



photos by STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

As soon as the sheet is removed, Osgood will snap pictures of the body, which may be used in later court proceedings.



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— Mary Sue Osgood
death investigator

Death investigator laughs in the face of it

By Tom Henderson
staff writer

MARY SUE OSGOOD laughs a lot in her business. It's the kind of job, if you can't laugh at it, it'll kill you.

Osgood investigates deaths for the Oakland County Medical Examiner's Office. With a sharp eye for detail and armed with Polaroid and video cameras, she rushes to the scene of suspicious deaths, traffic fatalities, drug overdoses and murders.

When Dr. Frank Madsen, a retired Lutheran minister, was brutally slain in Southfield recently, it was Osgood who was one of the first to arrive at the bloody scene.

When a young man was found dead in a field in Troy, shot four times and driven over by a car, she was called in the middle of the night to investigate.

She has filmed maggots crawling out of bloated, rotting flesh. She has been in apartments with blood

splattered over walls and carpet. She went to the scene of a hit-and-run, only to find out the dead child was the son of an old friend.

DESPITE IT ALL, Osgood cracks wise like some character in a Dashiell Hammett mystery.

"In this type of work, you have to have a sense of humor or you might as well be downstairs in the cooler with the rest of them," said Osgood, a registered nurse who has been a death investigator for a year. The cooler is a refrigerated room in the basement of the county morgue where bodies patiently await autopsies.

If laughing in the face of ugly, tragic death, in the face of venom and murder, is something of a necessity for keeping your sanity, Osgood is a fine specimen of mental health. She laughs often, at her co-workers, at herself at the job.

"There are two types of deaths in Detroit — regular and unladen." Or "Say I'm married and have three

kids. Don't say happily married or my husband will think I've been lying to you." Or about the 64-year-old man and his 60-year-old girlfriend who died of carbon monoxide poisoning during sex in his car in the garage: "Maybe his mother wouldn't let him bring a date in the house."

Sick humor? Sometimes. Yet it's healthy humor, too. As Phil Predmore, toxicologist at the medical examiner's office, said: "Most of us would not survive here without a sense of humor. Personal involvement is the one thing you cannot have in this business or you'll go stark raving mad."

OSGOOD IS a new breed for Oakland County. There are six other death investigators, all of them retired Detroit homicide investigators. Goebel Baynes, the administrator for the medical examiner's office, is himself a retired Detroit cop who saw enough spunk in Osgood a year ago to give her a try.

"It's funny," said Baynes. "The

other day I was downstairs with a body. There were two state police officers and they were both women. The medical examiner was a woman (Lynda Bledrzycki) and the investigator was a woman. I said, 'The broads are taking over.'"

Baynes laughed and left the room. "I wanted this job as much as I wanted air. I knew I could do an excellent job if given the opportunity," said Osgood.

There were 8,000 deaths in Oakland County last year. The medical examiner's office investigated 2,600 of them. If a call about a body comes in at night, chances are Osgood will end up at the scene. "I don't care what time they call me. I'll go out anywhere."

Going out at 3 a.m. to film blood and gore while hysterical relatives watch might seem like a terrible way to make a living. To Osgood, after years of working as a nurse in emergency rooms battling to save lives, "This is a no-stress job. To take it was the best decision I ever

made. I've learned to appreciate life. This is not a dress rehearsal."

And, yet, there are those inevitable moments when the ugly side of life gets to her. One of those was the sudden-death recently of a 30-year-old man who was the father of a boy whose life she'd helped save in the emergency room a few years ago.

"When I'm down, I surround myself with people and I laugh. People make me high," she said. Or she plays piano or goes for a drive.

OSGOOD RELUCTANTLY admits there was some resistance to her when she first joined the medical examiner's office, both by co-workers and by some of the police in the county who were expecting a male, 180-pound former cop to arrive at a death scene and get a slim, 36-year-old woman, instead.

"It was difficult for some, and it still may be difficult for some, whether it's here in the office or out in the county somewhere. Hey, it was a shock for everybody. But I'm

treated like one of the guys now."

Get past her tough-guy exterior, there's a soft center. "I don't watch TV because I cry at commercials. It doesn't take too much to touch my heart," she said. "I don't know that I do too well at funerals and I try to avoid them."

And a lot of the deaths do touch her, particularly the suicides of the young and the old. "The biggest thing that surprised me is how many old people kill themselves."

Osgood's husband of five years, Richard, is director of the paramedical program at Oakland Community College. She has three children, Holly, 15, Tony, 12, and Kam, 10. Despite the demands of her Rochester Hills home and job, Osgood is working on an associate degree in criminal justice and a bachelor's degree in business administration.

"It hasn't been easy," said Osgood. "I was divorced with three kids, working long hours in the emergency room, going to school at night. But it was worth it."

short takes

If you recently opened a shop, captured an award, earned a promotion or are planning a new venture or project — and there's a Farmington-area business angle — we'd like to hear from you so we can share your news item with other Farmington Observer readers. Send items to: Short takes, Farmington Observer, 33203 Grand River, Farmington 48024.

COMES ABOARD
Debra Burke, formerly of NBI Resource Data Systems Corp., has joined Casey Communications Management as computer services manager.



Debra Burke

Her responsibilities include providing on-going training to Casey Communications Management personnel, developing specific database applications and assisting with client computer needs. She will monitor the firm's computer network to ensure smooth daily operations.

Burke assisted Casey Communications Management with initial training of the staff in using the firm's new computer system.

As a senior systems support representative at NBI, Burke was responsible for the preparation and presentation of sales demonstrations, as well as assisting in customer training and support during installation of computer systems.

Earlier with NBI, she worked as a records administrator, maintaining records for field engineering. She also assisted with the development and implementation of database management systems for customers.

Burke received her computer training from North Carolina State University. She received additional training at NBI Resource Data Systems Corp.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Robert Gibbs, a member of the professional staff of Ann Arbor-based Johnson, Johnson & Roy Inc., has become a registered landscape architect in Michigan.

He received his master of landscape architecture degree from the University of Michigan in 1984, specializing in urban design, housing and historic interpretive systems. He has worked for JJR since 1985.

The Farmington Hills resident is vice president of the Farmington Ridge Homeowners Association and is active as chairman of its parks planning division.

NATIONAL MEMBER

Cecilia Hoffman of Farmington Hills joins 6,000 other Enrolled Agents as members of the National Association of Enrolled Agents (NAEA).

Enrolled Agents are granted the right to practice before the Internal Revenue Service at all administrative levels.

Agents may become Enrolled Agents through five years of continuous employment with the IRS and regular application and interpretation of the IRS Code of Regulations. Generally, only 30 percent of those who take the two-day Enrolled Agents exam pass.

THE NAEA requires 30 hours of continuing professional education each year in addition to strict adherence to a Code of Professional Ethics. The association works actively with government regulatory agencies and Congress on tax-related matters.

NEW PRESIDENT

The Metropolitan Detroit Sir Speedy Owner's Association has elected Terrie Alfonsi as their president for 1987.

She has managed the Sir Speedy of Grosse Pointe for five years. A Sir Speedy Printing Center is at 29208 Orchard Lake, Farmington Hills.

TAX REFORM

An Overview of the 1986 Tax Reform Act will be topic of the seminar presented at 7 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 11, at the Boyce, Wright, Pittman & Moug CPAs office, 28552 Orchard Lake, Farmington Hills. Cost is \$35 per person. Call 855-8100.

PR FIRM CHOSEN

Promark Innovations Inc. of Southfield has chosen Hermanoff & Associates Inc. of Farmington Hills as its public relations agency.

Promark Innovations is a marketing firm involved in the research, design and development of products to increase employer/employee awareness of drug and alcohol abuse in the workplace.

The company is marketing a 13-week program titled "Because We Care," which assists employers and employees in recognizing and receiving treatment for drug and alcohol abuse.

JOINS STAFF

Judith Botwick of Farmington Hills has joined the Detroit Medical Center as corporate manager for information services.

She had been with the management information consulting division of Arthur Andersen & Co., Detroit.

She is a member of Healthcare Financial Management Association and Health Management Systems Society.

MILEAGE BONUS

Hilton Hotel Corp. has become a travel partner in United Airlines' Mileage Plus Program. Members will receive bonus miles for hotel stays beginning Nov. 1.

"Mileage Plus is the best established and most popular of all frequent traveler programs in the industry. We are pleased to offer a mileage bonus to United passengers as part of the program and look forward to welcoming them to our hotels as regular Hilton customers," said Barron Hilton, chairman and president.

Mileage Plus members will earn 500 bonus miles each time they stay at a participating Hilton, including the Novi Hilton. For reservations, call toll-free, 1-800-HILTONS.

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