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Turning art into clues

Sketch artist volunteers talent to aid law enforcement officials

By GENE WARNER
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2/25/2007



Derek Gee/Buffalo News
Ralph Sirianni, who has an art studio in his home, above, donates his time to draw sketches of suspects for various area police agencies. He also works as a creative arts therapist and teacher.

Artist Ralph Sirianni couldn't wait to walk into the courtroom to see for himself what the suspect in the bike path rapes and murder looked like in person.

Three years ago, Sirianni put his skilled pencil to the sketch pad, agreeing to tackle the trickiest of portraiture assignments.

He met with a woman in her mid-20s who had been raped a decade earlier, at age 14, in Buffalo's Riverside area. She saw her attacker, the Bike Path Rapist, under obviously traumatic circumstances. And Sirianni tried to create a sketch of the man - while adding 10 years of aging to his features.

So he made the eyes a bit darker than what she described. The hair gained some touches of gray. And he added a few wrinkles to the face.

"This isn't what she said he looked like," Sirianni said. "This was meant to show the public, here is what he might look like now."

Sirianni watched with interest as suspect Altemio C. Sanchez was led into the courtroom five weeks ago, looking to see how much his sketch resembled the man police

believe responsible for the crime. "I thought it was a strong resemblance," he said. "I wish I could have put a mustache on him and taken the hair off [his head]. Other than that, I was very happy with it."

Welcome to the world of police sketches, an inexact mix of art and science that goes back generations, perhaps centuries.

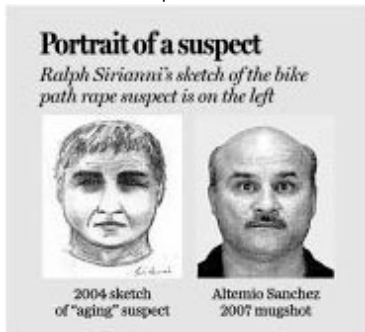
"There's been police sketch work back to the Old West - or longer - trying to catch gunslingers, cattle rustlers and other criminals," Sirianni said.

At a time when DNA testing and "CSI Everywhere" have dominated the world of high-profile police investigations, there's still a crucial role for police sketches.

"They are another investigative tool in the police arsenal," Buffalo Chief of Detectives Dennis J. Richards said. "They have not outlived their usefulness."

Buffalo Police Sex Offense Squad detectives use Sirianni when they have exhausted their more traditional investigative leads, and when the victim feels strongly that she remembers what her attacker looked like.

"Sirianni has been critical to our quick, successful completion of three or four cases in the last seven or eight years," said Lt. David F. Mann, commander of the Sex Offense Squad. "Those



cases either wouldn't have been solved, or they may have taken much longer to solve."

Sirianni is emphatic that he does a free-hand sketch, not a composite or machine-driven image.

In a composite, a victim is shown 20 sets of eyes, 20 noses, etc., in an attempt to generate a composite image of the attacker's facial features.

Composite and computer-generated sketches have come under attack in the past decade or so, led by the efforts of nationally prominent forensic artist Jeanne Boylan.

Boylan, whose book sits on the crowded bookshelf in Sirianni's North Buffalo home, has drawn sketches in some of the nation's most high-profile cases, involving Polly Klaas, the Unabomber, the Oklahoma City bombing and the drowning of Susan Smith's children.

Boylan and Sirianni subscribe to the same basic theory: When a person witnesses a traumatic event, the mind represses the visual image as a survival measure, to protect the person from re-experiencing the event.

It is the artist's job, through personality and sensitivity, to create a comfortable enough environment to unlock that repressed visual image.

"This is an individual who has just witnessed a crime; sometimes it can be horrific, like a rape," Sirianni said. "If anything, they're trying to block the image, as a defense mechanism. So it is my job to . . . make that person feel comfortable enough with me to relive that horrific event. I'm asking them to do something they don't want to do, with a complete stranger."

Composite sketches are different. With those, victims are bombarded by more than a dozen sets of eyes, noses, chins and other facial features.

That's like picking out your lost luggage by pointing to an airline baggage chart full of handles, fabrics, latches and locks, Boylan wrote.

"It may be too much [for the victim] to process all these images at that tender time," Sirianni said. "I think you have a better chance with a one-on-one interaction between the artist and the person describing the attacker."

Sirianni starts with a general description provided by the police, including the suspect's age, hair color and physical description. Then he uses his low-key demeanor to develop a rapport with the victim or witness, telling the person that he is there to help, to look for any description that can help lead to an arrest.

"What can you tell me about the person?" he asks. "Is there anything that stood out, a mark on his face, something on his nose, any feature you can tell me about?"

Gradually, while trying to build a comfort level and trust, Sirianni gets to the various facial features, such as the facial shape and the width of the nose. He is trying to wake any subconscious memory, to bring it out onto the sketch pad.

As an artist, Sirianni also makes some allowances for facial features that could be distorted at the time of a sexual attack. At the height of the crime, the attacker could have a flared nose, squinty eyes, clenched teeth and a grimace on his face.

"I'm trying to relax those features a little bit and present the image that the public might see, as opposed to the image the victim saw," he said.

And when he is done, Sirianni works with the victim, to tweak the sketch to fit the victim's visual image of the criminal.

Sirianni, 58, works as a creative arts therapist at Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Besides teaching a continuing-education course on portrait drawing, he also has dabbled in courtroom sketches of the Lackawanna Six, James Kopp and Ralph "Bucky" Phillips. Those sketches are available at his Web site, www.sirianniart.com.

And purely as a volunteer, Sirianni has worked with the Buffalo police, State Police and the Erie and Genesee County sheriff's offices.

His most dramatic triumph came a few years ago, when he worked with a 19-year-old rape

victim. Nine hours after his drawing was circulated among patrol officers, an officer spotted a similar-looking man, who was stopped and eventually charged with the rape.

Three detectives then showed Sirianni his sketch and a Polaroid of the suspect, revealing an uncanny resemblance. Sirianni later was given a Mayor's Award of Merit for his efforts in working with police.

"I won't accept a dime," Sirianni said of his work with police and victims. "For me, this is a way to take my gift and share it in a meaningful way with the community."

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