

Just Solving a Hit-and-Run in Sin City

Voiceover [00:00:05] Now this is recording RTI International Center for Forensic Science Presents Just Science.

Introduction [00:00:19] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode two of our Case Studies Part 1 mini season Just Science sat down with Stacey Chepren, member of a trial team for prosecuting federal criminal misconduct cases to discuss a fatal pedestrian hit and run involving trace and digital evidence. On a quiet morning in the city limits of Las Vegas, a pedestrian in a well-lit crosswalk was struck by an impaired driver who left the scene. There were no witnesses, but authorities quickly pieced together the case through a vehicle's aftermarket paint job and neighborhood video footage. Listen along as Stacey discusses the multi-agency cooperation and forensic analyzes used to identify the suspect. This episode is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Jaclynn McKay.

Jaclynn McKay [00:01:22] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Jaclynn McKay, with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. Today, we will be discussing how paint chip analysis and video footage help solve a fatal hit and run. Here to guide us in our discussion is Stacey Chepren. Welcome, Stacey. It's great to have you with us today.

Stacey Chepren [00:01:43] Hi, thank you.

Jaclynn McKay [00:01:44] So let's just dive into a little bit about your professional background and if you can talk to our listeners about how you became involved with this case.

Stacey Chepren [00:01:52] Sure. So I have been on the - a member of the federal trial team for the military for over 10 years now. So we prosecute criminal cases involving military members.

Jaclynn McKay [00:02:03] So this fatal hit and run case that you worked, would you mind providing a little bit of background on it and describing the scene for our listeners?

Stacey Chepren [00:02:10] I became involved because I was part of the trial team at the time and the location of where this case took place. I was assigned to that area and it happened one morning in May 2019. A gentleman was walking across the street in a crosswalk really early in the morning, and it was just about the time the sun was going to come up. So still a little bit dark outside. He was listening to his music like he usually did, and he was crossing the street when he was struck by a vehicle going at somewhat of a high rate of speed, because when he was struck, he was thrown quite a far distance from the intersection and he was dismembered. One of his legs was severed from his body from the impact. Local police obviously were called and then they became involved. The investigation began from there and then our military criminal investigation office was notified once they determined there's a military member involved in this.

Jaclynn McKay [00:03:09] And so after the police were notified of the incident, how did they come across the suspect vehicle?

Stacey Chepren [00:03:15] Initially, there was just the decedent and his leg was by the corner of an intersection and then the rest of his body was, I think it was about 60 feet up the road. And so there was debris in the intersection. So they could tell that it was a vehicle that had been, you know, significantly damaged by the impact. So patrols began driving around and just looking for vehicles that had damage to them that would, you know, line up with the type of accident that had occurred. The individual that called 911 was not there when it happened. There were no witnesses to see it actually happen. There were some people out riding their bikes that morning, just doing their morning exercise, and they had come across this deceased individual in the intersection and no one else was around. So patrols started driving around looking for the vehicle with heavy front end damage, and I mean, I want to say it was probably within 45 minutes they had located a black F-150 with significant front end damage on the driver's side and they began knocking on doors of the houses that were in the immediate area to determine who that truck belonged to. And then when they determined who it was that owned the truck, that's when they found out two military members actually were involved with that truck.

Jaclynn McKay [00:04:30] So upon talking to those individuals, did the police receive any additional information to help in the investigation?

Stacey Chepren [00:04:36] Initially, no. Initially, these two had denied being out at night or early in the morning. They had told police officers that they were in bed asleep all night. The truck was actually parked across the street from the house and that the owner of the truck had said, no, I never park my truck in that location, so somebody must have stolen my truck, wrecked it and brought it back and they acted like they had no idea what could have happened to this truck.

Jaclynn McKay [00:05:06] Was there any video footage that police were able to use to help piece together the events surrounding the hit and run?

Stacey Chepren [00:05:13] Yes. So they had separated these two because they knew the story wasn't really sounding legitimate. And the passenger, which was the friend of the driver, he is the one that actually said, you know, we were driving the truck, we weren't in bed all night. He had more of a guilty conscience about it and actually felt bad where the other one, didn't really seem to feel too much remorse about what had happened. It turns out they were drinking at a bar down the street all night. They were only about a mile, maybe a mile and a half from the house and then they had come home very early in the morning and the passenger stated he was sleeping when he felt the truck impact something and that woke him up and he heard the driver say, either, I think I just hit something or I think I hit someone and he kept driving. So once they got to the house, since they didn't stop, they got out and they had looked at the damage on the front end of the truck and they knew something significant had happened as far as the impact. So they went inside and they got some cleaning materials. They tried to clean off the front of the truck because there was actually blood and biological material on the truck. And one of the first things that the patrol officers did and the detectives when they arrived and saw the damage to this truck, was they looked for cameras on houses to see if maybe any of these cameras were on and recording or maybe ringing doorbells also caught this truck leaving and returning. They did get some footage from a neighbor across the street that shows this truck returning home right after the impact and then once they had returned home, they watched it back into the driveway and it looked like when it backed into the driveway, it

was pretty obvious that that was someone that was very familiar with backing into that driveway. I mean, it was still dark out when the truck had returned home. So this individual backed the truck in the driveway. You could see two people get out, come around to the front and then take a look at the front end. And then you see them go in the house, you see them come back out and they're trying to clean it off. And then the truck gets moved across the street by the driver. So that video footage helped determine like these two definitely were not in the house. It corroborated the passenger's story of they were not in the house sleeping all night. From there, the police went to the bar that they were at, like a 24 hour pizza place. So they went and they pulled the surveillance footage from the cameras in the bar and then that further pieced together what was going on that night. And these two were at the bar for a couple of hours and you could see them drinking. So they pulled the bar tabs to see the timestamps, how much alcohol they had consumed and then you see the driver on that security surveillance footage. You see him get up, go to the door, take something out of his pocket like a key fob and hit the button on it. And that was an important fact because the driver never admitted to actually driving the vehicle. So we kind of had to use this circumstantial evidence of this individual was caught on camera, going out, hitting a key fob, which would have been for that truck and we had to ask the bartender, you know, why did this person get up from the bar and do this? And she had said, oh, someone said, hey, there's a black truck outside with its lights on. So he actually was going to turn the lights off on the truck. These two, once they came out, they saw the damage on the truck. Then they went on foot because they were so close to the intersection, they went on foot and they went to the intersection. They saw the decedent and then they picked up the pieces of debris in the intersection. And they told, there was other people there that the people that were just riding their bikes, they told those people they can leave that those to the passenger and the driver, we're going to call 911. So the other people left and then one of the bikers, he rode to a police station that was just down the road, it was a highway patrol station, to see if there was anyone there to get help. And then when he returned, there was no police officers there. It was just a small substation. So he returned back to the intersection and everybody was gone and there was still no police activity. So it was him actually that called 911 and notified the police that there was a decedent in the intersection and he had no idea if anyone had called it in, so that's when the police initially responded. So then there was additional video footage after that, that was also caught on a camera on a neighbor's house showing these two that after they had moved the truck, they left in a silver vehicle, which turned out to be the driver's girlfriend's car. The driver's girlfriend had been staying at the house. So the driver and the passenger, they took those pieces that they had collected from the intersection. And what they were doing is they took all the pieces that they had picked up from the intersection and went and drove to another location to try and dispose of them in the desert. And then they drove back to the house. And when they came out of the house to get in the silver car and dispose of the pieces, they were also wearing different clothing. So these two knew they were in trouble. They're changing clothes. They're cleaning off the vehicle. They're moving it, disposing of evidence. Not notifying authorities. And then when they came back to the house, it was shortly after that that patrol was knocking on their door to see, you know, whose truck that was.

Jaclynn McKay [00:10:26] So I find it pretty interesting that you had video footage that pretty much laid out the events of how that night went. I know when I was previous crime scene investigator walking up on a scene and not really knowing exactly what happened and you really wish you had some video footage to kind of help piece everything together. It kind of sounds like you guys were very fortunate in that regard.

Stacey Chepren [00:10:49] We definitely were. And it was quick thinking on the part of the detectives and patrol to immediately start, you know, knocking on neighbors doors to see who has a Ring doorbell, who has any kind of other surveillance cameras on their house, because you never know how long that stuff is recorded for. So, I mean, if they would have waited longer, it may have been erased. So they were very quick to start collecting video and then they separated those two pretty fast, too. And once the passenger said, no, actually, we were down the street drinking at this bar, the detectives went down the street and started asking for the video surveillance because, again, you never know. Is that being erased? How long does it store? Did it even record? Are the people still at work that were working that night because it's a 24 hour place, so this is early in the morning. Some of the people may still be on shift. They weren't, but they did get a hold of the bartender that was on shift and she was able to confirm, yes, I know these two. Then there was obviously video of them being in the bar all night as well.

Jaclynn McKay [00:11:49] I think that's a testament to the great job that the officers did in this case, because without quick acting investigation, there's a lot of evidence that can be lost.

Stacey Chepren [00:11:59] They also did a great job just controlling the scene as well to make sure no other vehicles drove through it so they could collect what parts were still there. Because while those two did clean up some big pieces of the truck that were in the intersection, they didn't clean up everything. There were still parts to where the police officers were able to identify that it was a Ford vehicle, which helped when they located a Ford F-150 with significant front end damage. They found a piece of the headlamp and the truck was missing a headlight completely. I mean, the whole front driver's side was pretty smashed up. In addition to having biological material all over the front end, they could tell 99% sure without any trace evidence analysis, this is the vehicle we're looking for and they immediately secured it, and the CSAs, which are CSIs, but Las Vegas Metro refers to theirs as CSAs, crime scene analysts, they were immediately out there swabbing the truck and collecting what they could off of it.

Jaclynn McKay [00:12:56] So did this case occur on a busy highway?

Stacey Chepren [00:12:59] No. This actually took place in a neighborhood where the speed limit was 35 miles per hour and this came into play later as well since the decedent was dismembered, one of his legs was severed from the impact, we had an accident reconstructionist. He gave us a range of speed for which this truck would have been traveling. The speed limit was 35 miles per hour and we interviewed several witnesses that said no one drives the speed limit right there, especially not early in the morning. There's not a lot of traffic. People were known to speed. And since then, they actually have installed, the cities installed additional stop signs in the area to try and slow the flow of traffic.

Jaclynn McKay [00:13:37] So kind of in that same vein, was it hard to decipher between what was probative trace evidence on the scene as opposed to just a vehicle debris that may have been sitting on the side of the road?

Stacey Chepren [00:13:50] No, because these chunks of the truck was pretty large. And then there is also some shoes in the road from the decedent. His shoes had come off and he was listening to headphones, which was consistent with what one of the witnesses, one of his family members said. Yes, you know, he likes to listen to his music and walk, go for his early morning walk each morning. So we had the headphones in the road that we were

able to determine were his headphones and they were kind of smashed in the road. And then the large pieces of the truck, they had some serial numbers on it so they could narrow it down like that it was a black Ford F-150, you know, this model year. And then further, there were pieces of paint chips on the decedent. So that was collected. They were like in his neck. And so those were collected and then a paint chip analysis was conducted between the paint chips found on the decedent and then paint chips that were taken from the truck and it was determined that there was without a doubt that was the truck that struck him, because they look at the different layers of the paint and this truck, there's a lot of black Ford F-150s, but even though we didn't have a specific part with a VIN number specifically that belonged to that truck, this truck had a custom paint job and the paint analysis showed that without a doubt, this truck, because of the layers of the paint in the paint chips that were taken, they were able to say with 100% certainty that that was the truck that struck the decedent. And additionally, I believe it had a small lift on the truck as well so when our accident reconstructionist did his measurements and then we compared it against the height of the decedent, it was able to be determined that, yes, a truck of that height, it would have caused these injuries that the decedent had.

Jaclynn McKay [00:15:37] So you spoke about the evidence collected on the scene that was indicative of a black Ford F-150. You talked about the paint chips that were found on the decedent and they matched to the paint job of the suspect vehicle and you also talked about the heavy damage that was seen to the vehicle and that there was biological material. It kind of seems a little overkill, but was that biological material ever actually tested and compared to the victim?

Stacey Chepren [00:16:05] Yes, it was. I mean, it does seem like a bit much because it seemed pretty obvious. But when you take it to court, you know, you want to make sure that anything that you have available, you're going to go ahead and use it. And the CSA did swab the biological material on that truck and then the M.E., the medical examiner's office, also, they regularly take specimens from their decedents and so we can compare DNA and it was confirmed that, yes, that biological material on the truck, it was that of the decedent. And that also helped because we needed all this circumstantial evidence, because the driver immediately lawyered up and he never admitted to even driving his truck and so it took all of a combination of all these agencies and experts working together to show in court later on that this truck was driven by the owner that night. We asked several witnesses, you know, have you ever seen friends drive the truck? Does the girlfriend drive the truck? And all of them were saying, no, this guy, he drives this truck. It's his truck. He doesn't let people borrow it, nothing like that. So it was overwhelming circumstantial evidence that this individual was driving his truck. He never admitted to being behind the wheel that night. But the passenger said, you know, he was sleeping, he woke up and it was the impact in that he heard the driver make that statement. And then the passenger also later on our military criminal investigative organization that was handling this case jointly with the local law enforcement re-interviewed that passenger and it was him that kind of corroborated even more of the story that was evident from the surveillance video that was collected. He stated that, you know, maybe they thought they hit a deer at first, which is not common in Las Vegas and they pressed him a little more like, you know, that's not a deer. And he said, okay, yeah, it's not a deer. He was very remorseful. He said, yeah, you know, he really was the key too. So it all kind of added up and came together in the end for court.

Jaclynn McKay [00:18:09] So based on all the evidence that you had, what ended up happening as far as trial?

Stacey Chepren [00:18:15] We actually had a plea deal with the passenger because he was being so cooperative. And I mean, he was a big part of helping bring justice to the family of the decedent. He got a little jail time. He obviously was discharged from the military because of it and then we went to trial with the driver and the driver received 14 years in prison and a dishonorable discharge. So we prosecuted the passenger first so that his trial was over and then we brought him in to testify for the trial of the driver.

Jaclynn McKay [00:18:44] So since this occurred in the city of Las Vegas, how did the military ultimately get jurisdiction over this case? And can you speak a little bit to the policies and procedures about the military being notified when incidents like this occur?

Stacey Chepren [00:18:58] Sure. So they have a policy in place that's standard practice, where if a military member is involved in an off base incident, their command, their chain of command is going to find out about it. Typically, someone's going to show them a military I.D. or there's going to be evidence in the vehicle because some people don't admit right away that they're military member when they get in trouble because they know their command is going to get involved. Some of them try and hide it. This guy didn't. But once someone is identified as being in the military, if they go to jail, they're arrested, their unit gets notified. So the first sergeant will get a phone call. They're kind of the enlisted adviser for the people in the unit. And so the first sergeant gets a call because obviously this individual isn't going to make it to work that day because he's in jail. So they get notified, hey, there's been an incident. I'm in jail. But we also get a phone call as the prosecution office saying, hey, I have a member in jail. And then that triggers a whole nother process for us that we have to put in our system that we track our cases in, and because certain crimes, certain offenses are going to, or certain ranks of people, if they get in trouble, will trigger mandatory reporting that we have to report up to our higher headquarters. And if there's media involvement, and there was media involvement immediately in this case because roads were blocked off that morning and then this individual's mug shot went out with the local media, so we had to make our command aware immediately that this was going on and it involved a military member so that they were aware of what was happening.

Jaclynn McKay [00:20:34] Even as a part of the prosecution team, you were brought in almost immediately when this incident occurred.

Stacey Chepren [00:20:41] Yes, I would say within probably 2 hours of this happening, we were notified and so was our MCIO, our Military Criminal Investigation Organization. Because the MCIO is going to go and ask immediately what they can do to assist because they're going to run a joint investigation most times, and so they want to be involved immediately so that they are aware of everything and they want to know how they can assist and how they can help. It's a serious case and unfortunately, the decedent was a retired military member. So we have a military - an active duty military member striking and killing a retiree. So we had a very big interest in this case to ensure that we could do what we can and bring justice to the victim's family.

Jaclynn McKay [00:21:25] So you spoke about all the various agencies that were involved with this case, including the military in Las Vegas and ultimately the crime lab. Can you speak to how important the cooperation between all those agencies was to the resolution of this case?

Stacey Chepren [00:21:42] Yes, it was extremely important because the communication, the sharing of evidence are MCIO, which are Military Criminal Investigation Organization,

was immediately involved as soon as it was determined that there was a military member. Since this happened off base, we just refer to them as the locals. Generally, whatever area a base is in, they have jurisdiction of that case. So it's important to have good communication between all these agencies and then the prosecution office and the local D.A. and that helped determine who's going to take jurisdiction. In the beginning, it's not really determined where the jurisdictions going to stay. Is it going to stay downtown with the DA? Or is the military going to take it? So that's an even more important thing, why everybody needs to be involved, because you can't just hand it off one way or the other and hope that it goes one route or the other. So the locals here in Las Vegas, they're very cooperative with the military and they do work together really well. We have open lines of communication and then when it comes to court as well, they know they're going to have to come back and testify potentially. They always make themselves available.

Jaclynn McKay [00:22:51] That's really great because at the end of the day, you know, we're all fighting for the same cause. We're all trying to get justice for the victims. And although you had a lot of overwhelming evidence, circumstantial evidence for the driver and the passenger, were there any other suspects that came up during the investigation?

Stacey Chepren [00:23:08] No, these two were the only ones that that were investigated for it and the driver was actually, he was arrested that morning by the local law enforcement officers and then he spent a couple of nights in jail. They did a blood draw on him as well, and he still had alcohol in his system when they did that blood draw and then a retrograde extrapolation was done on his blood alcohol results and gave us a range to determine that he would have been over the legal limit when this event occurred. So just more evidence to help kind of seal the deal, so to speak, on this case involving him. And then he was handed over to the military for jurisdiction for that case. It was determined that the military had an interest in the case because, unfortunately, the victim, the decedent was a retired military member.

Jaclynn McKay [00:24:00] You mentioned that there were speed limits added in the area where this incident occurred. Did this case ultimately have any other effects on the community where it occurred in?

Stacey Chepren [00:24:10] Speed bumps installed in that area, additional stop signs in the area to kind of slow down the flow of traffic. The fatal traffic detail had given us some information concerning the rate of accidents in the area and, you know, because the defense was obviously going to try and bring out that information of, hey, this guy's in a dangerous area. He shouldn't have been out walking in the dark. But ironically, he was in a lit crosswalk. We verified that the lights were working on the street that night. Nothing was burned out. And then the bloodstains showed he was hit in the middle of the crosswalk. He was walking. He wasn't doing something odd, like laying down. He didn't trip and fall and was in the roadway where he wasn't visible. And he also had these bright orange shorts on with reflective material on them. And even though he was listening to music, I think that was another point the defense was probably going to go for to is, you know, maybe he had his headphones on and his music was too loud and he wasn't paying attention, but he was doing everything right by being in the crosswalk and having these shorts on using a lit area. He's in an area familiar to him, so, unfortunately, he was just at the wrong place at the wrong time that morning.

Jaclynn McKay [00:25:21] The reason I thought this case was so interesting was because you don't really hear a lot about trace analysis being used to solve cases in the mainstream media. But I also think that this case is a great testament to just multi-agency

cooperation and the police investigation that was done. So definitely kudos to everyone that worked on this case. It seems like it all came together very nicely. Thank you for taking the time to discuss this case with us.

Stacey Chepren [00:25:48] Of course, I really enjoyed being a guest though, so thank you for having me.

Jaclynn McKay [00:25:52] If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensics field, visit ForensicCOE.org. I'm Jaclynn McKay and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Introduction [00:26:10] Next week, Just Science sits down with Dr. Sharon Moses to discuss how forensic archeology can inform search strategies for missing individuals and what factors influence body disposal sites. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.