



JUST ASKING

INTERVIEW BY JOE HEIM

Forensic science on TV vs. real life: Not quite a match

Dr. Jennifer Smith, 57, was appointed director of Washington, D.C.'s Department of Forensic Sciences in July, where she oversees a staff of 120. She was an FBI special agent for 23 years and was a faculty member at Penn State from 2010 to 2015. She and her husband live in Washington.

There are so many forensics-based TV shows. And they all make forensics look like such a cool job. Is it a cool job?

It's the coolest job. That part they're correct about. There's a few things maybe that are off the mark a bit.

What do they get wrong?

Everything's a lot faster on the shows. And everything's a lot more perfect. So the fingerprint isn't like a partial print — it's like somebody just walks up and puts that big old thumbprint on just what you need it to be on. And I used to laugh because they're actors and they're gorgeous. I'm not saying we're not attractive people, but if you looked at my Quantico class versus the "Quantico" show, you would not find the same people.

Your Quantico class is going to be mad.

I know! But I have the picture upstairs if you want to verify. And we don't want to disappoint people who go to Quantico and are wondering, Where are all these gorgeous people?

When you were in college, were you watching "Quincy M.E." and thinking, I would love to do this kind of work?

Yes, "Quincy" was on, but I think before that, as a kid, it was reading Nancy Drew. I was so disappointed when my mother said she wasn't real. But I love science. I was growing up in the '60s, and we were landing people on the moon, so science was very cool. Girls were being encouraged to go out and do these things. And I wanted to be a detective, so I went to the library, and there was a book about forensic science, and it was a really happy marriage of

my interests. Because I enjoyed science, but I didn't necessarily see myself as that person in the lab coat.

Over your career, are there cases that stand out?

I had a sexual assault case in my home town, in little Eaton, Ohio. There was an individual that was assaulting women in my home town, and in Indiana, across the border, and I was able to figure out who did it. We had a DNA

match. Also, I met President Clinton [while working] the Monica Lewinsky case. We did that DNA. That was a more unusual one.

What do ... I'm not even sure what question I should ask about that. What was President Clinton like?

At that moment in time, a little embarrassed, to be honest. It wasn't exactly how I had planned to meet the president. ■

