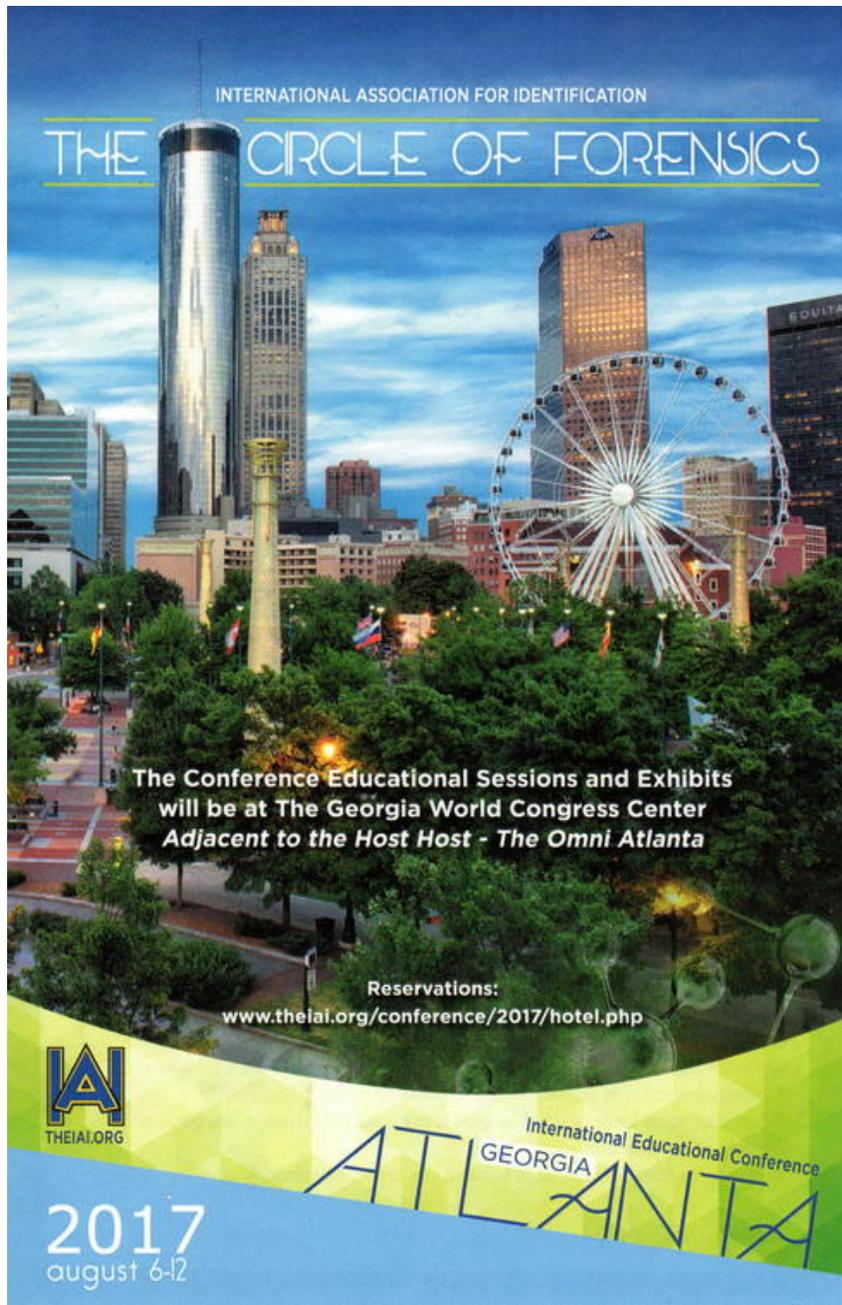


# GEORGINIA



## **2017 International Forensic Educational Conference Atlanta, Georgia August 6-12**

Our division is co-hosting the conference with the parent organization. This is a great opportunity for our members. There is a need for volunteers and participation in this event. Please contact our President, Lisa Maxwell, if you want to volunteer. We will need those available to give advice on the area and to sit at our division's table.

The conference cost for agencies sending two to four persons that are not members of The IAI will be \$400/person. If your agency is sending 5 or more, the conference fee will be \$375/person.

Please note that the cost for membership with The International Association of Identification is \$80. There are many benefits to membership which are listed on the website (<http://theiai.org/membership/index.php>). The cost for becoming a member with conference fees would be \$425.

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## Staged Crime Scenes: Suicide, Murder or Disappearance

Each year, between 14,000 and 16,000 people are killed in the United States at the willful hand of another person.

But those are just the ones that are known, investigated and cataloged. How many go overlooked, from a person reported as a firearm suicide in their bedroom, to a missing person who is really lying in a shallow grave never to be found?

Some criminologists say there could be an “epidemic” of murders going overlooked during death investigations, as killers have learned to cover their tracks by staging crime scenes, hiding evidence and otherwise throwing death investigations off track. Others say that although there is an increase, homicide detectives are still catching the vast majority of attempts to conceal crimes.

Everyone seems to agree on one thing: the staged crime scene has become a more common phenomenon as the public has become more familiar and fascinated with detective work.

“There’s an appreciable number of cases that are missed because law enforcement does not follow a specific protocol, all because of personal agendas, sloppy piecework or a staged scene that fools an investigator. But those are the exception—not the rule,” said Vernon Geberth, renowned homicide expert, and author of the landmark textbook “Practical Homicide Investigation.”

Of course, no statistics are available due to the nature of the unknown category of deaths. But a panel of experts told Forensic Magazine that recent years have definitely shown an increase in killers who are trying to fool cops at their own game.

**From Cain and Abel to the Petersons**  
Homicides can be misclassified as suicides,

### Editor's Message

I would like to take the opportunity to introduce myself. My name is Cory Payne. I am employed with the Carrollton Police Department. My jobs are crime scene investigator, evidence custodian, and latent print examiner. I am honored to serve you as the editor and webmaster of the Georgia State Division of the IA. I welcome any articles that you would like to share in the newsletter.

accidents or disappearances in hundreds of cases a year, according to Laura Pettler, a North Carolina-based forensic criminologist.

Her book, "Crime Scene Staging Dynamics in Homicide Cases," an exploration of the topic, was published last year by CRC Press. The book revisits criminal case histories stretching back to the story of Cain and Abel ("Am I my brother's keeper?"), to Shakespeare's version of the life of Macbeth ("Out, damned spot!"), through to high-profile homicides such as Susan Smith drowning her two sons in 1994 amid a bogus kidnapping story, and the brutal slaying of Laci Peterson by her husband Scott Peterson in 2002.

Pettler's main focus is "intimicide"—a crime of passion killing between intimate partners. Though each case is unique, the most common intimicides involve males killing females, and then making the scene look like a suicide or a disappearance. Pettler's book looks at the staged crime scene, and offers a methodology to reason out the totality of evidence, from the analysis of the initial 911 call, to lividity and rigor mortis offering clues about body positioning, and ballistics to verify whether the angle of a gunshot could be self-inflicted or not.

But the psychology and circumstantial evidence can also help guide an investigation, Pettler said. She advocates for analyzing the "victimology" of the deceased, as much as the physical forensic traces.

"America is hyper focused on physical evidence. Investigators can get tunnel vision on the forensic evidence," she said. "But the crime scene does not always put the weapon in the hands of the offender."

Pettler pointed to the case of Betty Lafon Neumar as just one possible example of how a crafty killer can get rid of a partner. Pettler was the district attorney's investigator on a cold case task force that determined the deaths of Neumar's five husbands and one son was suspicious. Then a 76-year-old grandmother, she was arrested in 2008 for the 1986 death of her fourth husband, Harold Gentry. But, Neumar died before she could stand trial, so she was never convicted of anything.

Whether it's slowly poisoning a husband, or shooting a wife and then putting the pistol in her hand, killers have come to realize that they can try to distort the forensic science to give them a chance at getting away with murder. The "CSI Effect" is well-known: popular depictions of criminal investigations on TV and in the media raise the expectations prosecutors have to meet, sometimes to an impossibly high standard.

### **The limits of forensic evidence**

But the "CSI Effect" also applies in another sense of the term: members of the public learn a little something about the actual process of criminal investigations. By knowing a bit about touch DNA, say, a garden-variety murderer may have a better chance at misdirecting the cops during a death investigation.

"The problem is that criminals read the same books and watch the same TV shows as everyone else and therefore gain insight into the investigative process as well as the value of trace evidence," said Geberth, a retired NYPD homicide commander, whose work has formed the basis of much of the study of staged crime scenes, including Pettler's.

A textbook example of a death investigation that will always be equivocal is that of a person who dies in a fall from a great height, like from a cliff or a building, added Lawrence Kobilinsky, a professor of forensic science and chair of the Department of Sciences at John Jay College.

Even with a clear look into the physical and psychological evidence, it may not be obvious whether the deceased slipped and fell to his/her death, deliberately killed oneself, or was pushed, Kobilinsky said.

"With respect to staged scenes, I think sometimes they are obvious, but [other times] they are in situations where investigators are not very well trained and experienced with staging...incorrect conclusions can be reached with a whole set of different outcomes," said Kobilinsky.

"Physical evidence can often tell you what occurred at a crime scene, but does not always tell you everything you need to know to accurately reconstruct the events of a crime.

“Do people get away with murder? No doubt that this happens,” he added.

The statistics on the known, but unsolved, murders in America can appear staggering by itself. Some 200,000 unsolved homicides have piled up since the 1960s, experts estimated a few years ago. Kenneth Mains, president of the American Investigative Society of Cold Cases, said the reason cases may go unresolved is because of ego.

“It’s a real troublesome trend, in a way,” said Mains. “People need to put the victims and victims’ families first. You can sit at your desks and wait for the call that never comes—or you can reach out to see if someone sees something you missed.”

### **An increase, not but an epidemic**

Geberth first wrote “Practical Homicide Investigation,” the “Bible” for murder cops, in 1982. One of its earliest marquee case studies was a woman’s death in a bathtub in New York City.

A husband reported to police that his wife had committed suicide by ingesting pills and then submerging herself in water. Geberth and the homicide squad noticed bruises around the throat of the woman, and the husband explained he had pulled her out of the tub using force, to try mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The husband, who had a degree in criminal justice and was himself awaiting appointment to the NYPD, knew police procedures and crime scene response.

But one minute detail leapt out at Geberth, already a veteran of death investigations at that point. He spotted the tiny hemorrhages in the wife’s eyes—a tell-tale mark of strangulation.

“It was very well done, by someone who was a graduate of the John Jay School of Criminal Justice, knew all about police procedure, and how police respond to a scene,” Geberth recalls. “What he didn’t know is forensics. I took one look into that gal’s eyes, and I saw the petechial hemorrhages, and I knew what we were dealing with.”

Suicides appear to be the most commonly staged scene. Geberth says it's because a suicide scene can be more of a challenge than even a clear homicide, if all the work is being done appropriately.

Geberth believes there are seven common mistakes in suicide investigations that could be providing murderers with a chance to get away with their crime, he wrote in *Law and Order Magazine* in 2013. Too many detectives assuming the case is a suicide is a major foible. Every death needs to be considered as a well-plotted and concealed homicide, he writes. Investigators need to consider the victimology of the dead. Most importantly, they need to consider all the psychological and physical evidence in its totality, and take each factor of the scene and the death to its ultimate conclusions.

"There's no brain surgery involved here, it's just doing your basic investigative duties," said Geberth, a strong advocate of checklists and attention to detail in even mundane investigative duties.

The increase in staged scenes is there, Geberth concludes, but it's not rampant. Investigators generally do their job, and faked suicides, accidents and disappearances are generally caught—even if the offenders have learned a thing or two from TV police procedurals, he said.

"We've always had staged crime scenes. We have more cases now where people are trying to mislead cops," he said. "But it is not an epidemic."

Augenstein, S. (2016, Dec 08). Staged Crime Scenes: Suicide, murder, or disappearance? *Forensic Magazine Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.forensicmag.com/article/2016/12/staged-crime-scenes-suicide-murder-or-disappearance>.

## Training Opportunities...

**Ron Smith and Associates, Inc.**

### **UNDERSTANDING EXCLUSIONS AND SUFFICIENCY DECISIONS**

Decatur, GA | May 8-12, 2017

CLASS CONTACT

Jesse Worley, Technical Leader

GBI - DOFS

404-270-8199

[jesse.worley@gbi.ga.gov](mailto:jesse.worley@gbi.ga.gov)

CLASS LOCATION

GBI - Main Building

3121 Panthersville Road

Decatur, GA. 30034

## Forensic Pieces

### ADVANCED RIDGEOLOGY SCIENCE WORKSHOP

Thomasville, Georgia | July 17-21, 2017

Host Contact

Andy Forte

Thomas County Sheriff's Office

229-289-2012

[AFORTE\\_00@yahoo.com](mailto:AFORTE_00@yahoo.com)

Class Location

Thomas County Sheriff's Office

921 Smith Avenue

Thomasville, GA 31792

Please visit the webpage for more information on training opportunities

## Cold Case Defendant Gets 20-Year Prison Sentence

Published 3-29-2017

By Matt Sharpe

[msharpe@upsonbeacon.com](mailto:msharpe@upsonbeacon.com)

A female victim from a 2002 armed robbery and rape case in Thomaston is getting closure following a court proceeding last week in Upson Superior Court.

Travis Montel Searcy, of Thomaston, pled guilty to rape and received a life sentence. The sentence stipulates that Searcy will serve 20 years in prison, and once released, he will remain on probation for the rest of his life.

Searcy was arrested in October of 2016 by Investigators with the Thomaston Police Department in connection with the 2002 armed robbery and rape case.

New DNA evidence obtained by the GBI linked Searcy to evidence from the 14-year-old Thomaston cold case.

“Fourteen years ago I was at a laundromat in Thomaston and was robbed and raped at gunpoint,” said the victim. “It took many years for him to be caught. Thanks to a great detective who never gave up on my case, and a district attorney who listened, today my rapist was sentenced to 20 years in prison and the rest of his life on probation. Thank you Detective Tim Ledbetter for fighting for me. You promised me you wouldn’t give up until he was put away... and you didn’t. To have someone do that to you leaves a forever mark. I don’t have to be scared of him finding me. Rape is a horrible crime. You never fully recover from it. I have carried this pain for 14 years. Although I wish he would of have received more time in jail, it’s finally over. I can heal now.”

According to a press release from TPD Chief Michael Richardson, the case occurred Aug. 2, 2002 shortly after midnight when an unidentified black male entered the Spin Cycle Laundromat located on Barnesville Street armed with a pistol and robbed a female victim then forced her into a bathroom where he sexually assaulted her. The offender then forced the victim back into the lobby where he sexually assaulted the victim again before fleeing the scene on foot. The suspect was never located.

“The night of the incident Detective Tim Ledbetter responded to the scene and took over the investigation,” said Richardson. “During the investigation a sexual assault kit was performed at the Upson Regional Medical Center on the victim and was sent to the G.B.I. Crime Lab to be examined for DNA evidence. There were no known DNA matches at that time and as a result the case went cold.”

On Sept. 14, 2016, Sgt. Ledbetter was notified by the G.B.I. Crime lab that a CODIS (Combined DNA Index System) match was located for the DNA profile that was removed from the sexual assault kit submitted in 2002. The CODIS match came back to Travis Montel Searcy, of Thomaston.

“Mr. Searcy was entered into the CODIS system as result of an unrelated arrest in 2009. Based on this new information the robbery/rape case was re-opened by the Thomaston Police Department. Shortly after re-opening the case Sgt. Ledbetter obtained arrests warrants for Searcy,” he said.

“On September 29, Searcy reported to his probation office in Thomaston at which time he was advised by Sgt. Ledbetter that he was under arrest for the 2002 robbery and rape that occurred at the Spin Cycle Laundromat. During the interview Searcy managed to flee the scene on foot knocking a citizen down as he fled. TPD and Probation officers were unable to locate Searcy at that time.

On Monday, October 3, 2016 TPD officers with the assistance of the U.S. Marshalls Southeast Metro Fugitive Task Force out of Macon, Georgia were able to track Searcy to a house in the 500 block of East Main Street at which time Searcy was found hiding in a closet. He was taken into custody without incident. An additional arrest of a female was made for harboring a fugitive at the time of Searcy's arrest.”

## Summer Conference 2017

Date: May 5, 2017

Time: 8:30 AM

Location: Gwinnett County Training Center  
3608 Braselton Hwy  
Dacula, GA

Contact: Ira Brunette

Phone: 404-391-2197

Email: [ira.burnette@gwinnettcountry.com](mailto:ira.burnette@gwinnettcountry.com)



GEORGIA STATE DIVISION  
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
FOR IDENTIFICATION



**APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP**

Please complete and return to:  
Georgia State Division, IAI  
P. O. Box 1949, Carrollton, GA 30112  
ANNUAL FEE: \$30

I hereby make application for membership in the Georgia State Division, International Association for Identification in accordance with its Bylaws and Constitution and agree to be bound by them.

I am applying for:  Active Membership  Associate Membership  
(defined on reverse)

<b>PLEASE COMPLETE BOTH ADDRESSES. Check mailing preference.</b>	Name in Full: _____	Date of Birth: _____
	Employed by: _____	How long? _____
	In what capacity? _____	How long? _____
	<input type="checkbox"/> Business Address: _____	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Home Address: _____	
	Business Phone #- _____ Ext: _____ Fax #- _____	
	Home Phone #- _____ E-mail Address: _____	

- Have you ever been convicted of a crime?  
 NO  
 YES (if yes, give full details on other side.)
- I understand that application fees paid to the Association by any new applicant between January 1st and August 31st shall be applied to the membership dues for that calendar year only; fees paid by an applicant on or after September 1st shall be applied to the following calendar year.
- All applications MUST be accompanied by payment of fees, which will be refunded if the application is rejected. *Incomplete applications will be returned.*
- Also, I understand that my Membership Certificate is the property of the Division and must be returned to the Secretary upon my *resignation or suspension.*

Because this information will be used for compiling our Membership Directory, PLEASE be precise and complete ALL items.

Lapel Pin is optional. The cost is \$5.00

<b>5. PLEASE NUMBER UP TO THREE AREAS OF YOUR EXPERTISE</b>		
Indicate your primary discipline as Number 1, then other areas as 2 and 3.		
___ Bloodstain Pattern Analysis	___ Fingerprint Identification	___ Laboratory Analysis
___ Crime Scene Investigation	___ Forensic Art	___ Polygraph
___ Innovative/Gen. Techniques	___ Footwear/Tire Tracks	___ Questioned Documents
___ Firearms & Toolmarks	___ Forensic Photography/	___ Voice Print & Acoustics
	___ Electronic Imaging	

6. Recommended by: \_\_\_\_\_ *Member's Name* \_\_\_\_\_ *Member's #*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Member's Address*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Recommender's Signature (Required)* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date*

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_ *Signature of Membership Committee Chairperson and Date*

STATE DETAILS OF "YES" Answer to Question 1 below:

PERSONAL HISTORY  
Degree and/or Honors and other Qualifications for Membership

### MEMBERSHIP QUALIFICATIONS

#### ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP

Active membership of the Georgia State Division shall consist of heads of Bureaus of Identification or Investigation (including persons under their supervision who are engaged in the science of identification), heads of Police Departments, Chiefs of Detectives and Sheriffs, provided however, that the foregoing persons are bona fide employees of, and who receive salaries from National, State, County, or Municipal Governments, or some subdivision.

#### ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP

All reputable persons wholly or partially engaged in any of the various phases of the science of identification and who are not qualified for Active Membership are eligible to become Associate Members. They shall, in all respects, be subject to the same rights and privileges as Active Members, except that they shall not be entitled to the office of Vice President or President.

**I certify that the information herein contained is true and correct to the best of my knowledge. Any omission or falsification of information will be a basis for rejection or denial of continued membership.**

Applicant's Signature and Date: \_\_\_\_\_