

"I Speak for the Victim"

Denise E. Greene

Writer's comment: I have wanted to be a doctor for a long time, and a few years ago I became interested in forensic pathology. A good portion of the intervening years has been spent wondering what kind of person chooses this field and why. In 1993 I took an intern position with the Sacramento County Coroner's Office to try to find the answer. An English paper that asked the students to interview someone in our future profession seemed the perfect opportunity to do some digging. Initially I approached the most outgoing of the pathologists in the office, but on the day scheduled for our interview he was required in court, so I approached the other pathologists. I was more than a little surprised when the senior pathologist, Dr. Robert M. Anthony, volunteered. Dr. Anthony has a reputation for being a benevolent grouch, and I was hesitant but curious about what I would discover. What I found was the type of person we all hope to have for a physician: warm, caring, and filled with concern for his patients. I learned a lot about what it takes to be a forensic pathologist and the reasons why some people are drawn to it. And I learned some new things about myself. Thanks, Dr. A.

—Denise E. Greene

Instructor's comment: It was fascinating watching the final version Denise's profile of Dr. Anthony emerge; in English 103A, she revised a lot. She's keenly interested in pathology, has been an intern in the Coroner's Office, and cares deeply about the well-being of the living (she enters medical school this fall), but none of these personal connections existed in her first paper. Like many first versions of profiles based on interviews, hers consisted almost entirely of quotations from the "authority" she respects and had interviewed. It didn't get a particularly good grade. She'd left out herself, her passions, and her sharp mind. But this final version—of course, it may not be final if she's still revising—is such a good profile because she uses her own feelings and analysis to structure her portrayal of Dr. Anthony. We get an insight into him, but the author, too, is alive.

—Susan Palo, Campus Writing Center

I remember the little girl because she touched my heart. When I first saw her I wanted to hold her close, keep her safe and warm. But she would never be warm again. I held her hand often, more for my comfort than hers since I knew she couldn't feel it. I handled her carefully as if to avoid hurting her. But no one would ever hurt her again. Less than three years old and already she was a statistic, a case number with the Sacramento County Coroner.

Dr. Robert M. Anthony is a certified forensic pathologist with the Sacramento County Coroner's Office. He is a recognized expert in his field and has been involved in such high-profile cases as the recent Dorothea Puente murder trial (where, according to a colleague, he was "one of only two pathologists who convinced a jury that a sweet little old lady was guilty of murder even if he didn't know the cause of death!"). But he didn't start off wanting to be a pathologist, or even a doctor.

After graduating from Tufts University, Dr. Anthony pursued a master's degree from Southern Methodist University with the intent of becoming a marine biologist. Like so many others in the early seventies, he found the Vietnam War changed his plans. Following a path designed to lead away from the fighting, he became a medical laboratory technician stateside. As such, he was asked to test the blood alcohol levels of a man involved in a drunk driving accident; the case served as an introduction to forensic toxicology. As he recalls, "I was hooked. I kept thinking, 'Where have you been all my life?'"

Pursuing a Ph.D. in the field required attending medical school classes, and it was here that his aspirations expanded. He ended up deciding that a Ph.D. in forensics wouldn't be enough and entered a combined M.D./Ph.D. program: "I spent all of my time at the coroner's office. It was heaven. I went to my boss after a year in the Ph.D. program and told him I wanted to become an M.D. He thought I was crazy but agreed to it. My wife thought I was only slightly crazy."

While in medical school he ignored pathology, concentrating on getting as much clinical experience as he could because, he thought, "Otherwise, when I'm doing this pathology stuff, I'm never going to see live patients again." For his pathology residency, he chose a program at Duke University, unique because of its affiliation with the North Carolina Coroner's Office. He was able to pursue the standard pathology track while participating in his love, forensic pathology. He became part of the Sacramento office in 1984.

I first met Dr. Anthony in April 1993, when I began working as an intern with the Sacramento Coroner. Each of the three physicians who comprise the Medical Examiner's staff has a distinct personality. Dr. Anthony is known as the grouchy one. A day does not pass without him grumbling about something and griping at everyone. But for some reason I liked him and even nicknamed him the "Certified Forensic Curmudgeon." People who enter a field like forensic pathology must have a reason, and I figured I knew Dr. Anthony's—he didn't like people much.

I discovered, however, that the lack of personal contact is one aspect of his current job that he regrets. "When I was a medical examiner in North Carolina I dealt with the families more. I found that personally a lot more satisfying. To be able to assure them that there was no suffering, and the relief—I found that very satisfying." He often expresses concern for the families of his patients, musing about their grief and distress.

I asked what attracted him to forensics since many view his work as repugnant. "People always ask, 'How can you do that,' and I reply, 'How can I not do it?' It's interesting, every case is different, I'm providing a service to the community, and I love answering questions, puzzles. Just when you think you've got it all figured out, along

comes a case that trashes all your preconceived notions and makes things fun again." The intellectual challenge, then, seems a big part of Dr. Anthony's attraction to the profession. He enjoys knowing that each day can bring something unique and baffling. Most people fear the unknown, the challenge, but this is part of the hook for Dr. Anthony and may explain why he is one of only 300 licensed forensic pathologists in the U.S.

For most people the aversion to Dr. Anthony's profession stems from the focus of the specialty—death. He admits that he was repulsed by the sights and smells of the autopsy room but insists that this occurred only in the beginning of his career. Speaking of his days in North Carolina, he explains, "I had this approach/avoidance. I was fascinated by what I saw, but the smell in the autopsy room was awful. Still, I was always being pulled back to the body. What was he up to? What was this person's life like? What was he exposed to? *Why did he die?* I wanted to know." The avoidance urge must linger. Dr. Anthony is well known around the morgue for his peculiar style: it takes forever to get him started on an autopsy, but once started he can complete it faster than any other pathologist. He still hates the autopsy room.

This seems a very different man from the curmudgeon I had grown to know. During our interview what took shape was a portrait of a caring and concerned individual. Why, then, does he go to such extremes to cultivate his morgue image as a grouch? Why does he always seem so angry?

It was while I was trying to answer that question that I thought about the little girl whose autopsy I had assisted. About the barely healed circular cigarette burns and the multitude of matching scars that covered her tiny legs. About the massive bruise that covered her buttocks, visible only in autopsy, hidden by her smooth chocolate coloring. About the tiny, perfect liver, split in two by the brutal force of that fatal blow to her abdomen. About how, of all the nameless, faceless bodies, hers had made me so enraged. I had wanted to find whoever did this and beat them to a bloody pulp. Physical violence was not my style, but I could make an exception.

I understood now. Dr. Anthony is a man who cares very much about people in a job where he must deal with the most inhumane acts of our society. He deals every day with the cruelties humans inflict on each other. He sees firsthand the effects of a society that places too little value on life. "Sometimes we're the only ones who know, or care, that these people are dead." If, in my brief tenure with the Coroner's Office, I had experienced such anger, certainly he had seen much more and had even more reason to be angry. If a single child-abuse case could make me mad, how many had he seen? And what about all the other victims who had demanded his attention? Wouldn't they have added to his outrage? Then why does he continue in forensic pathology? Just for the challenge? It seems unlikely.

The afternoon of our interview something else came through. The reason Dr. Anthony decided to become (and the reason he remains) a forensic pathologist is also the reason for his preeminence in the field. He spoke of it in the interview, and I realized that he had often talked about his job in this way. "I enjoy working with the authorities

to bring a case to its logical conclusion. I think it's great that we have the ability to help exonerate innocent people as well as convict the guilty." We generally associate this type of work with convictions, not exonerations, but Dr. Anthony's perspective is different. He says that his job is not to help the prosecution make their case. That is, after all, "their job." His job, as he sees it, is to represent his patients, to look after their best interests. He alone can speak for them, since they cannot speak for themselves. He must tell the judge, the jury, the public, to the best of his ability, exactly what happened in those fatal few moments. He must look closely and carefully, employing all the skills he has learned in his career, for he is the last person the victims will "see," and he is the last person to whom they can tell their stories. As Dr. Anthony puts it,

When you go to court, there is a prosecutor who represents society. There is a defense attorney who represents the accused. But who represents the victim? Nobody. I speak for the victim. And if I can speak eloquently enough, it can make a big difference.