

Artist cop draws criminals out, line by line

Orange Police Department officer Michael Streed wrote a book about his experiences as a sketch artist for police investigations.

By Jit Fong Chin
Orange City News

Police sketch artist Michael Streed's shining moment came two years ago, when the media realized that Alejandro Avila, the freshly nabbed suspected killer of Samantha Runnion, resembled Streed's drawing.

All the major news networks called. Streed was a star.

He'd gleaned the clues from a six-year-old witness and spun it into gold. The good guys caught the bad guys, and he was one of the heroes.

But Streed has a motto: You're only as good as what you did the day before. Witnesses are often forgetful, blurry and slurry. Who knows how useful tomorrow's sketch might be?

The glories, worries and adventures that have filled Streed's 25 years in law enforcement are chronicled in his 298-page self-published book called "SketchCops: True Stories From Those Who Draw the Line Against Crime."

Michael Streed's "SketchCops: True Stories From Those Who Draw the Line Against Crime" is available for \$19.95 from www.publishamerica.com or \$24.95 from www.amazon.com.

Streed, 46, says he is among the top three or four leading police sketch artists in Southern California.

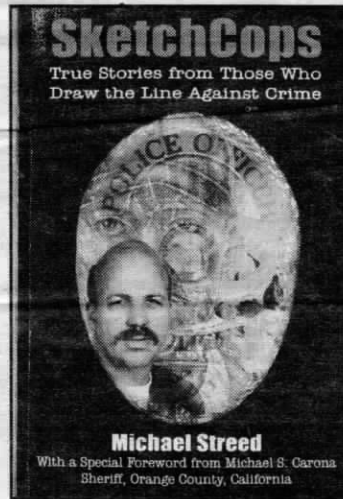
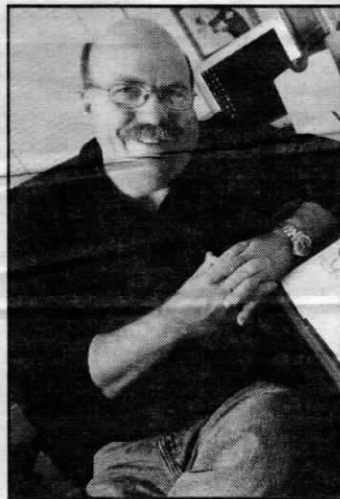
As a kid, he was always doodling. Disney cartoons, police motorcycles, street lamps, whimsy cartoons that matched his light-hearted personality.

The idealistic man decided to become a police officer like his father to help other people.

During his rookie year at Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department, he realized he could also train to be a sketch artist.

"I was watching the news one night and I saw a composite on the news. There it is! That's how I can put it all together," Streed said.

In 1980, the Orange High School graduate moved back to



Orange Police Department officer Michael Street details stories of his career as a sketch artist, including a noted drawing that helped nab the suspected abductor of Samantha Runnion.

his hometown and joined the Orange Police Department.

He took every forensic drawing class he could, clocking more than 600 hours of training hours and amassing unique skills like building faces out of skulls and using the computer to age the portrait of a missing person.

"When the detectives call you, it's because they've got nothing else left," Streed said.

"They turn the pressure up and you become the focal point of the investigation. Everybody sits collectively holding their breaths outside and you're inside with the eyewitness hoping you're able to get the information out of them."

"There's a lot that goes into these things," he said. "There's a lot of technical knowledge."

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You're mixing art, science, social psychology, pop psychology."

People often assume a sketch is good only if it looks exactly the same as the criminal. But it doesn't have to be identical to be useful.

"Quite often people have the attitude that unless it really looks exactly like the person, then it's some kind of failure," said Marilyn Droz, another sketch artist who freelances for the Huntington Beach and Los Angeles police departments.

"But the composite will still be a very valuable tool in the

investigation," Droz said. "It gives the officer and detectives an idea of the type of person they're looking for. A composite will be very valuable by eliminating people than really finding a person."

Streed, a fan of Dean Koontz and adventure movies, decided to write a book after his wife suggested he do so. In between holding down a full-time job as a patrol officer and taking his wife to radiation treatments, Streed managed to find enough time to bang out his story over the course of a year.

Publisher after publisher told him they loved the title "SketchCop" but said his writing was amateurish. Streed decided to publish the book himself through PublishAmerica.

"SketchCop" includes many of Streed's sketches that readers can compare to the actual photographs of the criminals. Streed also talks about how he interviews people and gives advice to readers on how to protect themselves from crime.

Streed has had many high profile successes.

For instance, in 1995, he was credited with helping to solve a 17-year-old murder mystery. He sketched pictures of what two men might look like based on skulls that were found in the desert. A woman recognized the sketches as Huntington Beach brothers Allan G. Taylor and Charles D. Taylor, who were kidnapped in 1978.

It may come as a surprise then Streed's first case study in

"SketchCops" illustrates failure.

DeWayne McKinney, a paroled gangster, spent 19 years in prison after he was wrongly convicted for the 1980 murder of a Burger King manager.

A list of reasons, ranging from mistakes by eyewitnesses to police misconduct to jury misconduct, were suggested for the mistake.

Streed was not blamed. Still, "SketchCop" readers can see that Streed's sketch resembled McKinney much more than Raymond Herman Jackett III, a man later fingered as the real criminal.

"I don't think anybody should be embarrassed to say, 'I screwed up, I could have done better,'" Streed said.

"There were safety guards that were built in, there were things that happened beyond me when this guy was misidentified."

"Hopefully someone can look at the first chapter and go, 'Ew, this guy can't draw.' But they'll look at some other drawings down the road and think, 'OK, he stayed committed.'"

"I don't mind baring my soul and say this is how I learned. Maybe we can all learn from this, whether it's a bad drawing, whether it's how we treat our kids, whether it why people commit crime in the first place."

"As a society, people are responsible for examining themselves."