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Professor displays the write stuff

By Ryan McLane, Enterprise special correspondent



Stalkers, beware.

Soon a group of law enforcement officers could be filing out of Massasoit Community College in Brockton armed with tools to help identify criminals by looking at something as simple as a pen stroke.

Plymouth's Ronald Rice relaxes in his home office with the textbooks he has written for his upcoming forensic courses. (J. KIELY JR./THE ENTERPRISE)

Their instruction will come from nationally known and court-qualified handwriting expert Ronald H. Rice of Plymouth, who has used his skills in the high-profile murder cases involving defendants O.J. Simpson and Timothy McVeigh and victim JonBenet Ramsey.

Rice said he has one goal in teaching the forensics program — making local investigators better at identifying suspects by using their handwriting against them.

"There is a certain way to analyze handwriting and profile suspects," Rice said. "For the most part, state officials do a poor job and have no clue what they are doing in investigations. That is something we'd like to change."

For example, he will show students how small handwriting details, such as identifying similar capitalization mistakes and punctuation errors, can be used effectively to nab criminals.

Rice is the state's only licensed handwriting- and document-analysis instructor, and wants to make Massasoit the first forensic writing study center in New England, Massasoit spokesman Edward Monteiro said.

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"We need to train law enforcement to do things right so that people like me can't come in and make them look foolish," Rice said.

Beginning this fall, Massasoit will offer training through a four-course program.

"To take these classes and have that type of background will only help officers do their job better," Abington Police Chief Richard Franey said. "Job candidates certified in this type of training are certainly more attractive as long as all of their credentials are in order."

Basic and advanced courses on handwriting analysis start Sept. 2 and Sept. 25, followed by a criminal profiling course, beginning Oct. 6. Each one costs \$77. These courses are also open to the public.

The final class will focus on forensic handwriting and document analysis for law-enforcement professionals only. That course begins on Nov. 6 and costs \$157.

"Every class an officer or detective takes will obviously make them better," George DiBlasi, executive director of the Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association, said. "The more resources you can bring to a case, the better."

A student who completes Rice's course will receive a certification in handwriting analysis, but will not be qualified enough to be paid or to testify in court. The program is the first step to become court qualified, which requires more training, including field work and study at private occupational schools.

Classes will include cases worked on by Rice at his company, Checkmate Forensic Services Inc., located on Amanda Avenue in Plymouth.

For instance, Checkmate recently received documents containing bomb threats sent to a major corporation that Rice wished to keep nameless.

In such cases, Rice first looks for two things: how serious is the person's threat, and is the company in immediate danger.

Rice said in 99 percent of these threats, victimized business owners know who is threatening them, but are unable to prove it.

To help them get a definite identification, Rice requests "exemplars" — samples of writing authored by the suspect in a

normal, non-threatening situation.

Everything from tax records to employment applications are sent to his office, where Rice examines them and offers an opinion as to whether the suspect is the threatening person.

"It's scary" when threats occur, Rice said, "and important that we identify these people before tragedy occurs."

Rice also uses his handwriting expertise as a consultant on forgery cases for banks and insurance companies, and to give expert testimony in criminal courts.

Rice, 61, began his profiling business 23 years ago in Pembroke while living in Marshfield.

For the past three years, he has worked out of his home in Plymouth and plans on staying there until he retires.

More than six local businesses, defendants and complainants, contact Rice every day for help, he said, but what excites him the most are high-profile cases.

In the late 1980s, Rice analyzed stalking letters sent to actress Brooke Shields to help develop a profile of a suspect.

Rice was hired by MSNBC to examine the ransom note found after young JonBenet Ramsey was found murdered in her Colorado home and to discuss its authenticity on the cable channel.

CNN contacted Rice when the O.J. Simpson case was making headlines. Simpson was accused, and later acquitted in criminal court, of murdering his former wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ronald Goldman.

The cable news channel asked him to analyze notes found in the white Ford Bronco that Simpson had used to flee from Los Angeles police before his arrest.

Rice said his opinion was that Simpson was indeed stalking Nicole, keeping track of her movements with scrawled messages found on small papers in the Bronco.

Rice also offered a profile to Timothy McVeigh's lawyers as to the terrorist's state of mind before he bombed the Oklahoma City federal building. McVeigh was executed in June.

"McVeigh was unhappy with the FBI profile he received, so his lawyers asked around and picked up my name from expert

circles," Rice said. "I took a copy of some letters he wrote and compared them to some standard exemplars, and gave the same evaluation as the FBI."

McVeigh was angry about his conclusions, Rice said, but he said he doesn't let those kind of reactions bother him.

"I get threats all the time, but it's part of the job," he said.



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