

The internship in the Escambia County Sheriff's Office Evidence Department stands as one of the most interesting experiences of my academic career. I dealt with every type of person from inmates to federal agents. During the course of my term at the evidence department, I attained some new skills and refined many of my skills retained from prior experience working in the private sector and from my personal hobbies. I have yet to take a college course on evidence, but I have had extensive schooling on forensic science. I probably would have been much more familiar with terms and protocol used in the crime scene unit, but I was placed in evidence where it is safer and more secure.

This internship required the use of skills from the three main types of jobs that I have had over the years which include warehouse, inventory, and customer service experiences. My experience in electrical hardware assemblies and car parts aided my ability to inventory the various bins and shelves of evidence. I spent the whole summer in 2004 filing vehicle maintenance reports at the car dealership where I worked, so filing evidence cards felt quite natural to me. I also worked for a year as a customer service representative in that car dealership's service drive, so I was able to teach the other evidence technicians where to look for a seized vehicle's identification serial number if its location was not readily apparent. My former hobby of coin collecting greatly aided the technicians when a large collection of foreign and domestic coins was seized and the values of the items had to be assessed. I am about a publication away from being an

official expert witness on firearms, so the technicians would invariably ask me to locate the weapon's make, model, and serial number whenever a firearm was seized. I even helped answer firearm-related questions posed by ATF agents from the local office. There was never a time that firearms came into evidence that I was not asked at least one or two questions about the items by the technicians. In my time at the evidence department, I helped identify and classify over twenty-five different firearms.

I learned a lot about evidence handling procedures during the course of my internship. One of the more interesting differences that I learned during my experience is the difference between found narcotics and seized narcotics. Found narcotics are illicit drugs that are detected in an open area or are turned in by a third party, these drugs are not associated with any particular person and thus are held for a few weeks or months before being destroyed via incinerator. Seized narcotics are those which are detected in a person's clothing, residence, or possession. Seized narcotics are held as evidence until the courts order their destruction after the suspect has been either convicted or exonerated. Seized narcotics are supposed to be analyzed for purity in an FDLE lab if the offense of possession counts as a felony or if the narcotics were found on a juvenile. I also learned how to properly seal and document different types of evidence. When I copied evidence for the state attorney's office (SAO), the evidence had to be resealed with special tape and I had to write (half on the tape and half on the container) that I copied the evidence for State Attorney X, the day's date, and my initials to indicate that I was the last person to seal the container. This information was also logged on a record sheet to keep track of what evidence was released and to whom. It was also interesting to see that certain items of evidence were separated due to departmental protocol. When a

bottle of pills is seized, the pills and the bottle have to be packaged and weighed separately before being filed as evidence. Illegal narcotics like marijuana and crack cocaine must be separated from the original baggies and weighed. Firearms and ammunition are stored in separate areas for obvious reasons and magazines must be stored unloaded. When an officer busts multiple suspects for narcotics possession, then the quantity of narcotics found on each suspect must be recorded to decide the severity of the penalty. Interestingly, prescription narcotics are much more commonly seized than any of the street drugs (i.e. crack and marijuana).

I learned that a lot of what has been taught to me in forensic courses assumes that the agency has unlimited space and funding. I was under the impression that flammable evidence only referred to arson debris that was to be stored in unused paint cans. Flammable evidence is actually arson debris as well as any item seized that may be flammable in nature such as solvents seized from people huffing fumes and cigarette lighters found on a dead drug addict or any suspect. Arson evidence is the only type of flammable that is stored in unused paint cans. I also did not know that each firearm seized in a domestic violence injunction (DVI) is recorded on a form and sent to the ATF to be researched just in case it is stolen or has been used in a crime. Another thing I did not learn in forensic courses is that all evidence is eventually either auctioned off by the government or destroyed per court order. The only evidence that stays in storage indefinitely is an item from an unsolved homicide because the statute of limitations never expires for unsolved murders.

My initial expectation of what working in an evidence department would be like was not far from my actual experience. An evidence department functions much like a

library except in this case; items are eventually destroyed or sold at auction. The drawback is that about ninety percent of the time, an evidence department is about as exciting as a library. I figured that I would be doing lots of filing and making copies, but I had no idea that those would be my primary duties. Since I was not authorized to use the computer network, I was left to perform basic tasks such as copying and inventorying evidence. I completed at least 100 evidence requests sent by the SAO for copies of everything from evidence cards to video footage of a murder scene. My biggest limitation during the course of this internship was the fact that I did not have computer access, because I was unable to help with any tasks performed by evidence technicians that involved maintaining computerized records or looking up evidence on the computer. With such a major limitation, I was only able to experience about a third of what an evidence technician does. The biggest difficulty that I faced during this internship was contacting the internship coordinator at Escambia County; this lieutenant is so busy that even his secretary is unaware of his whereabouts. I think that UWF should use someone easier to reach than this lieutenant because he is too busy to be reached and it is not fair to him or the intern.

I spent most of my time performing the important minor tasks that were required in the department that the others did not have time to address. The biggest difference that I made in my entire time there was the complete relocation and overhaul of the flammable evidence storage. The flammable evidence is stored in plastic cabinets that were on top of the walk-in evidence fridge/freezer, but a technician who performed maintenance on the cold storage units said that the walls and ceiling of the units were not designed to support the weight of these flammable evidence cabinets. This meant that I

had to supervise two inmates borrowed from the county jail next door as they moved the cabinets to the floor around a large chain link enclosure for firearms awaiting destruction. It was interesting that the inmates were not allowed to let me out of their sight and were instructed to follow me wherever I went. Once the cabinets were moved, the inmates went back to doing whatever inmates do and I set about inventorying the flammable evidence and organizing the cabinets by year.

The most important thing that this internship has taught me is that I do not want to ever be an evidence technician. I could easily be an evidence technician, but the job is boring and involves the handling of hazardous substances which are not part of my present job as a police dispatcher which pays exactly the same as an evidence technician position (I asked). Evidence technicians also have a much higher probability of being subpoenaed than dispatchers because many evidence 'customers' are criminal defense attorneys.

The UWF criminal justice program has done a wonderful job of informing me on basic policing and forensic protocol, but I have not taken a course on evidence and therefore cannot assess the validity of that curriculum. My education attained at UWF thus far has helped tremendously with my present job as a dispatcher, but I wish the curriculum would further stress the paranoia and 'tribal' mentality among police officers.

My advice to future interns at the Escambia Sheriff's Office is: do not expect action or excitement in an evidence department (I did not and I was not disappointed). You should expect to do a lot of filing and copying, for anything else is a bonus. Lastly, limit your answers to 'yes' and 'no' when they administer the pre-employment polygraph unless you have a lot of time on your hands (I was in there for almost three hours).