



**Ep. 21: Andrea Feldman (Sargent'06, MED'09) Crime Scene Specialist,
Prince William County Police Department**

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

What's the best part of being a crime scene specialist? For Andrea Feldman (Sargent'06, MED'06), nothing compares to the instant gratification when her forensic evidence helps bring the 'bad guys' to justice. As an undergraduate at BU, Andrea earned a degree in health studies from Sargent College and she went on to earn a master's in biomedical forensic sciences at the School of Medicine. While she may not have followed the path she expected, pursuing her life's work has brought Andrea tremendous satisfaction.

Podcast Transcript:

- Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations, and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU podcast. My guest today is double-terrier, Andrea Feldman. Andrea graduated from Sargent College in 2006, and then from the School of Medicine in 2009 with a master's in Biomedical Forensic Sciences. After completing her degrees, Andrea set out on her life's work to Virginia where she currently serves as a crime scene specialist in the Prince William County police department. As you'll hear, Andrea and I talked about both the joys and challenges that are unique in her field. She reflects on her BU experience and busts a few of the common myths surrounding her profession. As it turns out, CSI doesn't get everything quite right. Andrea Feldman, thanks so much for joining us on the Proud to BU podcast.
- Andrea Feldman: Thanks for having me.
- Jeff Murphy: You are currently a Crime Scene Specialist for Prince William County in Virginia. I can only imagine that our alumni think that your life is like living an episode of CSI or some other TV show. I'm guessing that's not the case.
- Andrea Feldman: No, not quite. It's a little bit different than what you see on TV.
- Jeff Murphy: Did you grow up watching those shows or what? At what point in your life did you decide that this was going to be the path for you?
- Andrea Feldman: I didn't really grow up watching those shows. Um, I went to BU thinking I was going to do physical therapy as my career profession and kind of decided along the way, it wasn't really for me. I took one class in high school that was forensic science. So when I was trying to figure out the grad program, because I knew I wanted to get a master's degree, I chose forensic science.
- Jeff Murphy: So as a kid growing up, you didn't have any scientists in your life or anything like that who had an impact on you?

Andrea Feldman: My mom was a nurse, which is a little bit of the health studies. When I was a really little kid, I was a little bit of a nerd and I kept telling my parents that I really wanted to be one of two things. I either wanted to be a Zamboni driver for the New York Rangers or I was really into dinosaurs because, remember that TV show Dinosaurs from when we were a little? I wanted to be a paleontologist. So I wanted to, as a little kid, study both.

Jeff Murphy: So let's rewind even farther. Did you grow up in Virginia or where did you grow up?

Andrea Feldman: No, I grew up outside New York City on Long Island. So I went to Boston U for college. And I didn't know anything about Virginia at the time, but when I was graduating, I was pretty much sending my application resume out to anywhere that was looking for entry-level jobs. And that's how I wound up in Virginia.

Jeff Murphy: Well how did you end up at BU? And you went into Sargent College right away, so you must've known that they've got a great program. Was that what brought you to Boston?

Andrea Feldman: Yeah, I went to BU because I knew I wanted to go to a school in the city. I didn't want to go to school in New York City because that was too close to home. So my mom and I drove up to Boston to go to one of the orientation sessions where the student ambassadors take you around and show you about the school, and I pretty much fell in love with Boston and Boston University during that tour.

Jeff Murphy: So tell us a little bit about your life and I'll ask this two ways. Outside of the classroom, first, where did you live on campus? What kind of places were you hanging out as an undergrad?

Andrea Feldman: As an undergrad I lived at, my freshman year was at the Towers and then I moved out to West Campus for my sophomore year. My junior year I studied for the first semester abroad at the London University program and when I came back I lived at one of the brownstones on Bay State Road. The brownstone on Bay State Road was probably my absolute favorite place to live. And after that I moved into an apartment with a couple friends in Allston for my senior year.

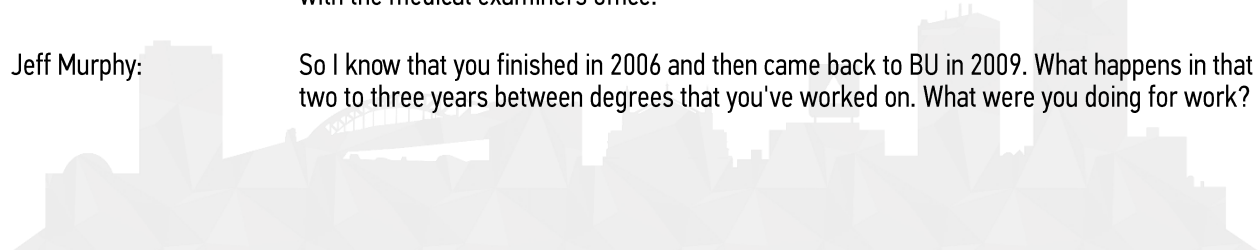
Jeff Murphy: What kind of stuff were you doing outside of classes? Were you involved in any student organizations, or did you have jobs that you were holding down while being a student?

Andrea Feldman: In undergrad I played a lot of intramural soccer. That took up most of my time. I hung out at some of the MIT fraternities that are on BU's campus, on Bay State Road, so I spent a lot of time at AEPI. And then as a graduate student I lived behind Symphony Hall and worked part-time at the Jewish Community Center in Newton. Hanging out, I spent a lot of time at Cornwall's in Kenmore Square. That was one of my absolute favorite places to go.

Jeff Murphy: So tell me a little bit about your academic experience at Sargent. Were there professors or colleagues or classes that really stood out in your mind as having an impact on your experience?

Andrea Feldman: I think as far as career-wise, the chemistry classes and the anatomy and physiology classes at Sargent College were the ones that had the most impact, especially as with the anatomy and physiology, I was able to put a lot of that knowledge to use while I was an investigator with the medical examiners office.

Jeff Murphy: So I know that you finished in 2006 and then came back to BU in 2009. What happens in that two to three years between degrees that you've worked on. What were you doing for work?



Andrea Feldman: So for the year that I was in between undergrad and grad school, I worked at the Jewish Community Center in Newton, doing a little bit of everything. I had coached the girl's soccer team. I had worked in their business office. I worked in their membership department selling memberships to the gym there. And really was just trying to figure out what my next steps were.

Jeff Murphy: So tell me about those next steps. How did you find yourself going from the JCC to the BU School of Medicine?

Andrea Feldman: When I was at the JCC, I kinda realized that selling gym memberships wasn't what I wanted to do forever. And I knew I wanted to go back to school to do something, so when I was looking up grad school programs, I started with BU's website. And on one of their graduate websites, they had this big banner that said, "checkout this program in forensic science". It was a new program at the time and I remembered how much I enjoyed forensic science in high school. I knew I didn't want to go to med school, but I knew I wanted to stay in the sciences. So I clicked on that banner and that was pretty much all she wrote. I applied and started school.

Jeff Murphy: So what was it specifically about forensic science that you enjoyed? And I'm curious if you feel that you have specific skills or even personality types that you feel like are kind of like a prerequisite for really being interested in forensic science?

Andrea Feldman: What I really enjoy about forensic science is that it's science that can be applied and you get immediate feedback. So you know, if you are trying to work in a research lab, maybe you're researching some type of cure for a disease and you don't see the results of that for you know, 10-20 years. With forensics, I can apply science that I learned in school and it's almost immediate. Maybe I get a fingerprint hit, maybe there's a DNA hit. But the end result is that we go to trial and we try to put the bad guys away and a year or two down the road, that's not 10-20 years down the road. So I like that there's immediate feedback on what I'm doing.

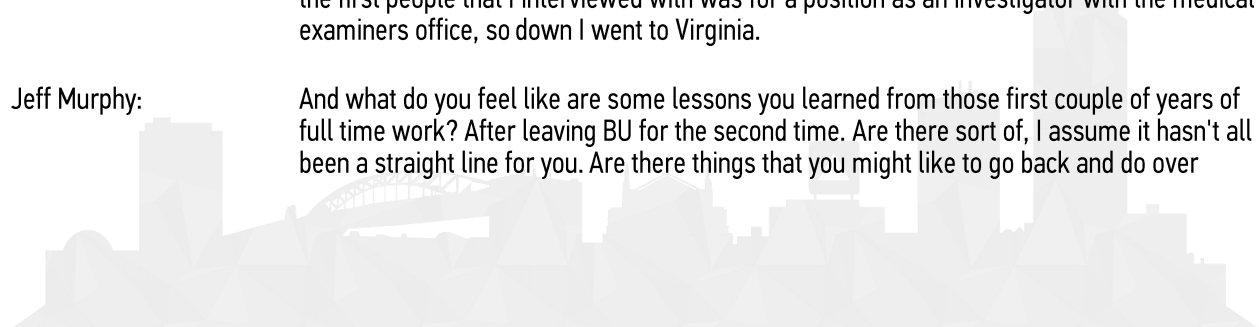
Jeff Murphy: So in your master's program, are you doing sort of real life work? Are you set up with internships or other positions at local agencies that do that work? Or is it really all sort of classroom work?

Andrea Feldman: Oh, no. I interned with the Boston Police Department for almost a year in their trace evidence section. And they were really gracious enough to help me complete my thesis using their instrumentation.

Jeff Murphy: That's great. And so then what are those next few years after finishing your master's degree look like?

Andrea Feldman: So I finished my degree, and when I finished the degree, I thought at the time I was going to go into trace evidence, which is really a lab chemistry side of forensic science in the lab for the most part. But when I was applying for jobs, I probably sent my resume out to a good 35 different agencies and I thought I was going to go into trace evidence, but as it turned out, the first people that I interviewed with was for a position as an investigator with the medical examiners office, so down I went to Virginia.

Jeff Murphy: And what do you feel like are some lessons you learned from those first couple of years of full time work? After leaving BU for the second time. Are there sort of, I assume it hasn't all been a straight line for you. Are there things that you might like to go back and do over



again? Or did you feel like once you left BU that you really were on sort of like a straight and narrow path?

Jeff Murphy: That's a really tough question. It wasn't such a straight and narrow path to get to my first job. I really thought I was more suited for lab work, and I thought that's what I wanted to do. Instead, I just fell into fieldwork instead, which was something I never thought I had any interest in, to be honest. But I fell into the work as an investigator and realize that fieldwork was all that I wanted to do. So when a position opened within the Prince William County Police Department, I jumped at that chance to move into full-time crime scene work as opposed to just focusing on death investigations.

Jeff Murphy: And in some ways I kind of ruined our interview, at least for me, when we talked earlier because I wasn't sure whether or not you were actually a police officer and as you told me...

Andrea Feldman: Right. No, so there's two routes to become a crime scene investigator and it all depends on what department you work for and where in the country you want to live. I'm not a sworn officer, I'm a civilian crime scene officer, whereas many of my coworkers are sworn officers and it really just depends on where you live, whether you need to go through a police academy and put some time in on the road before you become a specialty officer in something like crime scene or you can do like I did and go the civilian route and be hired just as a crime scene investigator.

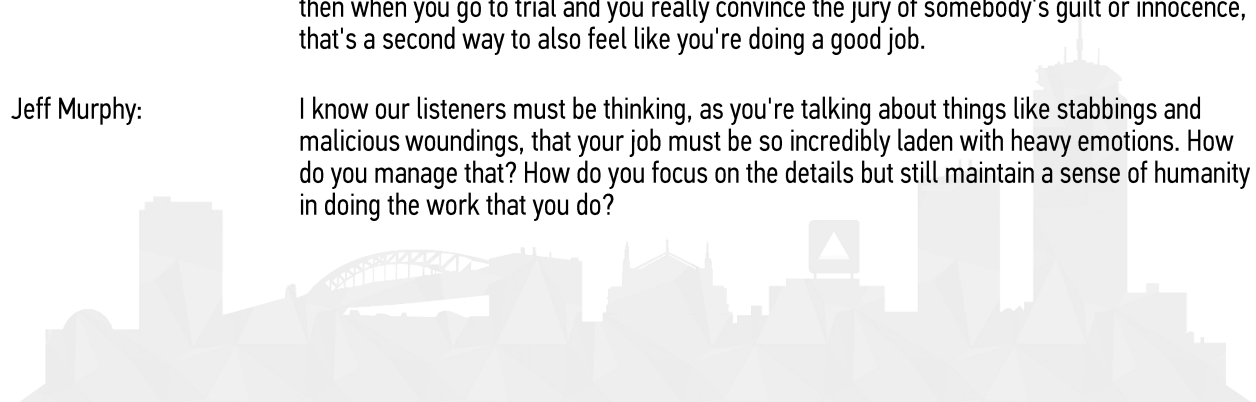
Jeff Murphy: And if I'm hearing you right, there really aren't any big differences in the kind of work you can do as a "civilian" versus a sworn officer. Right? It's just depends on the state.

Andrea Feldman: Right. It depends on the state. It's not even just the state. It depends on the jurisdiction that you work for, really.

Jeff Murphy: So we talked about this a little bit also, but what can you tell us about the kinds of cases you're working on? And I'm also curious to know, you mentioned kind of bringing the bad guys to justice. Is that the thing that really just becomes the most rewarding for you? Or is there some sort of scientific discovery thing that happens that's the most rewarding?

Andrea Feldman: I think it's kind of two-fold. So working in forensics for almost 10 years at this point, you start learning on smaller crimes, like property crimes or stolen automobiles and then you move your way up to the bigger stuff. I work more on homicides and assaults and shootings and stabbings and malicious woundings that require a little bit more skill to bring the case to completion. So, for me the satisfaction is really two-fold. If I'm in the lab and I'm fingerprinting something and I get a great fingerprint off, let's say a murder weapon, and the people that do the fingerprint comparison gets a hit that the fingerprint that I found on the weapon is indeed our suspect. That's almost that instant gratification, because it happens for us very quickly. Now all that gets put together and a trial, especially for big cases, could take a year to three years before it comes to completion. So it's like a two-fold satisfaction with your original science is doing some good and we're taking people off the street and then when you go to trial and you really convince the jury of somebody's guilt or innocence, that's a second way to also feel like you're doing a good job.

Jeff Murphy: I know our listeners must be thinking, as you're talking about things like stabbings and malicious woundings, that your job must be so incredibly laden with heavy emotions. How do you manage that? How do you focus on the details but still maintain a sense of humanity in doing the work that you do?



Andrea Feldman: So a lot of it is, we have some really sick humor that you don't see on the CSI TV shows. There's a lot of removing yourself from the situation. So I still, my stress relief is playing soccer, or hanging out with friends or taking my dog for a walk. And then on top of it there's a big movement in law enforcement to actually take care of department members' mental health. So we are required to speak with the department psychologist twice a year to check in to make sure everything's okay.

Jeff Murphy: That's interesting. Not to dive in too deeply, but do you feel like that's been helpful for you, or is it really just more of a procedure that you have to go through?

Andrea Feldman: No, I feel it's been helpful. It's more helpful to be able to talk to other people that maybe understand what you're going through and saw what you're going through. So another avenue that a lot of departments are exploring now is something called peer support, where other department members form like a confidential group that if you're not feeling all right, you can go talk to them and kind of have an informal venting session to keep moving with your job.

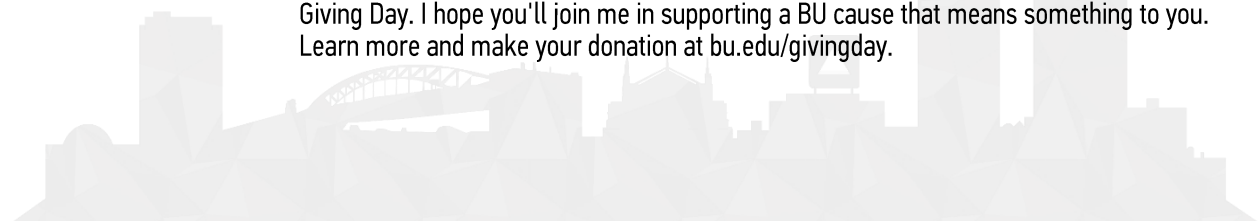
Jeff Murphy: Well, Andrea, I really appreciate all the time that you've carved out for us. Last question for you. We have so many students in particularly the Metropolitan College who are interested in criminal justice. Obviously you mentioned the forensic science program over at the School of Medicine. What advice do you have to share with BU folks who might ask you about how to do the work that you do? If somebody was interested in being a crime scene investigator based on television shows that they watch, what would you be able to share with them?

Andrea Feldman: Well, I think the first thing I would say is that it is nothing like on TV. We get really dirty and we wear uniforms and I'm not running around in a pair of high heels all day long, if at all. And it's not like on TV where it's one person does everything. We're all part of different groups. There's the crime scene people that pick up the evidence. There's the detectives that talk to the suspects. There's the lab people that do all the analysis. So it's really a team effort to try to bring a case to completion. So normally I do a lot of work with interns and high school students and college students that are interested in forensics. And my biggest advice to everybody is don't get yourself tunnel-visioned into one type of forensics. I started school thinking I was going to go into DNA and I wanted nothing to do with DNA. I thought I was going to do trace evidence and chemistry, and then it turned out I fell in love with fieldwork. So when coming out of school, it's important to see what's around and apply to everything that might be interesting to you. And then on top of all of that, you also have to be willing to move, because there's only so many people that do crime scene work in one little area that you really have to kind of go with the flow and be willing to just see what's out there.

Jeff Murphy: Well again, Andrea, I was really excited to hear more about your life. Thanks so much for being on the podcast.

Andrea Feldman: No problem. Thank you for having me.

Jeff Murphy: Thanks again to Andrea for joining me on the podcast. If you'd like to connect with her directly, be sure to look her up on BU's career advisory network. As one of our nearly 8,000 advisors, Andrea has generously made herself available to current students and her fellow alumni who are looking for career advice, job shadowing, mentoring and more. Visit bu.edu/alumni/CAN for details. And coming up on Wednesday, April 3rd is the annual BU Giving Day. I hope you'll join me in supporting a BU cause that means something to you. Learn more and make your donation at bu.edu/givingday.



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