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British forensics technique may be key to solving Reyka case

February 10, 2011 | By Sofia Santana, Sun Sentinel

The key to solving one of South Florida's most high-profile murders — the 2007 killing of Broward Sheriff's Sgt. Chris Reyka — may rest in the hands of a British scientist.

The forensics chief at the Northamptonshire police department, near London, has pioneered a technique of lifting fingerprints off spent bullet shell casings — something that could help authorities identify shooting suspects.

The Sheriff's Office recently sent a homicide detective to England to meet with forensic scientist John Bond to see if his technique could find fingerprints on 10 shell casings. They were collected from the Pompano Beach Walgreens parking lot where Reyka, a Wellington father of four, was killed while investigating a suspicious vehicle.

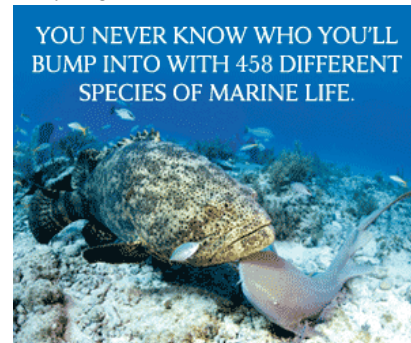
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Unable to find the murder weapon or the vehicle used by the killer, detectives have had scant physical evidence to work with.

"They called us out of the blue and said they couldn't find any fingerprints," said Bond, who then offered his assistance and invited the detective to England. "We do the work whilst they're with us."

Detectives declined to talk about the trip but said through a spokeswoman they are "utilizing many investigative techniques to further Sgt. Reyka's case."

The sergeant's widow, Kim Reyka, could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Bond, 55, has worked in the Northamptonshire police department's crime lab for 18 years. He previously was a physicist at a private company.

Bond figured out how to find fingerprints by looking for corrosion on the shell casing caused by finger sweat.

He covers the shell casings with a carbon powder and then zaps them with 2,500 volts of electricity. This makes the powder stick to the corroded parts of the metal, revealing the fingerprint. This procedure also preserves the fingerprint.

This method can also reveal fingerprints on surfaces that have been wiped down, Bond said.

For a bullet fired out of a semi-automatic pistol, the kind of weapon used in Reyka's killing, Bond looks for at least a full or partial thumb print on a shell casing, because the user would have had to press his or her thumb onto each round when loading the gun's magazine.

Regular fingerprinting, meanwhile, involves dusting a surface with fine latent or metallic powder to see what finger residue the powder sticks to.

"Conventional techniques look for sweat. We look for corrosion," Bond said.

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