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'Crime House' Provides Hands-on Experience

As a "witness" and a "police officer" exchange tense words at the scene of a "death," it's easy to forget they are students participating in a class exercise. This is just the sort of realism Dean Van Bibber, Fairmont State Community & Technical College Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, wants to see when he observes his students conducting a mock investigation at the "crime house" on Hillside Drive in Fairmont.

During a recent mock investigation, Van Bibber recreated a real-life death probe for his crime scene investigation students. Van Bibber took part in the actual investigation of the suspicious death during his days as police chief in Lancaster, Pa. Each semester, he challenges his students to solve crimes he recreates in order for them to get a feel for some of the obstacles and problems they could encounter when they enter the real world of crime fighting.

The scenario in this particular case was the death of a man in his early 60s who had emphysema. His wife reported that when her husband woke up that morning he committed suicide by shooting himself. As death scene investigators, it becomes the students' job to find out whether this was, indeed, a suicide or something more sinister. Van Bibber planted clues that would draw the investigators to the right conclusion, based on photographs taken at the scene, blood stain and other evidence and their interview of their one witness, the dead man's wife.

"It's a lot more real here than just sitting and talking about it," student Heather Reedy said. "It's learning by doing."

The three-bedroom house, conveniently located in a residential neighborhood close to the FS main campus, provides the venue for students in the criminal science and forensic science programs to receive practical experience. Van Bibber and Assistant Professor Les Boggess say leasing such a house is a dream come true.

"We've been wanting to do this for years," Van Bibber said, referring to having a place to conduct indoor mock investigations. Before the students had access to the "crime house," Van Bibber had to confine his mock investigations to outdoor crime scenes.

Students said that when they arrive at the scenes they have textbook answers in their heads, but it is easy to forget those when they are looking at the evidence in a realistic setting.

"This is hands-on," student Timothy Hunnell said. "I'm one of those guys who couldn't learn this just in the classroom."

Fairmont State offers several programs of study that prepare students for careers in forensics, criminal justice and homeland security.

FSU's College of Liberal Arts offers a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice, which qualifies students for employment with local, state and federal criminal justice agencies and in the growing industrial security field. A Master of Science in Criminal Justice degree is also offered in conjunction with Marshall University.

FSU's College of Science and Technology offers a Bachelor of Science degree in Forensics, consisting of two majors, forensic psychology and forensic science.

Fairmont State Community & Technical College also offers associate degrees in both Criminal Justice and Homeland Security. Employment opportunities for students completing the Criminal Justice program include jobs with local, state and county government or as police officers, correctional officers, security officers or as private investigators. Students completing the associate degree in Homeland Security can find employment opportunities with defense corporations, hospitals, the aviation industry, regional security offices and state and federal emergency management.

For more information contact:

Amy Baker, Fairmont State Director of Public Relations

Office: (304) 367-4135 | **Cell:** (304) 288-9540 | **Fax:** (304) 367-4580

E-mail: abaker3@fairmontstate.edu