

Being a regional forensic coordinator

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Q&A: Crime Scene Investigator, Elizabeth Garside asks Ryan Howell about his forensics career

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Career beginnings

What made you join the world of forensics?

Initially, I didn't know that the role of crime scene investigator (CSI) even existed. I saw it on TV and thought it was just an American thing. I went to uni for four years to study a management degree with marketing because I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I couldn't see myself working in an office every day, five days a week, meeting the same people every day. I wanted to do something more meaningful.

So, I joined the Special Constabulary as a volunteer police officer and loved policing. I thought the natural step would be to become a full-time police officer, but there was a recruitment freeze at the time. Because of that, I got a temporary job in the police, and during this I saw jobs advertised for CSI, so I thought why not give it a go? I went through the full interview process with many steps, ended up joining CSI in August 2009 and loved it.

Advice

What's the best piece of advice you've been given?

'Stay calm'. People can tell when you're not calm. I remember one day in the office when it was absolutely manic. The phone was ringing and my colleague ran across the room. Just before he picked up the phone, he took a moment to compose himself and when he answered, sounded completely in control. I spoke to him afterwards and he said if you stay calm, speaking slowly and purposefully, people will think you know exactly what you're doing, even if inside your head you're running around like a headless chicken. In this job, you will always be presented with circumstances you've never seen before. Don't panic, think about it logically and don't rush.

What advice do you have for a new CSI like me?

The job can be really exciting and fast-paced, but what you don't see on TV is the repeated exposure to trauma. You're not sure how you're going to respond to that or deal with it until you physically have to. CSI has been a dream job for some colleagues I've known, but they've got here and said, 'I can't do it'.

People worry about saying they can't do it, but a phrase I read the other day which was meaningful to me is: 'It's best to admit you walked through the wrong door than spend your whole life living in the wrong room.'

People don't realise how traumatic the job can be. We have to understand how best to cope with that, which is also on the organisation to look after the teams too.

What skills are necessary as a CSI or for working in forensics in general?

Every force will have their own requirements for that of course, but for me it's the following.

- Resilience – understanding what that is and how to manage it. This doesn't mean ignoring everything, it means knowing how to cope with it.
- Public service motivation. We are here for the public and must remember that.
- Attention to detail. If you don't see it, no one else will.
- A sense of humour. If you can't laugh about some things, it will be a long, long career.

Have you had any role models during your career?

I think my work ethic comes from my Papa. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents when I was a small child and I grew up seeing him grow his own family business, working hard. At around 13 years old, I joined the family business peeling potatoes for the family fish and chip restaurant, doing anything I could to help.

I saw my granddad grow that takeaway into a 100-seat restaurant which was winning national awards. It's really instilled in me that when you work, you work hard, but it'll be rewarding. It's easy to do nothing, but that's never been an option for me. I always do things to the best of my ability.

Another role model is a fantastic boss I had. He realised what I was capable of and continued to develop me, despite knowing I would eventually move force to live with my partner. He put me onto

various leadership courses at the College of Policing and I still use the learning from those. He wanted to invest in me, not just the organisation, which I don't think we see enough of. I've used him as a bit of a role model for my own leadership; not to be an exact copy but to carve my own way through it.

Unique experiences

What is something unusual that you had to deal with?

There's a memorable job where the smell will always stay with me. It's a sad job. Bailiffs had forced a door open because the homeowner hadn't been paying the bills. They had passed away in the bathtub and was there for the best part of 10 months, without anyone realising. They had no family at all. That's unusual as we don't go to those kind of jobs often. It's those which make you realise how lucky you are to have your health and family.

Another unusual thing is when I'd been to a case in a multiple occupancy house for a suicide. Around six months later, I pulled up onto the driveway and looked at the house and thought, 'I've been here before'. Believe it or not, I went to the exact same room as the suicide but this time it was for a burglary. I was stood in the same flat, around the same furniture, which felt a bit peculiar.

What is a standout memory you have from working in forensics?

There will always be jobs that you go to and think, 'I will never forget that job'. They can be really sombre and one which comes to mind for me is a murder on a bus. From the CCTV, you could just see the suspect's eyes light up when they saw the victim. I saw the huge amount of traffic caused by the commotion of what happened, as it occurred in an area which is on my way to work. At this point I didn't know what had happened, but I was deployed to the scene once I got to work. It was one of those jobs you never really want to be involved in, but you feel privileged to be involved in helping identify the suspect.

Another one which stands out is when I went to a missing person enquiry with my team and straight away we found blood drag marks. I was moving some boxes in the garage of the property and suddenly I saw a pair of feet staring at me. I instantly got a feeling of being punched in the stomach. People thought I was winding them up when I said that the victim was in the garage, but I wasn't joking.

Challenges

What has been the biggest challenge of your career?

When people find out that you're a CSI, the first thing they often ask is, 'what's the worst thing you've seen?' When you ask that, you're basically asking the CSI to remember and relive something that they've likely put to the back of their mind. I try to take the conversation off somewhere else and maybe tell them a funny anecdotal story about something. In reality, people probably don't really want to hear about the gory details because they'll have nightmares about it.

Another challenge is police staff progression. To progress, you have to go where the jobs are which often means moving somewhere where you have no ties, connections, family or friends. A positive of this is that even if you go somewhere new, the job is generally the same. However, people seem to stay in these jobs for a long time, sometimes 20 years, and you have to wait for some jobs to come up to be able to make that move, which can be a big challenge.

How do you personally cope with the more stressful/challenging cases you've attended?

Crime scenes are traumatic, and people will deal with them in different ways. For me, I go into a job and just turn a switch off. There's a job for me to do and a list of things that need doing, I get them done. What I don't do is think about that person, think about their family, think about how they must be upset, because that won't help me help them. There's a quote I found on the internet: 'Resilience is about how you recharge, not how you endure.'

I try to remind people that work is work and home is home. So, when you're away from work, shut the laptop. The emails will still be there tomorrow. Last October I started running and now I'm absolutely hooked on it. I love it. All I can hear if I'm not listening to a podcast is my own footsteps and it's wonderful. It's so effective at reducing stress, so that's how I cope.

Achievements

What has been your proudest achievement in policing?

I'm proud to be doing the job that I'm doing, and I wouldn't change it. In one of the forces I worked in, there was a threat of redundancy and I started looking for other jobs. Thankfully that never happened, but I realised I would always want to work in forensics. I love it and it's not the sort of job

you can do through gritted teeth.

Another proud moment is that I also have the honour of being the chief officer of the Special Constabulary, which I joined four years before I became a CSI. My line manager sent me the advert for the chief officer position from another area, saying it looked like something that had my name written all over it. I wasn't sure if I should or shouldn't do it at the time, but that gave me the push I needed. I've done it for two and a half years which gives me a huge sense of pride. I lead a 100-strong team of volunteer police officers who come in, not because they're getting paid for it, but because their motivation is to help people and keep people safe.

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