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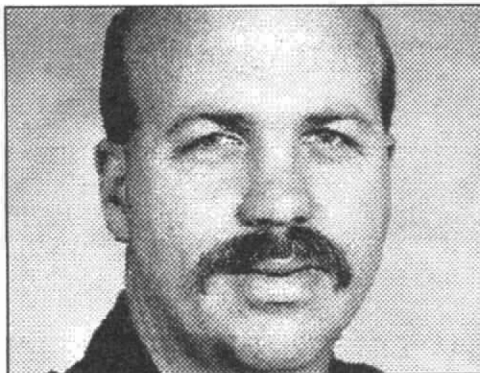
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Updated Feb. 2, 2005, 5:27 p.m. ET

**A sketch cop at work: 10 questions with
sketch artist Michael Streed**

"Sketch cop" Michael Streed has worked on several cases, including the murder case of 5-year-old Samantha Runnion.

**By Sherrie Streit
Court TV**[E-mail](#) | [Print](#)

In the television world of "Forensic Files" and "CSI," little attention is paid to the sketch cop's role in a criminal investigation. Yet many criminal investigations rely on sketch cops to direct the search for a suspect. In the murder case of Samantha Runnion, a 5-year-old girl who disappeared from her Stanton, Calif., home on July 15, 2002, it only took one image broadcast by the local media for police to find her suspected killer, Alejandro Avila. The sketch artist, Michael Streed, whose work helped to capture Avila and countless other criminals, recently wrote a book about his experiences, "SketchCops — True Stories from Those Who Draw the Line Against Crime." Court TV sat down with Michael Streed to discuss his views on the Runnion case and the role of a sketch cop in police work.

What does a sketch cop do? How do you approach the work?

Many times I'm called upon to contribute graphic information on cases. This entails interviewing victims of violent crimes. I'm not only a sketch artist, but a police officer as well. Most police sketch artists do sketches as a collateral duty. My job, primarily, is to be the first responder — to be there to conduct interviews with witnesses and protect the crime scene. My approach also comes from my training as an experienced police investigator, social scientist and skilled interviewer. In many cases, these skills have proven to be a successful recipe in obtaining a usable description, especially when creating an image from the words of an eyewitness.

How did you become interested in this field? What

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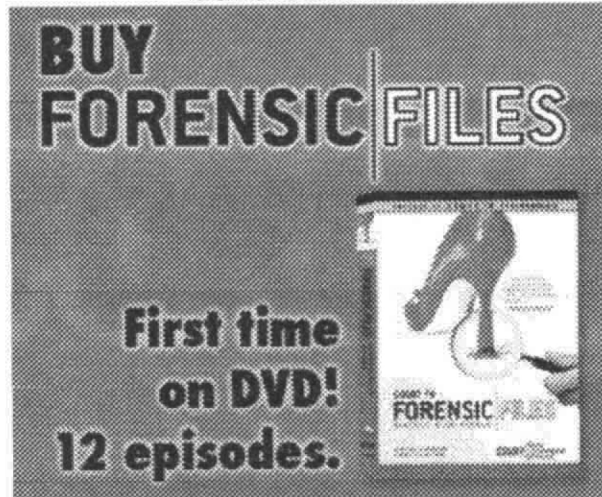
were some of your work experiences before you became a sketch cop?

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I always drew as a child. When I was bored, I would turn to drawing. Growing up in a police family, I was surrounded by cops. I always figured that I would end up as a cop and wondered how I could marry those two loves. One day, when I was a young police officer, I was watching the news, and I saw a sketch. Then the idea came to me. My drawing skills were marginal, but I had mentors [other sketch cops] who helped me to refine my ability.

I [also] worked as a police cadet, doing street work. After I received my badge, I began looking for ways to contribute some other element of me. I wanted to become a detective with a skill. [Steed is a 27-year police veteran who is now on retainer for several different counties and law enforcement agencies.]

How do you coax an image from the mind of a witness? What is the process?

The witness interview process is very specific. I initially try to develop a trust with them. This helps them with their recall skills, so I help them to develop their memory further. Then I try to gain some advantage from the visual image they describe.

I try to guide their narration at times, show them physical features, and sort of guide them through the story. However, I usually let the witness or victim tell me the sketch — each characteristic is described by the witness. Often people don't trust their own instincts and they end up creating their own obstacles in the process, so I try to help them eliminate the fear and the bias.

What was your first case as a sketch cop? What

has been your most interesting case?

My first case was a robbery at a local convenience store. I wanted to prove the value of the art, so I volunteered my services. The police agency had no idea what I was doing, so if my experiment failed, it would lessen the embarrassment to me and not do a disservice to the art itself. It was difficult, because I had not been trained in the delicate art of interviewing. Also, my involvement was not sanctioned, so I was at the mercy of the store clerk, who was busy working with customers. It was difficult, but I finally completed the sketch with the clerk's assistance.

The worst part came when I went to the local police department to proudly show the detective the fruits of my labor. I remember the puzzled look on his face as he accepted the drawing. Now, after many years of experience on both sides, I can understand his bewilderment. I am positive he had no idea who I was, even though I was a deputy sheriff with the county agency. I also don't think he had a clue about how to proceed with a drawing. That taught me a valuable lesson in marketing my skills to local law enforcement. [It also taught me] that there is a learning curve and educational component in what we do as far as teaching detectives how to properly use drawings.

My most interesting case to date has been my skull reconstruction sketches of two murdered brothers — the Taylor brothers. Their skeletal remains were found after a series of torrential rainstorms. They were buried, one on top of the other, in a six-foot-deep grave. The remains were dressed in clothing similar to that of outlaw motorcycle gang members. What made the case difficult was the forensic anthropologist's estimation that the remains had been buried for approximately 17 years. Other than the clothing, there was no hair sample or anything else that would give a clue to how they once appeared.

This case was actually my first attempt at sketching from the skull. I had recently completed a class in the technique and was eager to try my hand at it. It was good that I had the training, because although I had been previously trained in a 3D technique using clay, the skulls were in poor condition and would not be able to handle the weight of the clay.

The anthropologist described them as being young, so their faces would still have good definition as well. The difficult part was the hairstyle. The bodies had been buried in the mid-to-late 1970s. I sketched both with similar hairstyles and made the final renderings to complete their posthumous portraits.

Once finished, I returned to the coroner's office and turned the skulls and sketches over to the investigator, who remarked that they looked an awful lot alike. He seemed disappointed because of the resemblance. I think he believed it would confuse the public when the

sketches were released to the media. I just stood there dumbfounded, thinking of something to say. I turned to leave and flippantly remarked, "Maybe they're brothers," as I walked out the door. As it turned out, they were, in fact, brothers.

You wrote the book "SketchCops — Stories From Those Who Draw the Line Against Crime." How does this book illustrate the job of a sketch cop?

When I wrote the book, it was not an autobiography [but] rather a composite of many different roles that are played in an investigation. The sketch itself does not carry the story. The investigation [does]. The description of the composite is the back story, but there is much more involved. And my training involved [being a] mixture of experienced police investigator, social scientist and skilled interviewer. In many cases, these skills have proven to be a successful recipe for sketch cops to obtain a usable description for law enforcement, especially when creating an image from the words of an eyewitness.

What are some of the other ways in which sketch cops can help solve crimes? For instance, if you come across an unidentified body?

Image enhancement, or the process of altering images of a fugitive's appearance through digital imagery to determine their possible appearance, is another way we can help solve a crime. Or reconstruction, as in the case of the Taylor brothers' remains. Typically, in remains reconstruction, I make an educated guess about the victim's lifestyle and hairstyle at the time. I consider a variety of factors, and use my knowledge of human anatomy.

What was significant about the Samantha Runnion case? How difficult was it to obtain a sketch from a child?

What was significant about this case was the age of the witness. Very few people believed in a 5-year-old child's ability to define an image, particularly after such a traumatic event. In this case, the child was very bright, and I was able to help guide her through the description and allow her to tell them the story. However, I was the last one to speak with this witness. Children are very pure and simplistic in their approach and description — they have fewer obstacles than adults. However, they do encounter problems with cross-racial identification. And they sometimes embellish in order to receive attention, but overall I trust the memory of children.

How do you approach a crime scene? How does your approach differ from that of a police officer or another detective?

As a first responder, I like to be there immediately to

verify witness descriptions of the scene; it helps to understand where the victim or witness was in order to assess the witness. I work in conjunction with the forensic part of the team. In a sexual-assault case, it sometimes has worked as a human lie-detector [test]. And in some cases, they do lie.

What do you think the role of a sketch cop is in solving a crime?

I think the role of a sketch cop is that of a critical tool in an investigation. But it is an often underused tool that more agencies should implement in their cases. Many times, agencies don't effectively communicate in these types of investigations, and far too often the sketch cop does not enter until it's too late.

What is the toughest part of being a sketch cop? What are some of the other challenges you face in your profession?

One of the toughest parts of being a sketch cop is trying to prove the value of what we do. Often, DNA overshadows a facial identification. These DNA banks are good in researching a suspect, but not everyone is in them. Often a sketch allows police to move faster in the investigation process. But every case is different — a sketch cop's skills have to meet the needs of each investigation.

For more information on Michael Streed and his book, go to www.sketchcop.com.

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