

On the trail: CSI work takes grit, lacks TV glamour, investigator says

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It's not Miami. It's not New York. And it's not Las Vegas.

It's CSI Wilmington - the real deal.

Since 1988, Beth Troutman, a crime scene investigator, has dusted for fingerprints, photographed shoe imprints and pulled maggots off bodies for time-of-death determination - all in the name of solving serious cases for the Wilmington Police Department.

Troutman, whose blond hair is tethered into a neat French twist, doesn't beat around the bush when she explains that her job-reality is far from the glamour depicted on the TV shows.

"I'm glad I'm not wearing my own clothes," Troutman said pinching the blue polyester of her uniform. "We do a lot of dumpster-diving."

Those who watch the popular TV shows, airing three nights a week, know that those CSIs wear suits and sexy corporate-America clothes, drive expensive cars and tumble into complex criminal puzzles, which they solve in the course of an hour-long show.

Troutman occasionally watches a *CSI* show, which she calls comedy.

She and the other eight members of the CSI unit kid each other at work about the show.

Troutman said the men in her unit say they'd like her to look more like the woman lead character in one of the shows.

"But then I say I wouldn't mind having Gil Grissom as a supervisor, either," Troutman said laughing. Grissom is the lead male character in the Las Vegas version of *CSI*.

"When you sit there and watch *CSI*, whether it's Miami or New York, they pick up the cigarette butt, make the match and go interview the person that did it," Lt. James Varrone said.

Troutman and her peers seldom - or never - learn of arrests in the cases they've worked until they're subpoenaed to appear in court.

The nine members of the Wilmington Police Department's CSI unit have picked up their fair share of cigarette butts, but DNA or other forensic evidence is sent to state or private labs for testing.

"On the shows, they've got one person doing photo, one doing fingerprints, one to do the drawings and one to collect the evidence, at least," Troutman said. "All that stuff is right, the difference is just that here, we do it all."

Troutman wants one of those state-of-the-art computers that matches fingerprints on the CSI shows.

"It goes blip-blip-blip-blip, while thousands of fingerprints flip on the screen, then it stops and the print they're researching automatically overlaps the match," she explained. "Wait a minute, there's a loop-type and there's a whorl-type, and they have a match?"

Troutman explains what only the trained eye of a real CSI would know.

There are three types of fingerprints, arch, loop or whorl, kind of like blood types.

"We do have computers that search for matches," she said, "but it's not like you put in one print, it matches and confetti falls out of the sky."

Being a CSI has a lot to do with common sense and paying attention to details.

It's about photos, prints, shoe impressions, measurements, directions and angles.

"It's about putting the pieces of the puzzle together," Troutman said. "You've got to be able to read a crime scene, you've got to know what it's saying to you."

On a recent Monday morning, nothing out of the ordinary happens.

Instead, Troutman catches up with a couple of overnight break-ins that didn't require immediate assistance and some car break-ins discovered early in the morning.

Just as she's about to leave a crime scene, an employee comes running out and tells Troutman that the staff just discovered that someone, probably the thief, has used the office bathroom and hadn't flushed.

Would she like to take a sample?

"We call it the CSI effect," Troutman explained, closing up her silver-colored suitcase, which contains fingerprint powder and brushes. "People think we can do the most amazing things."

As a matter of fact, people demand a lot of things they've seen on TV when Troutman and her colleagues arrive.

"They've seen it on TV and they expect us to solve it," Troutman said. "It doesn't matter

to them that there are no fingerprints available in their car or whatever it may be."

But Troutman takes people's assumptions with a smile.

She loves her job and that's more important than anything else.

"You can't come to work and not love what you do and want to do it every day no matter what," she said. "We make or break cases, if we overlook something the bad guy's going to go free. I think that's one of the few similarities between us and the shows."

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