

Point of View

This July, the International Association for Identification, IAI, is holding its 91st educational conference in Boston. Hundreds of professionals involved with crime scene investigation will gather with vendors and others to socialize and network; learn from each other; see new products and technologies; and take certification exams in various disciplines. A week in Boston with colleagues may sound like a vacation but really, it can be so much more.

Look at the IAI's website (www.theiai.org) and you will notice that this conference is not simply called a trade show or a symposium or a meeting. This conference explicitly calls itself educational. This is a place for officers from both large and small departments to learn. Given the fact that for many, their only formal training in crime scene processing is a small percentage of their Academy time, this annual IAI conference as well as the smaller regional conferences held around the country, are key to keeping crime scene professionals up-to-date on methods and technologies.

Crime scene officers are thirsting for knowledge. I have a website of my own (www.csigizmos.com) where officers in the field offer tips and tricks they have learned. That site receives over 150,000 hits per month! Sharing information is so important to our place in the criminal justice system.

While it is often difficult for officers from small departments to attend conferences such as IAI, it is crucial that they do so in order to be effective in their jobs. The Academy is the initial training an officer receives. Those in large departments are apt to have the good fortune to have additional training and experienced crime scene professionals to mentor them. Those in smaller departments may not be so lucky. Taking advantage of any sort of instruction is crucial for them. Although travel to the international conference is cost prohibitive for some, local and state IAI divisions offer training and meetings as well, without the expense of travel.

What does it take to become a crime scene officer in the U.S.? Sadly, it often takes little more than the blessing of the chief or sheriff. That's it! Perhaps the U.S. needs to look north of the border to Canada where an officer may need to take 10-12 weeks of specialized training in order to work as a crime scene officer. Things are looking up in the U.S. as we head toward crime scene officer certification. The IAI offers a number of courses in different disciplines of crime scene processing. These are taught by active and retired officers.

Technology changes so fast. Officers need to be in a state of constant learning. Although I am retired from the police force, my 'retirement' job allows me the luxury of attending lots of conferences. I get to see not only new products but I learn new methods and tactics as well. The IAI can offer this to you. Again, check out their website for cost effective workshops and seminars.

The biggest advantage I see in attending a conference, however, is the contacts you make through networking. You have the opportunity to meet trainers who specialize in various aspects of crime scene processing as well as fellow officers involved in similar work. Having a network to call on when you have a question or need some information is so important. You need to know your limits and that's easier to do when you know you have some backup.

Make sure when you attend a conference, you visit the exhibit hall. Vendors are there to meet you and introduce you to new products and methods. These companies specialize in crime scene supplies, photography, evidence packaging, cabinets and chambers, chemicals, testing, etc. They connect you to 'what's out there' and how it's used.

Attendance at a conference like IAI can leave you with life changing techniques. You learn and see and meet. You take back to your department, new ways to approach your work. You come away with a new awareness