

Mind-Scene Investigation

Alumna's psychological evaluations assist medical examiners

Army National Guard Captain Gordon Hess' body was discovered in a culvert about 24 hours after he disappeared from his Fort Knox, KY, 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 his body.

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.

Their finding: suicide by stabbing. Hess' wife and family immediately launched their own investigation, recruiting 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 added that

he hadn't seemed suicidal.

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

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 on national television.

La Fon, who holds her B.S., M.S., and Psy.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

"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

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. Ultimately, the Army upheld its original ruling.

One of the most challenging aspects of the

job, says La Fon, is facing families, particularly when she rules a case a suicide. "Families are typically in denial. You hear that there's no way their son could have suicided, and then you find out it was a suicide. Suicidal people typically guard their families from the extent of their problems, so it makes sense that they're the last ones in the world to know their loved one had been having problems."

"You have to be respectful," she says. 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.

The investigative work 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.

La Fon earned her bachelor's degree in Management Information Systems from Loyola in 1988 and spent five years assembling and maintaining databases, but soon found herself looking for a new career path. "There was nothing intrin-

sically 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."

Loyola had just launched a new Psy.D. program, and La Fon checked it out, and applied. She 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.

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.

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 does remember La

Fon as a serious, goal-oriented student in the program—"Clearly, she sets her mind on something and does it," he says.

Kim Hitzelberger Fernandez, '92, is a freelance writer in Bethesda. This is her first article for Loyola Magazine.

IN MEMORIAM

Two former chairmen of Loyola's Board of Trustees passed away in 2003.

Donald J. Zeman, '59, a retired managing partner in the accounting firm of Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co., died of a heart attack at the Greater Baltimore Medical Center on Feb. 7. He was 71.

In 1969, Zeman became the first lay alumnus appointed to Loyola's Board of Trustees. From 1973 to 1975, he served as Chairman of the Board, again becoming the first lay alumnus to hold the position.

Patrick J. McDonough, Jr., a businessman and entrepreneur who served as a Trustee of the College for two decades, died on April 27. He was 71.

A 1957 graduate of the University of Baltimore, McDonough first joined Loyola's Board of Trustees in 1974, and went on to serve as its Chair for two terms. During his tenure, he stressed the importance of strategic planning and helped guide the College's emergence as a regional, residential institution.