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CSI camp a glimpse into profession's harsh realities

By: Andrew Perlot , Record-Journal staff

NEW HAVEN - The hallway's single light cast the crime scene in grim shadow. Sprawled out on the stairs was the slain victim, her clothes disheveled.

The investigators had found a condom, a bottle of schnapps and a pink pocketbook -- all signs pointing to a sex assault case, they said.

After multiple sweeps of the scene they came across a piece of evidence that had previously eluded them -- a single hair that just might identify the rapist. Things were looking good.

But the victim was no more than a mannequin, the objects artfully-arranged dress from the prop room and the investigators high school students enjoying summer camp of a different sort.

Four students from Meriden and several dozen from around the state spent the past week investigating similar crime scenes at the University of New Haven's Henry C. Lee College Criminal Justice/Forensic Science CSI Camp.

Ever wonder about the validity of the CSI television show, how they get those tests back so quickly and do finger prints work?

The campers learned these things and just about everything else related to crime scene investigation that can be crammed into a week, said Henry C. Lee, the renowned forensics expert and head of the state police forensic lab.

"I hope they all grow up and all become forensic examiners," he said. "But whatever fields they go into, they have to be able to use logic."

At the stairwell crime scene, Samantha Lynes and Catherine Esposito, both 17-year-olds from Meriden, were attempting to use logic to solve the mystery Friday. The day had been set aside for the students to show off their new analytical skills while applying them to mock crime scenes.

Esposito listed the facts of the case.

"We found a pocketbook, some liquor, and a used condom," she said. "We're thinking it's a possible sex crime." She spoke of the need to go over the scene again and again, because a single bit of evidence can make all the difference.

Nearby, someone was working on a sketch of the scene, measuring the distance from the corpse to the wall.

Others were checking objects for fingerprints.

Esposito, a Maloney High School student, was enjoying herself, she said. Her group went about its work seriously and methodically.

"This is what I want to do out of college," she said.

Lynes, also a Maloney student, is interested in attending UNH. She called the camp "a great experience."

The rough sketch and measurements could be rendered into a high-quality image of the scene by computers, Lynes said.

She ran up the stairs a moment later to examine a new clue that had been found.

Advertisement

An advertisement for "Designs by Denise" window treatments. The ad features a banner with the company name in a decorative font. Below the banner, it lists services: "Window Treatments • Slipcovers", "Drapes • Valences • Cornices". It also includes the text "Select Your Own Fabric • Installation Available", "Call Denise To Set Up An Appointment", the phone number "203-237-6446", the email address "TheYarnGarden@aol.com", and a call to action "Click here for more information". The background of the ad shows a window with curtains.

Platt student Ian Drost, 17, was checking out a scene that he said looked like a possible suicide.

A corpse was found, surrounded by pills, and there was an unidentified powder that the students wanted to send to the lab.

"It's very intensive," Drost said of the camp.

Drost eventually wants to be on a police SWAT team and said he considered the forensics work good background.

What appeared to be a kitchen murder scene was absorbing the attention of Amber Brooks, a 16-year-old Wilcox Technical High School student.

Blood was splattered around the kitchen, and a knife had been found, she said, but it was too early to determine exactly what had happened.

The work kept her on her toes, she said. "It's very intriguing."

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