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Current position: Chief Medical Investigator, Office of the Medical Investigator

Associate Professor of Pathology, University of New Mexico

Education history:

Undergraduate Education: Bachelor's degree in Biology, Valdosta State University (Valdosta, GA)

Medical School: Mercer University School of Medicine (Macon, GA)

Residency Program: Anatomic Pathology, University of Virginia (Charlottesville, VA)

Fellowship: Neuropathology, University of Virginia (Charlottesville, VA)

Fellowship: Forensic Pathology, Virginia Commonwealth University, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Western District (Roanoke, VA)

HOW DID YOU INITIALLY BECOME INTERESTED IN FORENSIC PATHOLOGY?

I became interested in forensic pathology in the 10th grade of high school, when a teacher gave a “test” on character traits and strengths, and my result was pathology. A family friend, who worked at a veterinary diagnostic lab, lent me a book from their library on forensic pathology, which I read twice and decided that “this is for me.” My dad was a Georgia State Trooper and I’d always had an understanding of law enforcement. Coupled with a love of science, hours of watching “Forensic Files,” and listening to my dad’s stories, forensic pathology just seemed like a good fit for me. Even today, I still occasionally watch Forensic Files, especially the New Mexico cases, and review the case findings to see whether I agree with the TV show’s conclusions.

WHAT IS THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF BEING A FORENSIC PATHOLOGIST?

Those cases where you can give family members some peace of mind and answer their questions are the most rewarding. Occasionally, when a family member says, “Thank you for what you do,” you get affirmation that you are helping people and making a difference. Forensics is a challenging field to practice in for a long length of time, so I believe that we

should hold on to these comments when we get them and remind ourselves of them when times are onerous.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES/CHALLENGES OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY TODAY?

As a forensic community in today's climate, we must acknowledge and focus on promoting wellness and prevention of burnout, so that we can also retain the forensic pathologists that we currently have, while attracting more physicians to our field. Being a forensic pathologist comes with a wealth of challenges, mentally and emotionally, so we are obligated to change the way that we handle our stressors and treat vicarious trauma. In the event that we can't repopulate the field with pathologists, we must reassess how we practice, as violent deaths and the opioid epidemic can easily overwhelm our already overburdened system.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CASE AND WHY?

As a second-year resident at the University of Virginia, I had the opportunity to moonlight as a local medical examiner. Three months prior to my first week on call, a 20-year-old Virginia Tech student named Morgan Harrington, disappeared after she left a Metallica concert in Charlottesville, Virginia, in October 2009. Her skeletal remains were discovered on a farm, about 20 miles south of where she'd last been seen alive, and I was the local medical examiner who was on call that day. Morgan's disappearance had been high profile, having been featured on well-known media outlets including People magazine, and Metallica had offered a \$50,000 reward for information. Arriving on scene, somewhat paralyzed by the droves of law enforcement officers, squad cars, and helicopters, I was escorted to her remains, where I made a few assessments of antemortem and postmortem injuries to law enforcement and then sent Morgan's remains to Richmond for an autopsy, which ultimately ruled her death to be due to homicidal violence of undetermined etiology.

I went on to finish my residency and fellowships and had started my position at the OMI in August of 2014, when a month later, another student disappeared. This time, 18-year-old Hannah Graham, a University of Virginia student, was found in a moderate state of decomposition 5 weeks after her disappearance. Autopsy examination ruled her cause of death to be homicidal violence as well. After reviewing video footage, Graham was linked to a suspect, Jesse Matthew, who was arrested after fleeing the state. Matthew was also linked to Harrington's murder, as well as a rape in northern Virginia. He was tried and convicted and sentenced to 7 life sentences without the possibility of parole.

For me, the crippling chapter of this story, is that I had had my own encounter with Jesse Matthew, unbeknownst to me at the time, which wasn't obvious until the news media showed Matthew's picture after Graham's disappearance, a few years younger with shorter hair, standing next to his yellow cab. I'd interviewed for residency at UVA in the winter of 2007 and upon completing my interviews, had to catch an early morning flight back to Georgia. The hotel called a yellow cab and I was on my way to the airport, except I noticed

that the cab driver was taking me through the woods, instead of the direct and busy route of highway 29. I dismissed this as the cab driver just attempting to collect more of a fare and he made casual small talk about my trip to Virginia. At some point the conversation became odd and I noticed him watching me in the rearview mirror, commenting on my “cute southern accent” and telling me that I was “pretty,” except that his entire demeanor had changed. I can’t adequately convey how the atmosphere changed or how my instinct was telling me that I was in trouble. I remember noticing some houses on the other side of the tree line, gripping the door handle, and thinking that when he started slowing down, that I would run. I remember him looking at me again, obviously noting the tears running down my cheeks, and he stopped talking and took me straight to the airport. I threw money at him, ran into the airport and called my dad, saying, “This guy was going to hurt me. I’m sure of it! But I can’t complain to his company about giving me a compliment, can I? They’ll just think I’m crazy.”

Twelve years later, in some bizarre, unexplainable way, I feel a morbid connection to Morgan Harrington, having witnessed the remnants of her vicious murder, and having experienced a mere fraction of her fear as she fell victim to her murderer. As a medical examiner, we have to disconnect our own personal experiences with some cases, except that this will haunt me for the rest of my career.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT WORKING WITH YOUR TEAM?

The OMI team is comprised of some of the most hardworking people I know, with an authentic caring nature and sense of altruism. I love watching how each person utilizes their strengths and talents to accomplish our goals. As far as the forensic pathologists, I love the comradery that we have with each other, the evening texts about certain TV shows, chatting about our family and running cases by each other. Perhaps the most endearing aspect of working at OMI is helping each other when we need that extra boost. I can speak from personal experience when my entire family, despite all the precautions, got COVID-19, with my son becoming ill first. By the time that my husband was ill, a week’s worth of groceries had been dropped off at our front gate from the phenomenal FP ladies with whom I’m blessed to work with. This is one example of many, where we’ve stepped up to the plate to help each other.

WHAT ARE YOUR HOBBIES AND HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN A WORK-LIFE BALANCE?

My hobbies are piano, cooking, skiing, and sour dough bread baking and prior to COVID, included world travel and scuba diving. For me, knowing when I’ve reached that point in the day where my productivity diminishes is helpful, because that’s when I call it quits for the day and go home to hug my children, listen to The Rock sing “You’re Welcome” for the 1,000th time, and force my 5-year-old son to read with me, after which I run, row, and play pool in our game room.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WORK SOUNDTRACK AND WHY?

I always tease our autopsy technicians about their music selections. I'm generally an old soul, who appreciates when musicians could actually sing, and you could understand the words and the lyrics. Once, an autopsy tech asked what I wanted to listen to and I replied "oldies," thinking that she'd put something like Frankie Valli or Diana Ross. She put the 90s channel on. When I told her that 90s wasn't old, she put it on the 80s channel and Cyndi Lauper's "Good Enough" played. I belted out, "WHAT MOVIE?" for anyone to humor me. Of course, no one answered because no one had ever heard of "The Goonies." My music choice usually depends on the day, but you can't go wrong with oldies and rock-n-roll in general.

WHAT IS YOUR MOST-LIKED MEAL AT YOUR FAVORITE LOCAL RESTAURANT?

Back when life was simpler and we could actually sit in restaurants, I loved eating at El Pinto, the largest restaurant in New Mexico. The waiting area walls are full of photographs of famous people who've dined there, some likable and others not, but still fun to peruse the wall. You can't go wrong with their house margarita, guacamole, carne adovada burrito smothered in red chile, or the red chile ribs, and the finale of sopapillas with honey. Of course you can get takeout, but it isn't the same!!