

Paid To Do the Impossible

The head of the Suffolk crime lab knows how to bag criminals

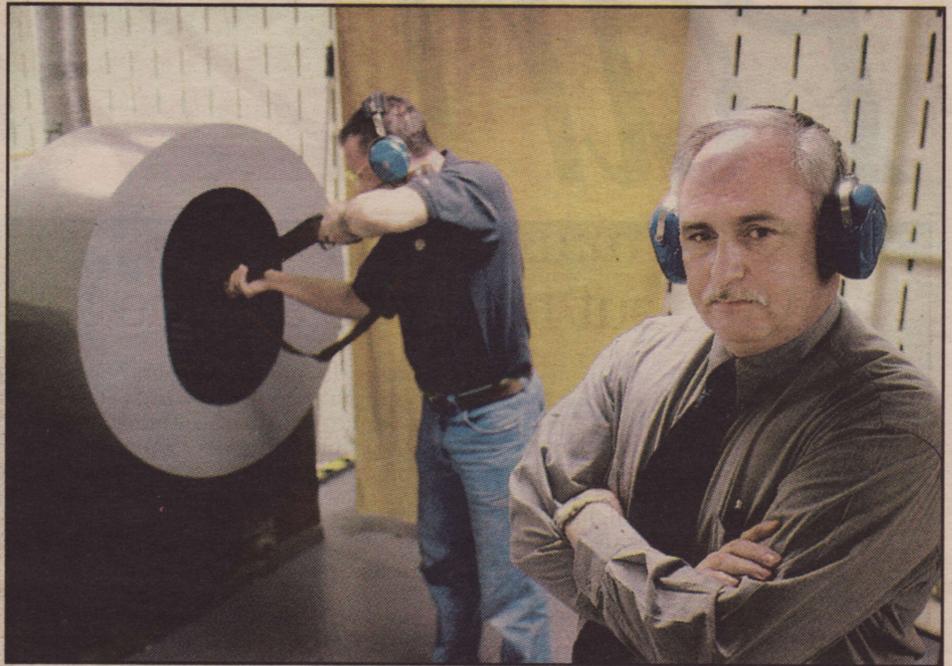
By Bill Jensen

THE BODY WAS FOUND in the woods of Westchester in the late 1970s. The victim: a paroled felon. The prime suspect: his jailed partner. The evidence: slim, save for three bloody Hefty garbage bags. And the detectives — the detectives wanted Vincent Crispino to do the impossible.

"They wanted to know if I could say whether these three bags covered in blood came from a box of bags in the suspect's apartment," Crispino says of the strangest request he ever received as a crime investigator.

After he got over his incredulity at the pie-in-the-sky scenario, Crispino went to work. He called the bags' maker. The company had never been asked if particular bags could be linked through any patterns in manufacturing. After some thought, an employee mentioned a heat bar that rolls out every 37 inches or so to cut the bags, Crispino recalls. The heat seal would run perpendicular to random lines running throughout the sheet of plastic. If you could match up the lines, you could match up your killer.

"I went out and bought a box of Hefty garbage bags on the weekend," Crispino remembers. "I took the glass off my storm door, took a lamp from my daughter's bedroom and made a light table in my living room." Crispino pieced the bags together and saw a perfect fit. "I



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Vincent Crispino, right, director of the crime lab, with George Krivosta, a firearms examiner

said 'Son of a gun; this has potential.' Then I did it with the evidence and we were able to show that markings on the sides and the tops of the three bags were linked to the bags in the box."

The evidence won a conviction, and Crispino had developed a new technique to trace garbage bags — a common killing accessory — that was presented to other forensic scientists and used to close cases, including an unsolved Florida kidnapping.

But that was in what Crispino, 53, tags as his "former life," 16 years doing bench work and giving testimony that helped convict killers such as Jean Harris in the

Scarsdale Diet Doctor case. Crispino's "current" life, as director of the Suffolk County Crime Laboratory, is about securing grants, pushing field procedures into the new millennium and helping to develop accreditation standards for the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors so O.J. and JonBenet debacles become a thing of the past.

This Saturday at 8 p.m., Crispino will join crime historian E.J. Wagner for "The Forensic Forum: Exploring the Crime Scene" at SUNY Stony Brook. After Wagner lays bare the eerie details of historic

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TALK WITH
Vincent Crispino, Investigator

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murders, Crispino will take over to discuss how he might have handled the cases in modern times. (Call 631-632-8230 for information on the talk.)

In the past 32 years, Crispino has seen his profession evolve from one looked down upon by the Sherlock Holmes-types of old. "If I went out with my lab coat just to go into the coffee room in Westchester, 1969," Crispino remembers, "the guys would say, 'Heh, Vinny, how 'bout giving me two pounds of chopped meat?'"

Today, Crispino serves up the prime rib of DNA, what many consider the great equalizer of 21st century law enforcement. And now, with the success of CBS' new crime drama "CSI," the occupation of crime investigator has taken on a sexy spin. While the show stretches the truth — civilian crime lab workers generally don't interrogate suspects and make arrests — the Suffolk unit that Crispino heads is more like the show than most crime labs in the country.

The laboratory "is one of the few civilian labs in the state that is routinely expected to respond," Crispino explains. "So if the Suffolk County Homicide Squad gets a call that there's a murder tonight, the next call that usually goes out is to the laboratory."

Having scientists getting first crack at a scene is one of the reasons Crispino says he chose to head up the Suffolk lab 16 years ago.

"If there is going to be reconstruction interpretations done, if it's a bludgeoning or high-velocity-impact blood spatter, they get a chance to see the blood spatter, see the body and the evidence next to the body, as opposed to photographs or diagrams."

They'll bring back the evidence to Crispino's lab, which is a treasure trove of bad-guy bear traps. There's the gun room, where a replica of the Suffolk Sniper's rifle was tested. The trace evidence room, where carpet fibers and paint chips, like the ones used to put away serial killer Robert Schulman, are analyzed. There's a legion of microscopes, all hovered over by civilians looking at this type of cell or that type of chemical. It all leads up to one thing — catching the bad guy — which is getting a lot easier, thanks to the creation of local, statewide and national DNA databases.

"In the past," Crispino says, "they'd give us a name and say, 'Is this the guy?' Now we come to them and say, 'This is your guy.'"

His soldiers still have to rely on the wits that helped Crispino crack that garbage bag evidence years ago. But science is definitely catching up to the bad guys, tilting the playing field of the cat-and-mouse game of cops and robbers, rapists and killers. And that's just fine with Crispino.

"If you're a bad guy," Crispino says sternly, "nothing is unfair." ■

Bill Jensen is a freelance writer.