

Police artist praises helpful child witness

COMPOSITE: A sketch of a suspect in a little girl's slaying proved valuable.

BY LINDA LOU
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CORONA—Michael Streed's 25 years' experience in law enforcement did little to reduce the stress from his most recent assignment.

Streed, a city of Orange police officer and forensic artist who lives in Corona, depicted the suspect in Samantha Runnion's kidnapping based on her playmate's description.

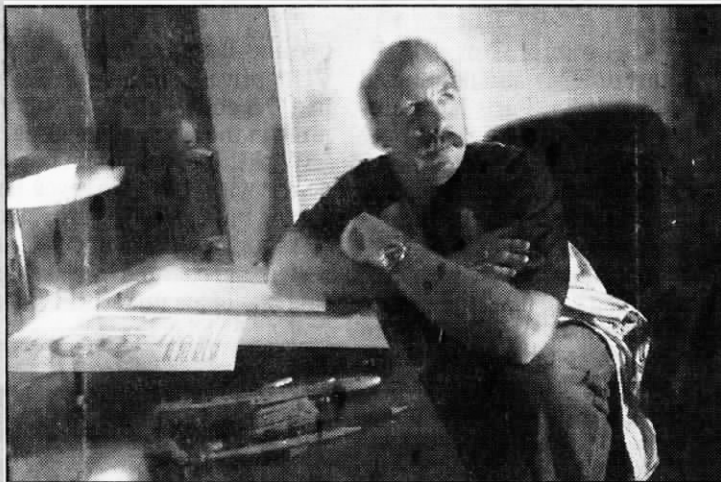
Samantha's face lingered in his mind after he finished his part in the case, Streed said Saturday.

Within hours of Samantha's kidnapping Monday, Streed had interviewed the 5-year-old witness who was playing with the victim and created a composite of the suspect that was released the next day.

Although Streed, 44, said he couldn't compare this witness' verbal recollection and recognition skills to other witnesses from his experience, he praised the girl.

"I think she did her job well," he said. "She saw what she saw and was very helpful in relaying the information to me."

His interview with the girl was conducted like any of his



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Forensic artist Michael Streed of Corona drew the composite sketch of the suspect in the Samantha Runnion case.

other assignments, Streed said. He spent time building rapport with the witness before making inquiries.

He typically helps child witnesses relax by encouraging them to draw or play games, he said. Streed said he has to act like a "pop psychologist" sometimes.

Once witnesses feel more comfortable, Streed gets them to concentrate and talk about suspects' facial features.

"I let them do as much talking as possible before I ask them more specific questions," he said. "I don't want to lead them."

Once solid details emerge

based on what a witness tells him, Streed pulls out a photo album of criminals who might have that specific type of nose, eyes mouth, etc.. Witnesses then select the appropriate features that Streed puts together to draw a composite.

Then he shows his composite to each witness and makes changes. The process takes 90 minutes to 2½ hours.

Streed, who used an 8-year-old's account to draw the composite of the man suspected of kidnapping and killing 10-year-old Anthony Martinez of Beaumont in 1997, said children can remember faces.

"Children are reliable wit-

nesses, despite what people say," he said. "They discount children's reliability because of their age and perceived inability to articulate facial features, but that's not true."

But one problem with child witnesses is that they like to please adults and say what they think adults want to hear, Streed said. That's where his training kicks in.

Streed, who not only draws composites but fugitive, age-progression and skeletal-remains reconstruction sketches, has taken classes from the FBI and art schools across the nation. He draws 50 to 75 sketches per year and has helped various local police departments that request his help.

In his spare time, Streed draws cartoons. His comic characters, Hackers and Crackers, can be found online at www.planetcyber.org.

One lesson Streed said he hopes people remember is the usefulness of composites.

"I hope the public gains greater awareness of composite drawings and uses them to help with any future cases," he said. "This (Samantha Runnion) case can get police agencies to consider using composites more to solve crimes and realize their impact."

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