



December 14, 2009

Oasis Middle students study evidence collection

BY MAE YOUSIF-BASHI
mbashi@news-press.com

Samantha Wood carefully bent down, leaving enough space between herself and the bloody hammer.

Once she found the right angle, the 12-year-old snapped a photograph that would later be used to help solve the crime.

Wood wasn't at a real-life crime scene Tuesday, but one made up by her Oasis Middle School seventh-grade teacher Jane Flynn.

Flynn's crime scene investigation class is learning about the procedures involved in collecting evidence.

She rearranged the school desks and used "caution" tape to line an area of the room. Numbered pieces of evidence such as a "bloody" soda bottle and set of keys were scattered throughout the scene.

Many of the skills they've learned so far, such as studying blood spatters, can be used in real-life forensics, said Larry Stringham, forensics supervisor with the Cape Coral Police Department.

"It's a good start if that's something they wish to do," Stringham said. "... it's important because the colleges here do offer CSI courses."

Throughout the month of November, detectives with the Cape police department's property crimes unit filed 46 felony charges against 19 burglary suspects.

Many of those cases were solved with the help of evidence collected by Stringham's six-person forensics unit. Once in a crime scene, the team collects evidence ranging from latent fingerprints to photographs of blood spatters.

"People don't really understand the importance of photography," Stringham said.

He noted that photographs are much of the evidence used in court to convict a criminal.

"It's so important because it's the only way the victim can talk to the jury," Stringham said.

Flynn has been teaching the class about long-, medium- and short-range photographs and the importance of capturing the entire scene from many different angles.

The class also has studied historical crime scene investigations and will be collecting and studying DNA from bananas and strawberries.

"This (class) is a lot of observation and getting them aware of their surroundings," Flynn said. "It's a skill

I think a lot of us take for granted.”

Although it’s an elective, students were assigned to the science class.

“It’s my favorite out of all my classes,” said Daniel Higginbotham, 12. He noted that he now has a new-found career interest. “It’s fun learning about crime scene investigation.”

The class has discussed how TV’s “CSI” series can differ from a real-life investigation.

“I like (the class) a lot because you get to learn how real investigators look at a crime scene,” Wood said. “Sometimes, I watch ‘CSI’ and wonder how it’s really done.”

Stringham said the show “CSI: Las Vegas” shows the most real-life forensics.

“They show real procedures, but what they can’t show is the time element ... it’s just sped up,” he said.

Additional Facts

By the numbers

Cape Coral forensics from Jan. 1-Dec. 7

- 820: number of crime scenes in which the unit responded
- 608: usable fingerprints picked up at crime scenes that were entered into a database, which consists of 80,000 individuals that help match fingerprints lifted from a scene.
- 105: number of fingerprints matched to an individual that were related to a crime in one way or another. Many of those matches led to arrests or advances in a case.
- 4,358: requests from officers or others in the Police Department for services from the forensics unit. In-house requests include services such as video enhancement or processing fingerprints.

— Source: Larry Stringham, supervisor of Cape Coral Police Department’s Forensics Unit
