

MY VIEW



Founder Wayne Fortin



NOTE: Although TIP volunteers are often on death scenes with Coroner Investigators, the investigators remain a mystery for many of us: *Why do they do what they do?... How do they regularly see death up close on a regular basis and not get burned out?...*

Jill Roberts is the Executive Director of TIP of S. Nevada, and she is also a Clark County, NV. Coroner Investigator. I asked Jill if she would share her experience of being an Investigator. She agreed. Below are the questions I asked her and her answers.

INSIDE THE MIND OF A CORONER INVESTIGATOR

Q. How long have you been a coroner investigator?

A. **Just under 10 years.**

Q. What attracted you to the job?

A. **I majored in biology in college and planned on going to med school to be a doctor. I took all of the prerequisite classes- anatomy, physiology, microbiology, etc. I loved learning about the human body. One semester away from graduating, I changed my mind and switched majors. I always still had the interest in what a human can withstand and what makes a person live... and what makes a person die. I have always loved learning and when I noticed the coroner's office offering a reserve academy for investigations, I applied thinking that if I was accepted into the academy, I'd just love to learn all about the process. I was accepted, went through the academy, and thought it would be fascinating to work as an investigator on a part time basis, if they allowed. They allowed!**

Q. Why do you do this job? It seems being so close to death on a regular basis can be depressing.

A. Much like TIP, a portion of it is about making the process a little bit easier for families to go through. But also, I feel a deep responsibility to the decedent. They can no longer talk for themselves, so it is my job to speak for them and to help in the process of figuring out why they died. I write their last chapter in life. It's an honor and a privilege to do that. How do I keep the job from being depressing? I use my TIP skills of leaving myself in the car. I am very focused on my responsibilities but not the tragedy itself.

Q. It seems to me it takes a special person to be an investigator. Do you agree? If so, what special qualities do CI's possess.

A. YES, it takes a special person. Investigators have to be very well-rounded having medical, analytical, emotional and practical skills. They have to be well-written (for report writing), organized, diplomatic, must be quick on their toes, be able to multitask (huge), and not be squeamish! Medical knowledge is a must, as is a lot of common sense and the ability to not take things personally.

Q. Are there situations which are especially difficult for you?

A. Child abuse or senior abuse cases. In almost 10 years there's ONE call that I have had a hard time letting go of and it was a child abuse case.

Q. Are you ever in situations where the nature of the incident hits so "close to home" you need to call for help?

A. No.

Q. When you talk to rookie investigators, what do you tell them they must learn to survive in the job emotionally?

A. To leave themselves in the car... And to learn how to talk to people with a sense of compassion.

Q. Because of the nature of the job, you can't avoid seeing some very disturbing sights up close. How do you deal with that?

A. Strangely, the sights and smells don't "bother" me. I think that is one of the reasons that I know that this is a job I'm well suited for. The only thing I really don't like are bed bugs and roaches. Yuck!

Q. What part of the job gives you the most satisfaction?

A. Being able to be the eyes and ears for the medical examiners... Knowing that what I do on scene helps them in determining how someone dies. The more detailed of a job I do will make it easier for them.

Q. What about the job would the rest of us be surprised to know?

A. In Clark County, most of the investigators are women! It used to be a very male dominated career, but that has changed throughout the years.

Q. What do your family and friends think of your work?

A. Some never ask me about work. Others are fascinated by it.

Q. What do you do to keep yourself physically safe on scenes?

A. Scene safety is a must! I almost got hit a few years ago on a freeway where I was investigating a motorcycle fatality. Someone was driving drunk and blew through the orange cones set up to close the roadway and drove through our scene. It's nice to know that situations like this are taken seriously though- the driver was caught and prosecuted. But that was a bit scary! I always pay attention to my surroundings- and to the people I am working with. I am always conscious of the presence of alcohol, illicit drugs, weapons, irrational people, biohazard situations, etc.

Q. How do you keep emotionally fit (immediately following a shift as well as long term.)

A. Proactive care as opposed to reactionary care is key. I learned after One October that I always have to be ready for the worst of the worst.

Q. I know in emergency services "gallows humor" is sometimes used by first responders to cope. Do you and your peers engage in "gallows humor."

A. Sure... back in the office, at times. Not as much as you would think, though, at least not here... It's more of sharing the oddities of a call or the strange things that happen as opposed to laughing or joking about them.

Q. I am sure you and your colleagues are very respectful of the deceased who you encounter. What do you do to express this respect and to ensure you don't become calloused and lose this respect?

A. YES. Being respectful of the deceased is of utmost importance. We have signs hanging above every doorway in the coroner's office that reminds us of this. The signs say...

"Remember... Families entrust us with one of their most precious possessions. Keep faith with them by conducting yourself as though the family were present. The body is dear to them. Treat it reverently."

It is a constant reminder of the respect that the deceased deserve. I have NEVER encountered an investigator, tech, or doctor who does not treat the deceased as they should be.

Q. You have lots of experience dealing with survivors immediately following a death. What are some do's and don'ts you have learned about how best to support them?

A. Everything TIP teaches! I use so many TIP skills in my line of work with the coroner's office. The differences are that I am giving death notifications and sometimes asking really difficult questions or having to relay very sensitive information to survivors. One of the biggest "do's" for me is having a TIP volunteer present. They oftentimes can support someone in a way that wouldn't be possible for me, even with my knowledge of the TIP skills. Sometimes people are not receptive to receiving kindness and support from someone who just changed the whole trajectory of their world and pulled the proverbial rug out from under them.

Q. Do you consider it an important part of your job to support survivors and is supporting survivors considered an important part of the job by administrators?

A. Yes, it is important to me. Although it is important to administrators, it is not as important as other aspects of the job. And depending on who the survivor is, the investigator may never even speak to them. For instance, if the person on scene is not legal next of kin, some investigators will spend little to no time talking with them. It's not that they don't want to be supportive, but it's just not part of the job to support someone who is not directly involved. That's why TIP is so important!

Q. TIP volunteers sometimes encounter coroner investigators delayed response times in arriving at scenes. What are the most common reasons for delayed response times?

A. We have been SO busy in Las Vegas and have been severely short staffed. Sometimes, we have another call holding before we even get to our first call. There are some days we are going call to call to call to call. That makes for long delays and also makes for a rushed investigator while on scene who might not have a lot of time to spend talking with survivors.

Q. How do you handle situations where family members want to “say goodbye” to their deceased loved one but their deceased does not look presentable?

A. I'm very “to the point.” I explain why. Most people do not have an issue with this once they know it's for their best interest. I will always try my hardest to make it possible for people to view their loved one though, if possible.

Q. How has your attitude about life and death changed as a result of the job (if at all)?

A. TIP changed that for me before I became an investigator by instilling in me a sense of appreciation for life and health. 😊 But on a negative note, I know due to my investigative work, I am more skeptical of people than I ever have been. Something to work on!

Q. Is part of your job giving death notifications to survivors? If so, what have you learned about giving death notifications?

A. Yes! I teach a death notification class using the EFA skills!

Q. What is the most important thing TIP volunteers need to know when dealing with Coroner Investigators?

A. One more thing that I think is important is that there are times volunteers think they are helping the investigator by stepping in and speaking on the survivor's behalf when questions are being asked. It's really not helpful. Sometimes we might ask questions in roundabout ways, ask odd questions, or reword a question on purpose- and are looking for the survivor to respond. There might be a reason we are asking a certain question that might not be obvious to a TIP volunteer or anyone else on scene. HOWEVER, after the investigator is finished asking questions, it would absolutely be appropriate and appreciated for the volunteer to take the investigator aside and mention something they might think might be important (for example: “I know you asked Susie about her mom's medical history, and she seemed confused about her mom's health and didn't say much. She did tell me before you arrived that her mom had been diagnosed with diabetes, a few weeks ago.”