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Hoover, Alabama police artist called in to help on recent rape cases

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Hoover police Sgt. Paul Lefebvre puts faces to crimes.

He is the department's composite sketch artist, and his pencil-and-paper skills have been in demand in recent weeks.

When Cullman police needed to alert the public about a rape suspect last month, Lefebvre was called on to draw the sketch of the perpetrator. He also crafted the drawing released last week of a man Birmingham police say raped a 9-year-old girl.

He has done hundreds of sketches of suspects, ranging from rapists to robbers, since taking on the role of sketch artist in 1995. He is one of 534 forensic artists who work full-time for national or international law enforcement agencies and who have been trained by the FBI since 1984.

Lefebvre, a Baton Rouge native, has long had an affinity for art, drawing as a child.

He said Hoover composites previously were done by crime scene investigators using computer images. He approached his superiors, showing them examples of his artwork and asked for the opportunity to draw the sketches instead of using computer images. "They let me try it, and that's how it started," he said.

Having a forensic artist on staff is rare for most police departments, said Don Stahl, who is chairman of the forensic art subcommittee of the International Association for Identification. The Minnesota-based group is the world's oldest and largest organization of forensic identification investigators, examiners, analysts and technicians, with more than 7,000 members.

"Most forensic artists support their own agencies and surrounding agencies because of the rarity of having a forensic artist on staff," said Stahl, who is a detective sergeant with the Charles County Sheriff's Office in LaPlata, Md.

IAI has about 139 forensic artists as members, Stahl said.

Cullman Police Capt. Max Bartlett said the department used to do some computer generated composites, but contacted Lefebvre after he was referred by the Alabama Bureau of Investigation.

Lefebvre attended the FBI Forensic Facial Imaging Program in Quantico, Va., and attended classes taught by some of the nation's most renowned instructors in the field. He also has training in skull reconstruction using clay.

Credits victims:

Lefebvre said his role in creating composite sketches is minimal. "It's the victims who do all the work in this," he said. "They do an amazing job of remembering, especially after they have been traumatized."

His work hinges on making sure the crime victim is as comfortable and relaxed as possible, he said. A sketch artist's biggest skill is the successful interview of the victim, he said.



"We're used to dealing with suspects or witnesses who are not cooperative with us," Lefebvre said. "Now when you deal with someone who wants to cooperate, our whole mind-set has to change during the interview."

Lefebvre said he uses a cognitive interview system taught by the FBI that allows him to illicit suppressed memories from a witness or victim by getting them to reach back for accurate representations stored away in their minds.

Lefebvre, who also investigates financial crimes for Hoover police, said he does not go into his interviews for a drawing as a police investigator. He is armed only with paper and pencil.

"I don't come in wearing a gun and a badge," he said. "It's just me. We just sit down in a quiet room. I just start out trying to build rapport with the witness, and we just go from there."

He said he shows the victim or witness reference photos and talks to them in detail about the suspect's face to help their memory.

"Once they begin looking at the photos, you can see it just click in their mind that they really do remember more than they think they remember," he said. "That's when the process starts. I try to keep them as involved as possible."

He said once the description of a person's nose and eyes is nailed down, the sketch will be more successful.

Lefebvre said as he draws the sketches, he lets the victim correct him in any way as he goes along. "Usually, we come out with a pretty good product," he said.



Successful sketches:

In the case of the rape of the Birmingham girl, Lefebvre said he gave her paper and pencil so she could be involved. The process took about an hour, and the girl was very brave, he said.

Lefebvre said a successful sketch is not one that looks exactly like the suspect.

"We're not really after trying to get an exact likeness," he said. "We just want it to represent that person."

Stahl said it is "virtually impossible" to have a sketch come out looking exactly like a person because an artist's drawing is based on memory, and everybody interprets people in different ways.

Lefebvre said a composite is only a tool, just as fingerprints are, in helping solve a crime. Composites also help investigators rule out certain suspects. Composites are often sent to newspapers and television stations. Other times, they will go out as a bulletin to other police departments or to jails.

Stahl said an artist's work is an important piece of the puzzle in solving a case.

Lefebvre said he is most rewarded when he sees a case come to a close and a suspect successfully prosecuted.

"If I can help in some small way, that helps me feel that I have done my part in it," he said.

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