

“I see a side of life that other people don’t” says crime scene investigator

By **Marian Scaife** -



CSI Alice Stewart and sniffer dog trained to find semen

A Derbyshire Crime Scene Investigator tells how she copes with dealing the extraordinary aspects of her job.

Alice Stewart was on call the night 11 May 2012 when fire swept through a semi-detached house at 8 Victory Road, Osmaston, Derby killing Jade, 10, John, nine, Jack, seven, Jesse, six, and Jayden, five, and three days later Duwayne, 13. The six children died of smoke inhalation from a house fire started by their parents, Mick and Mairead Philpott.

Stewart, now 53, has been a crime scene investigator (CSI) for 31 years with Derbyshire Constabulary. One of her specialisms is disaster victim identification (DVI). She was the first CSI to arrive that night. She would later go on to give evidence in court on her son's eleventh birthday.

Stewart came to Derby in 1989 to study photography at Derbyshire College of Higher Education. She comes from a small town, Risca in south east Wales. She remembers seeing lots of pubs, churches and countryside while growing up.



It was her interest in photography that led to a boyfriend's uncle suggesting she apply to be a scene of crime officer (SOCO). Initially she was turned down due to a lack of experience, including not having seen a dead body. Incidentally, the job went to her now husband, Graham Stewart.

Not long after Stewart became a photographic technician for the forensics team. She met Graham on her first day at work. Their task was to take a set of fingerprints from a mummified body at the mortuary. A technique that involved slicing the skin from the finger, washing and soaking the skin to soften and laying over a gloved hand allowing the wearer to ink and roll to obtain a print.

When asked how she copes with the bodies, sights and smells that accompany her job Stewart says, "I have learned during my career you have to compartmentalise. You can't let yourself become too involved in the story. It's not good."

Working with a supportive set of colleagues also helps. If details of a case resonate more with one colleague over another, a death of a baby for example, then someone else is likely to step in. Dates of birth, children of similar ages to her own are details that impact Stewart.

It not always first hand experiences that have an effect. Stewart says she was deeply affected by a police officer describing a conversation he'd had with an 11 year old boy trapped under a car who went on to die at the scene. She puts her hand to her chest and eyes well up when recalling this.

Stewart is well aware she "sees a side to life that other people don't". She gets frustrated when people ask for gruesome details about her job, "usually over dinner" she says.

Fortunately her career has not tarnished her love of photography. It has a serious technical purpose in her professional life but in her personal life she uses Instagram like everyone else.
