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Real-life CSI not like on television

By Ed Grisamore

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Jay Jarvis was CSI before CSI was cool.

He would arrive at a crime scene and wrap his fingers around every shred, fiber, particle and drop of evidence. Then he would return to the laboratory and attempt to solve the crime.

But those were the old days. The job is more specialized now. He does most of his forensic work behind closed doors, where the sun doesn't shine and the television cameras don't roll.

It's a good thing the GBI Central Regional Crime Lab is just up the street from the Georgia Forestry Commission on Riggins Mill Road.

A lot of trees have to die to keep up with all the paperwork.

Yes, Jay was a CSI guy before everyone and his brother started thinking a criminologist was among the most glamorous professions in the world.

Surely they must all wear Superman capes and have stars on their lab doors.

At least that's the way television has portrayed the job he loves. He admits most folks might find it about as exciting as watching sulfuric acid dry.

"The public thinks it's a cool job, but the perception is not exactly the way it is," he said. "If someone were to follow me around, they might find it boring."

On Wednesday, the TV police drama "CSI," which stands for Crime Scene Investigation, was renewed for a 12th season by CBS. The series takes place in Las Vegas, and its popularity has led to spin-offs "CSI: Miami," "CSI: NY" and similar shows on other networks.

For the past 32 years, Jay has been starring in his own CSI: Macon, CSI: Dublin, CSI: Warner Robins, CSI: Albany and other cities around Georgia.

He rarely watches the series and considers it sensational and over-the-top. Oh, it's fascinating work, just not quite as thrilling as Hollywood makes it out to be in prime time.

"We don't go out and collect evidence or carry a gun," he said. "We don't just work on one case and solve it in an hour. We can't match a bullet in 35 seconds, and we have so much we have to document. They leave out the parts about all the paperwork and details."

The CSI shows have increased awareness and spurred such an interest in the field that many high schools are now offering forensic classes as part of their science curriculums.

"There are young people who want to get into forensics," said Jay. "And then they realize: 'What? You mean I have to take chemistry?'"

He prefers to leave the TV cameras to his little sister, The Telegraph's own Liz Fabian, who broadcasts the news every morning on macon.com, Fox 24 and ABC 16. (Liz holds the distinction of having served as an anchor and reporter at every local TV news station. She spent more than three years at The Weather Channel.)

Thursday was Jay's last day with the GBI, and colleagues, law enforcement officials and others in the criminal justice community dropped by to wish him well.

He's 54 years old, but he's retiring and ready to begin the next chapter of his life.

Perhaps that chapter will start with another book. He loves to write. Two years ago, he published "Georgia's Crime Doctor," the story of Dr. Herman Jones, founder of the Georgia State Crime Laboratory.

Jay grew up in Long Island, where he bought beakers from a local dime store and built his own chemistry lab in the basement.

"I didn't blow up the house, but I stunk it up a few times," he said, laughing.

A high school field trip to the New York City crime lab changed his life. He felt the tug of forensic science calling every letter on his periodic table.

When his father, Tom, moved the family to Milledgeville to work at Grumman Aerospace, Jay got his degree in chemistry from Georgia College & State University. He did his master's degree work at the University of Pittsburgh, which had one of the few forensics programs in the nation. His graduate school courses were at the county crime lab, where classes would meet every day after 5 p.m. and were taught by people in the field rather than academic types.

He worked for two years at the GBI Crime Lab in Atlanta, where he met his wife, Debra. He came to Macon in 1981 and left to manage the lab in Summerville in northwest Georgia in 1997. He has been back in Macon since 2008 to finish up his career.

Jay has been involved in several high-profile local cases and, in recent years, has specialized as a firearms examiner. He serves as chairman of the laboratory accreditation board of the American Society of Crime Lab Directors, which oversees the implementation of quality systems in forensic labs both in the U.S. and internationally.

"His efforts have helped solve many local crimes either by assisting in the conviction of the guilty or by helping to clear those under false accusation," said Brian Hargett, manager of the central Georgia lab. "He has assisted our local law enforcement officials numerous times, but never in the spotlight."

Jay is not a "spotlight" kind of fellow -- just one of those guys in the trenches who has done his job, without glitter or glory, and made a real difference.