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ARTIST EXTRAORDINAIRE: Orange police officer Mike Streed works on a computer-aged photo of Jamie Allen of Los Angeles.

Former FBI man is guru of age-progression art

PROFILE: Horace Heafner is the mastermind behind the artistry that has replaced pencil sketches with computer manipulation.

By BONNIE WESTON

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Orange police officer Michael Streed nearly gushes when he describes his mentor, Horace Heafner, the nation's master of "age-progression" technology.

"He spent 40 years using pencil and paper, and now he's Michelangelo with a computer," said Streed, a patrol officer and master forensic artist. "He's the best."

Heafner, 65, is the mastermind behind the age-progression program at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, based in Arlington, Va. The program takes outdated pictures of missing children and ages them, using a mix of forensic artistry and cutting-edge computer technology.

For a man who spent much of his 40-year career at the FBI relying on pencil, paper and clay, it's nearly a miracle — one Heafner feared would never occur.

"Forty years ago, I wouldn't have believed it, I couldn't have

imagined it, there were no computers," Heafner said. "When computers began to arrive, I thought, 'Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if I could get my pictures in there and work on them just like a painting?'"

Which is pretty much what Heafner, Streed and other age-progression specialists do today. Computer screens are their easels. And they have applications well beyond missing children.

When he isn't working on missing children, Heafner finds time to work on other high-profile requests.

During the summer he helped debunk a claim that a daguerrotype was the earliest known photo of President Lincoln. Heafner fed the image into his computer and began adding years, guided by confirmed pictures of Lincoln.

"This guy had Lincoln's big ears, but no way they were the same man," Heafner said. "If it was Lincoln, it would have been worth millions. Oh, well."

To help a foundation traveling to Russia in hopes of unraveling the fate of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swiss diplomat who rescued thousands of Jews during World War II, Heafner recently worked up images of the diplomat as he would have appeared in his 60s and 70s and at 82, the age he would be now.

"Now that's a missing case I would dearly like to say I helped solve," he said.

Horace Heafner, the program's leader and Streed's chief mentor, said the most remarkable case involved a woman vacationing at a Mexican resort.

She came across a boy on the beach. For some reason, she felt sorry for him. He wouldn't speak to her, so she snapped his picture hoping to cheer him up and thought no more of it.

When she returned to California, she got an advertising circular in the mail — the kind rou-

tinely delivered with junk mail — did a double take and called the center. Her snapshot and the circular's aged photo of the boy were a match. He's now back home in North Carolina.

Of 300 age-progression images the National Center and its satellite centers have produced, Heafner said 40 have helped recover children. And as technology progresses, he expects the batting average to rise dramatically.