

Dana LaFon

By Kim Fernandez

Army National Guard Captain Gordon Hess' body was discovered in a culvert about 24 hours after he disappeared from his Fort Knox, Kentucky barracks. Clad in jogging clothes, Hess had been stabbed 26 times with the Leatherman tool he'd bought the night before, and which was found next to him.

With no identifiable fingerprints on the bloody tool and no witnesses, the Army launched an investigation into the captain's death, calling in forensic psychologists and experts to determine what happened.

Its finding: suicide by stabbing.

Hess' wife and family immediately launched their own investigation, calling in different experts and garnering the attention of the national media, including television's "60 Minutes," which began working on a piece questioning the manner of death. The family claimed Hess could not have stabbed himself twice in the heart, once in the liver, and four times in the lungs, and wasn't suicidal to begin with.

The piece ran on November 28, 1999, just as Dana La Fon finished picking up her young son's toys in the family's Baltimore living room. She straightened up just as Hess' photo flashed across the screen.

"I saw his face and knew I'd seen it before," La Fon remembers. "Then I said, 'Oh my gosh, that's Gordon Hess! Only when I saw him, he was much paler!'"

La Fon had seen Hess once before...in his autopsy photos. As in many cases where the medical examiner couldn't determine the cause of death, she'd been called in to participate in a psychological autopsy. She never dreamed that her ruling of death by suicide would be questioned by 60 Minutes.

La Fon, who holds her BS, MS, and Ph.D degrees from Loyola, conducts several psychological autopsies every year, delving into the lives of the deceased to determine if they were killed by their own hands or someone else's. "It's much like a psychological evaluation of anyone," she explains. "You can do interviews with family, friends, and the people who saw them last. But there's a certain element of investigation to it—you have to be able to understand police reports, toxicology, and forensic pathology to understand what you're reading, and you end up with a conclusion to manner of death."

Hess' stab wound patterns were very consistent with a self-stabbing, she says, noting that suicide by stabbing is not unusual.

"I recorded the program and used it in a lecture I was doing a few weeks later," she says. "The same articles they used to say that no, this wasn't a suicide showed a wound pattern almost identical to those of Mr. Hess that was from a suicide. The angle and force were very consistent with those you'd get if you stabbed yourself. It was really interesting to see them use the same data and literature."

As with the Hess case, La Fon says many families vehemently question suicide rulings, and one of the most challenging aspects of the job is facing families in such cases. “Families are typically in denial,” she says. “You hear that there’s no way their son could have suicided, and then you find out it was a suicide. You guard your family, so it makes sense that they’re the last ones in the world to know you’re having problems.”

That’s why, she says, she’s become an expert on both the forensic aspect of her job and on the grief side of things. “You have to be respectful,” she says. “I’m very careful doing this type of work.”

It may not be everyone’s cup of tea—some may even call it morbid—but La Fon says it’s a fascinating part of her career, which has also included psychological work with the Baltimore City Division of Parole and Probation, and the courts, where she helped determine if inmates were competent to stand trial or be executed. She’s also an adjunct faculty member in Loyola’s psychology department and mom to two children.

“There’s never a dull day,” she says with a laugh.

La Fon earned her bachelor’s degree in Management Information Systems in 1988 and spent five years assembling and maintaining databases, but soon found herself looking for a new career path. “There was nothing intrinsically satisfying about the job,” she says now, and found her dream career in a book called, “Who Killed Precious,” about criminal profiling.

“I started doing informational interviews and looking into how you get to do this sort of stuff,” she says. “I was 30 at the time. I found out you don’t become an FBI agent, which wasn’t my style anyway. You get your doctorate.”

The search began for a Ph.D. program close to her home that might fit the bill. She turned back to Loyola, hoping to find what she needed.

“I’d heard comments about Loyola students, that they were always well-prepared and that Loyola interns were always a cut above those from other schools,” she says. “That really meant something.”

Loyola had just launched a new doctorate program, and La Fon checked it out, and applied. “I sometimes wonder if the diversity of another school might have benefited me, but with two kids, it just wasn’t realistic at the time,” she says. “The Jesuit philosophy means you’re competitive with yourself instead of with others. I noticed that in my undergrad and it was great for me. You challenge yourself. You compete against yourself to do better and better.”

She sent her application for the new Ph.D. program, and still laughs a little thinking about her entrance interview, which was an all-day marathon she completed just three weeks after giving birth to her son. “I was so tired,” she says, after weeks of sleeping in short bursts to care for an infant and adjusting to having this new person in the house.

Her final interview was scheduled for 4 p.m., and Dr. Martin Sherman asked who her role models were growing up. Her answer: Catwoman.

“I actually said it,” she says now. “Catwoman! He started writing furiously, and I was dying to ask what he was writing.” She justified her answer by explaining that Catwoman was her own person and a strong leader. Other female television characters of the era were subservient to male characters, she said. Catwoman did her own thing and didn’t take anything from anybody.

Sherman laughs a bit when asked about the interview today. “I don’t remember that,” he says. “I’ve made a couple of applicants cry. If she didn’t cry, I don’t remember it.” He says La Fon was a serious, goal-oriented student in the program—“Clearly, she sets her mind on something and does it,” he says.

“They accepted me anyway,” she says of the Catwoman coment. “Maybe they accepted me because of that. I often wondered!”

“Dana was a real risk-taker to come into our program for the first class,” says Psychology Department Chair Amanda Thomas. “She has known her interest since the beginning.”