USF criminology students investigate mock murders

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SOUTH VENICE — As the college criminology students approached the desolate wooded area, they saw a woman tied to a tree. Little did they know the bodyguard of “the victim” was around the corner, also dead.

Now the 27 students had to figure out just how the woman was strangled, tied up and left to decompose. Criminology students in professor William Kemper’s class at the University of Florida Sarasota-Manatee’s North Port campus worked Monday in the woods during their field trip to the mock crime scene at State College of Florida’s South Venice campus. Each had to dissect the complicated crime scenes where the two “bodies” — life-size mannequins — were found.

Making it more complex, the word “AIDS” was spray-painted in the grass, with an arrow pointing to the tree where the victim was tied. There were several bizarre pieces of evidence including a Barbie doll left at the victim’s feet with a letter and white powdery substance on it that read “Mr. and Miss Policeman.” Stapled above the victim’s head was another letter with potential clues.

Kemper explained that officers wouldn’t remove the letters because they could be contaminated with a substance such as anthrax.

“The scene would have to be cleared and the letters would be removed by Hazmat and put in a safebox, along with the tongs used to pick up the letters,” he said. “If you put the tongs in your back pocket, that could mean the end for you.”

Kemper deferred the rest of the scientific explanation to Jane Pfelsticker, director of biotechnology at SCF.

“Anthrax spores can remain active in some cases for thousands of years,” she said, adding they can create a respiratory infection with flu-like symptoms for several days, followed by often fatal results.

Teams of students were sent along the crime scene to discover more evidence. They found empty energy drink cans, a rope and tools. As they walked a path out of the woods, they discovered a knife.

Rounding the corner, they saw the body of a man tipped over but still in a lounge chair. His head rested on a newspaper he appeared to be reading when he was attacked.

Students immediately examined the blood spatter and a ball inside of a bloody sock.

“We knew this was a mock crime scene that we were only going to work on for a few hours,” USF senior John Harrison said. “I’m learning quite a bit. The real work will take place when we go back to class to review all of our evidence.”

Harrison’s crime scene partner, Allyson Henry, who is majoring in psychology and minoring in criminology, said she enjoyed the “hands-on experience” of a crime scene.
“There are so many career opportunities in the criminology field,” she said. “I like the psychological element of figuring out the crime scene and what led up to it.”

Kemper showed students how to prepare the crime scene, protect and evaluate it; collect physical evidence; work with the medical examiner; and prepare a diagram and a final survey of the scene.

At the end of the day, some students realized the woman was lured to the woods by a man who promised to pay her while her bodyguard waited for her. It proved not such a good idea for the pair.

Kemper’s students will review the evidence and share it with area middle school students from the STEMsmart (science, technology, engineering and math) program on March 23. They will mentor the students in the program, explaining blood spatter, evidence collection and reviewing evidence in the lab to help find the “murderer.”

SUN PHOTOS BY ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH
Students in Bill Kemper’s criminology class at the USF Sarasota-Manatee at North Port review evidence at a mock crime scene of a man found in a wooded area. He was the bodyguard of the woman found tied to a tree in another area of the woods. Students had to figure out Monday how and why the two were “murdered.”
Betty Bullock, acting as a medical examiner, tells her assistant John Sansbury the condition of the female “victim” found tied to a tree at the State College of Florida’s South Venice campus during a mock crime scene investigation Monday led by professor Bill Kemper, who teaches criminology at the University of South Florida at North Port branch. Students gathered evidence to try to figure out what happened to the woman.