

***Researching Reform interviews Vidocq! Super sleuth extraordinaire, Vidocq is the defroster of cold cases and holder of some seriously gruesome materials.....To get to know him better, read on...***

*Where did your passion for unsolved/ wrongfully solved crimes stem from?*

The curiosity started in law school where we focused a lot on police interrogations. During classes my mind would wonder around the question “but what if?” In those days, I did not dig into cases that deeply since graduation was foremost on my mind and after that; well...the world awaited me!

After my Amnesty International years, I worked in academia. I had read a lot about unsolved crimes but it was not until I branched out to police departments that I saw for myself how cases can go unsolved without any malice of the officers involved.

Digging into decade old cases, I saw how limited the files from the 40s, 50s and 60s were and how little was written down. The files were often paper thin. They lacked the basics such as full names and last places of residency. Autopsies were discussed but then no copy of the autopsy report was included. Often I found what was left of a faxed copy of an autopsy report but due to age, the fax became illegible.

Many reports were written in a style that I call “note to self-reporting” meaning that the officer knew all the players and assumed that he/she would be working on the case alone or, with others who also knew the players. Therefore the officer did not bother to completely fill out all forms, add full names, nicknames, addresses, etc. Nowadays, police reports are more difficult to read because they are full of information from the start. The style has clearly changed as well. The officer now writes a report with in his/her mind that any other officer can be assigned to that case and that officer may not know any of the key players.

With often little to go on and with police departments understaffed and overworked as they universally are, digging into cold cases becomes an enormous hurdle for any detective who wishes to devote time to cold cases. They would have to do a lot of searching through files, boxes, storage rooms, etc., and make inventories of what there is and what they need.

Often, those cold case files and boxes lack an inventory list so officers do not always know exactly what is in the boxes until they start digging.

Not having the luxury of time and money, many officers and their superiors resolve to dedicate time to cold cases as soon as their inbox allows which is not very often. I do have that time. If you click on the tab “cold case investigations” at the top of the website, you can read how I got started.

Link: <http://www.defrostingcoldcases.com/introduction-to-cold-case-investigations>

*Over the years, how many cases would you say you have defrosted, approximately and are there any particular types of crime that interest you, over and above others?*

There are cases I was directly involved in and was kept up to speed about their status. From those, six were re-opened and are being re-investigated. However, since they are cold they do not get any priority despite being re-opened. Moreover, those departments do not (as far as I am aware) have any additional funding or grant money to free one officer who can dedicate him/herself completely to cold case investigations.

I must admit that wrongful convictions have a strong hold on me. Not just because we could, if proven, have someone unjustly incarcerated but also because someone out there, has not been caught yet.

*You use a lot of detailed and sometimes graphic evidence to analyse these crimes, which you then post onto your blog - is this information publicly available or do you have secret sources? :-)*

I search for materials, collect all details and place everything in one post. One thing that I found with cold cases is that all information is scattered. There may be a newspaper report here, families may have set up a website there or added information to existing sites about missing people-unsolved homicides but still, I find many stories incomplete.

If possible and applicable, I try to get in touch with the attorneys who were involved in the cases and some have provided insight and more detailed information. Family members also provide me with materials/information previously not used by the media. And of course, I have my sources!

*What kind of information is available to the public on unsolved crimes and where can they look to find it (i.e. if they feel a family member has either been wrongfully convicted or their murderer never found)?*

The first step is one that you must make yourself: gather all information available to you now. Remember that in either a wrongful conviction or an unsolved homicide, a decision was made to not look any further. In the latter, police felt that they did not have enough evidence or leads and in the former, a jury turned in a verdict. So what you must do is convince people to take up the case again.

Be ready to be asked the following question: what is new? Everyone you approach will ask you why this time is different, what it was that made you think the case should be re-investigated. The fact that the case involves someone you knew is not enough. That sounds hard but any officer will tell you that they need more. You have their sympathy but their hands are tied unless you give them something new. That will get the attention of people in authority to re-open a case.

Materials can be found in newspapers (either original or on fiche in public libraries or university libraries), police reports, interviews, information in chat rooms, forums, etc. You will need to scan the web, check links, follow links back to their source information, check footnotes in articles and find that information, etc.

*Losing a loved one must be incredibly tough on the family members; does conviction act as a therapeutic outlet for their grief?*

No, closure after conviction or execution for that matter is a myth. The hurt does not go away.

“Closure” has become a fashionably loaded word that carries the misconception that a prosecutor is speaking for your family at trial. Wrong! The prosecutor represents the constitutional state and not the relatives of a victim. They have different needs and wants. The latter need emotional understanding of their hurt and acknowledgement of that pain by an impartial authority as part of the grieving process. The former, the constitutional state, does not have emotions and as such, should be represented in an unemotional, objective manner.

I have friends whose loved ones were murdered. Some witnessed the execution of their loved one's murderers. They did not feel better at all. A chapter was closed, correct. That murderer will never hurt another person again, correct. But no execution can soften the pain of having lost a child or partner. The pain on holidays, birthdays, and other celebrations will still be there.

Those who buy into the "closure myth" will be disappointed and will feel that the system led them down. They should have been told that no criminal justice system can ever give closure for wounds that deep.

*You also have an extensive background in the field of Human Rights - has anyone ever brought an action against the state for wrongful conviction and/or been successful?*

Yes, and there are whole libraries full with books about wrongful convictions! For actions against the state, follow the [Innocence Projects](#) in the USA and the UK for information galore!

I cannot resist...I must mention these wrongful convictions because I am working on some of them: check DCC for the cases of William Thomas Zeigler, Richard Lapointe, the Crewe Murders, Brian Parsons' case, Henry Skinner and Cameron Todd Willingham.

Links:

<http://www.defrostingcoldcases.com/category/zeigler>

<http://www.defrostingcoldcases.com/?s=richard+lapointe>

<http://www.defrostingcoldcases.com/?s=Crewe%2C+Jeanette+and+Harvey>

<http://www.defrostingcoldcases.com/forensics/which-brian-parsons-is-responsible-for-the-death-of-mrs-ivy-batten>

<http://www.defrostingcoldcases.com/?s=Skinner%2C+Henry+>

<http://www.defrostingcoldcases.com/?s=willingham>

*Do you think the state should be penalised for wrongful convictions?*

YES. Period. Full stop.

*Imprisoning people for their crimes is society's way of penalising offenders and protecting society at large; how effective do you feel this is in reducing crime and do you have alternative views on what might be more efficient, if at all?*

Incarceration is effective as long as it is tailored to the people who you send there. Locking up a tax evader without a criminal record in a closed confinement with people who have committed crimes against mankind, does not make sense to me at all.

I also believe that mandatory sentencing is wrong. Every judge should have the authority to set a sentence that suits the crime and the criminal. The judge is the one who poured over all mitigating and aggravating circumstances, who heard about the convicted person's demeanor from a variety of people including the people in charge of safeguarding the convicted one during trial.

Mandatory sentencing has taken away from the judge the ability to make sense of punishment and to deliver to the convicted person a tailored and effective message.

*Are you an advocate of the death penalty?*

No. Period. Full stop.

*And lastly.... how would you like to make the process of criminal investigation better?*

Criminal investigation in general? The place to start is by outfitting the police department with the right number of officers in other words, proportional to the residents in the jurisdiction that they cover. If the number of residents shows a steady increase then the number of officers should go up as well.

Assuming that you have outfitted all those officers with the right equipment and materials, I guess that the police department's computer network would be next. Standardizing forms with enough space to actually write/type a full address into a box, etc. Homicides without leads for more than a year should automatically be transferred to a separate database from which officers can directly download reports and information.

All police departments should have a cold case squad. That does not mean that those officers exclusively work on cold cases. That would be ideal! What I mean is that per department, a team is assigned that gets pulled from active duty as soon as a cold case grant or funding comes in. Having a cold case database ready will then facilitate the search for cases to be handled first.

Last, every department should have a page on their website dedicated to their cold cases so that people can read about them.

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