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Interview with C. Michael Bowers

C. Michael Bowers



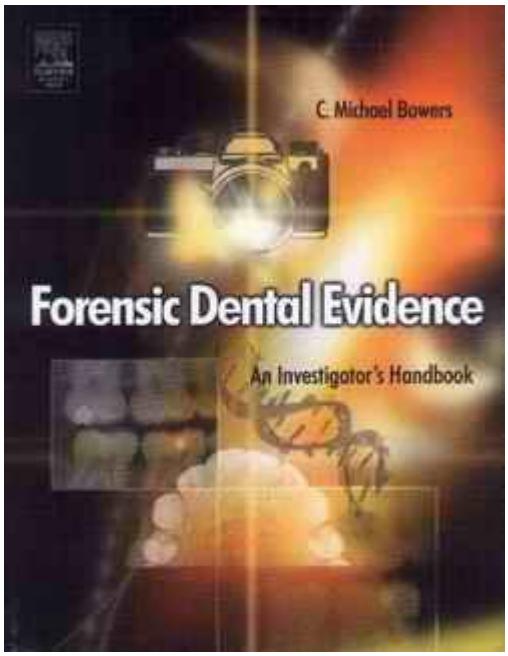
(Mike Bowers is a 1975 graduate of University of Southern California School of Dentistry. He is currently a voluntary faculty member teaching students at the Union Rescue Mission, the Mobile Clinic and supervising USC Dental Health Fairs throughout Los Angeles. Dr. Bowers has his private dental practice in Ventura where he has also developed a part-time career in forensic dentistry. A Deputy Medical Examiner for the Ventura County Coroner's office since 1987, he became Board Certified in Forensic Odontology in 1989 and credentialed as a Senior Crime Scene Analyst in 1998. He acquired a law degree in 1992 and is also a member of the California Bar. He is regularly consulted in dental evidence matters by law enforcement agencies, the defense bar, and has assisted in investigations throughout the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. He regularly lectures and teaches dentists both in the United States and abroad. The author of numerous peer-reviewed articles on forensic identification techniques, Dr. Bowers also has co-edited the current 3rd edition of the "Manual of Forensic Odontology" (ASFO publisher: www.asfo.org) which is in its fourth printing and considered the leading source of methods and information for training forensic dentists. His second text, " Digital Analysis of Bite Mark Evidence," with Dr. Raymond Johansen, is the first compilation of digital imaging techniques related to human identification from teeth and bite marks. Academic Press published his latest book, "Forensic Dental Evidence: An Investigator's Handbook" in 2004.). This journal reviewed his book Forensic Dental Evidence: An Investigator's Handbook (Elsevier Academic Press, 2004) in the current issue of our journal.

We at the "Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology" approached him for an online interview and he graciously agreed. The interview was conducted for well over two weeks. He proved to be one of our wittiest interviewees, having a great sense of humor. Some excerpts.. ..)

Q. Please tell us something about your early life.

A. I was born and raised in Southern California where I attended St. Anthony Boys' High School. I graduated from University of Southern California in 1971, 1975 and 1980 with various degrees. I was a faculty member at USC School of Dentistry since 1975 and am currently an Associate Clinical Professor in Community Dentistry. I have a dental practice in Ventura, California.

Cover Jacket of *Forensic Dental Evidence: An Investigator's Handbook*, the bestseller by Dr. Bowers (Elsevier Academic Press, 2004). Click cover to go to its review.



Q. Why did you take up forensic odontology as your specialization? Any special reason?

A. I read Sherlock Holmes' stories as a kid. Once I discovered my interest in forensics, my dental degree allowed me to find an entry level position at the Ventura Medical Examiner's Office. My forensic training developed from that relationship with the pathologists.

Q. Can you tell for our readers one of your remarkable cases - One which you would like to remember for long time.

A. All of them are memorable for one reason or another. However I would like to narrate one case for your readers. Two defendants, Ray Young and Harold Hill, were convicted of murder after a 1994 trial in Chicago, Illinois. Testimony of two bite marks on the female victim's body was instrumental in the States' case against them. Mr. Young was identified as the individual who made one bite mark and Mr. Hill was considered a "possible biter" of the other injury. In 1999 during appeal of the convictions, I was asked by the Chicago Public Defender's Office to independently review the evidence used against them at trial. I concluded that the State's expert had arrived at erroneous conclusions due to the differences seen between the bite marks and the characteristics of the defendants' dentition. Years later the appeal advanced a motion for the court to order DNA profiling of previously untested evidence from the victim's body. Eventually this was accomplished

in 2002, and the results concluded that the tissue removed from under the finger nails of the victim possessed neither the DNA characteristics of the victim nor the two defendants. Both defendants were released from prison at the end of August 2002. This case was particularly satisfying for me.

Q. Keith Simpson wrote the bestseller "Forty Years of Murder", which was his autobiography with lots of interesting cases. Many other forensic pathologists have done similar experiments. Recently Chester Stern has written a book on Iain West's cases (Dr. Iain West's casebook). Do you plan to write such a book?

A. I wrote my latest book "Forensic Dental Evidence" (the one which you have reviewed in your journal) as a casebook for instructional purposes for police investigators and the general forensic audience. It's as close to my memoirs as I'll ever get, although the title, I guess, could have been "Twenty Years of Molars!"

Q. Is this (Forensic Dental Evidence) your first book? Which books have you written before? On which subjects?

A. No, it is not my first book. I have three books in print already. The previous two are "Digital Analysis of Bite mark Evidence (2000) and the Manual of Forensic Dentistry (1995). Ray Johansen co-wrote the first with me and Gary Bell co-edited the Manual with me.

Digital Analysis of Bite mark Evidence is a step by step application of simple digital methods to bite mark comparison and dental identification methods. We wanted to show people the benefits of digital control of the photographic and x-ray evidence used in this arena. The variables and distortions in crime scene and autopsy pictures were generally uncontrolled in most of the cases I consulted in prior to the year 2000. Dentists were making statements like "that side view of this bite mark is still good evidence". Such statements always bothered me, since we did not have readily available tools as dentists to understand the effects of flawed photography on the patterns we were seeing in bite mark cases. The use of desktop computer programs and some important work in the 1980's by Tom Krauss and Bill Hyzer (developers of the ABFO No. 2 L-shaped scale) is now available for those investigators who will take their own time and learn how to use the techniques. In a sense, the computer screen is now our comparison microscope with a whole bunch of image tools available.

The Manual is a odontology procedural book written by 34 contributors. It has sold around the world and has gone through two or three printings. The American Society of Forensic Odontology publishes it. The focus is to take a forensic dentistry apart piece-by-piece for the novice dentist. The contributors are all highly experienced members of the forensic community.

Bowers' Superlatives



Dr. Bowers has an amazingly good sense of humor. We requested him to answer some questions in short, so our readers could know him better. Here is what he has come up with:

Calling in life : The phone was busy

First award : Driver's license

First book: Cat in the Hat for Dummies

Greatest inspiration: Bill Gates

Greatest love of my life: Judy Garland in Wizard of Oz

I am most sensitive about: My feet

I am passionate about: My sleep

I am superstitious about: It is bad luck to be superstitious

I don't compromise with: You decide

I hate: Squeaky chalkboards

I look forward to: Waking up

I Love: Sleeping in late when I am 4 time zones from home.

I would like to be marooned on a desert island with: Satellite TV.

If I could change one thing about my family, it would be: I would be younger than they are.

If I could change one thing about myself, it would be: Have more choices

If I could change one thing about the world, it would be: Make it a happier place

My biggest assets: What's that??

My biggest fear: Doing this interview

My Birthday: Seems to be every other month.

My current state of mind: The State of Confusion which is next to Rhode Island.

My favorite bedroom line: Nylon or hemp.

My favorite food: Any

My favorite one-liner: I don't do jokes

My favorite possession: Commemorative underwear from Super Bowl XXIX.

My favorite quote: Do this over (inside joke from Dental School)

My favorite journey/holiday: Occurs frequently due to my mind drifting off somewhere without me.

My greatest extravagance: Eye shadow from May Kay Cosmetics.

My greatest necessity: Daily bathing.

My greatest regret: Weekly bathing.

My Hero: The guy who invented peanut butter.

My idea of perfect happiness: Guilt free peanut butter; extra crunchy.

My life's mantra: When in doubt, go to sleep.

My most treasured possession: Any money my wife leaves in my wallet.

My sex appeal: Appears to have already been peeled and eaten.

My spice: Old

My strength: A determination to finish this interview.

My wildest fantasy: Any one actually reading this.

Place Of Birth: Hearsay statements place this in California sometimes after the Gold Rush of 1849.

Real Name: Ferdinand Marcos jr.

The move/case/book that kick started my career: S. Holmes

What touches me most: Generally my belt buckle.

When or where was I happiest: Getting overly wine tested in Switzerland.

Where do I see myself five years down the line: Standing looking at the other end of the line.

Who or what would I like to be born as in my next life: A sentient being

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Q. Tell us something about your current book.

A. The new book is a compilation of cases from my files and other contributors files. What I wanted to do was create a logical process for non-dental personnel to learn a bit about dentistry and then show them the existence and appearances of physical dental evidence in the typical cases that occur. This learning process is driven by excellent photography and simple explanations of what dentists can and cannot do. It is not a "how to" book but is rather a "what it looks like" and "how to preserve/collect it" book.

Q. What is your next book about? Does it have anything to do with forensic odontology?

A. In the last 10 years I have written about everything I know up to this point on this forensic subject. I have no future plans for technical writing.

Q. Can you tell us about your career? Your educational background?

A. I spent many years in training at the University of Southern California. My early years there were spent going to football games and racing 8 man shells for the SC Crew team. I still go to football games sometimes.

Q. Any fascinating experiences while writing this book, or while researching for this book?

A. I was trying to get pictures of George Washington's dentures but ran into an apathetic museum system in our Nation's Capitol.

The piece in my book about Adolf Hitler was fun to do with Michel Perrier. I think every generation since 1945 has had some dentist saying he has "positively identified" Herr Hitler.

Q. Could you tell us about your family? Did you inherit the love of science/writing from your parents? How many children do you have?

My Catholic high school English teacher was named Michael Sheridan Nolan. He was a cross between James Joyce and Mother Teresa as well as a glorious example of Irish wisdom. He fooled me into thinking I could write a complete sentence.

I am married and have two grown step-kids. I plan for them (the kids) to support me in my dotage.

Q. What do you love most (besides your professional work and writing of course)?

I fly small airplanes for fun and pretend I am the Red Baron.

Q. Your favorite dish, book, movie, star, person?

Johnny Depp appears to have my general attitude about live.

Q. What do you dislike most?

Forensic experts who blithely use their knowledge in court to support unscientific and/or exaggerated opinions on bite mark evidence.

Q. What do you consider as your biggest achievement in life?

Being friends with my mentor at USC, Dr. Charles Goldstein. He really IS a Jewish version of Mother Teresa. He is the founder of all the community dental health programs at this school and at 82 years of age I still can't keep up with him.

Q. If God asked you choose your profession again, what would it be and why?

Tibetan monk who acts in Hollywood pictures.

Q. Have you ever traveled to India, or to Indian subcontinent? Would you like to visit, if such an opportunity arose?

I travel for food.

Q. What has been your biggest failure/disappointment?

Listening to dentists in the 1980's telling me that bite mark analysis was as good as fingerprint analysis. I never quite believed them.

Q. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be, and why?

I would look like Brad Pitt.

Q. What is your life's mantra?

Kick the tires and light the fires. (Old aviator proverb that usually contributes to a crash later that terminates the aviating).

Q. In one line, how would you best describe yourself?

Fabulooooous

Q. Are you interested in Science Fiction? Do you think SF is a good means to teach science to children?

I think teaching the History of Science would be better.

Q. What do you do first thing in the morning?

Return to bed throughout the day.

Q. And the last thing at night? Plan my next nap.

Q. Who/what would you like to be born as in your next birth?

An Irish German prophet who attracts movie scripts.

Q. Any message for our readers?

If you have gotten this far in this interview, please accept my humble apologies.

Dr. Bowers can be approached via E-mail at CMBOWERS@aol.com. The review of his book Forensic Dental Evidence: An Investigator's Handbook *appears in the same issue. Readers wanting to visit this review may want to the linked page (page008).*

Interview appearing in the previous issue Interviews : Collective Index Interviews in our sister publication : Collective Index