

The case for DNA

Hampikian shares expertise, enthusiasm for forensics biology

BY JANELLE BROWN

Greg Hampikian had barely settled into his new offices this fall in the Biology Department at Boise State University when he received some important news – an inmate who had spent 17 years in a Georgia prison after being convicted of a brutal rape would be freed. The reason: the DNA evidence Hampikian had analyzed as

biology at Clayton State College and University in Georgia.

The highly publicized Harrison case adds to growing momentum for DNA-based forensics, a field that Hampikian believes will play an increasingly important role in criminal justice in the years ahead. “DNA-based forensics is the gold standard when it comes to evidence,” he says. “It’s something that juries understand.”

Hampikian is bringing his scientific expertise, his enthusiasm and his many years of hands-on experience into his classrooms at Boise State. He is teaching a new course in forensic biology this fall for both graduate and undergraduate students that combines classroom instruction with some innovative outreach. For example, in October students joined in a telephone conference call with Court TV reporter Beth Karas, who was covering the Scott Peterson murder trial, and also heard a presentation about the Peterson case from a national expert on crime scene investigations.

Hampikian has also launched a student-driven research project that could have national significance: a survey of the procedures each of the 50 states follows for obtaining, analyzing and introducing DNA evidence as part of criminal procedures. The issue is becoming increasingly important because of many emerging conflicts over when and how DNA evidence should be used by law-enforcement agencies and the courts.

“No one has ever conducted a survey like this before,” says Hampikian, who plans on using Freedom of

Information Act protocol if needed to obtain procedures from each state.

Hampikian calls the classroom “the most underutilized resource in the country,” something he’s working on changing. He’s already received letters from three inmates at the Idaho State Penitentiary asking for his help to review DNA evidence in their cases, and his students are now helping with the groundwork to determine how to respond. Hampikian is collaborating with BSU computer science professor Tim Andersen on a research proposal that deals with the development and applications of artificial DNA. He’s interested in developing a forensics course for high school biology teachers in Idaho, a program he launched in Georgia while serving on the faculty of Clayton. And he’s working with a video production company on training videos for law-enforcement and court officials on obtaining and handling DNA evidence.

That’s a lot of irons in the fire any way you look at it, but Hampikian says he enjoys it all. When he’s not pursuing scientific endeavors, Hampikian is also a playwright and poet. He co-authored *Exit to Freedom* with former inmate Calvin Johnson; the book chronicles Johnson’s 16-year effort to prove his freedom and is the only firsthand account of a prisoner freed by DNA evidence.

After a couple of months at Boise State, Hampikian says he feels right at home.

“Boise State has the collaborative environment that I enjoy,” he says. “I’m glad to be here.”



part of the Georgia Innocence Project proved that the inmate, Clarence Harrison, had not committed the crime.

Hampikian (above), a nationally recognized forensic DNA expert, author, and now a member of Boise State’s faculty, flew back to Georgia to meet with lawyers and participate in press events surrounding Harrison’s release.

“It was miraculous. We had a 17-year-old rape kit slide to work with, but the results were clear: The DNA tests clearly showed that Harrison could not have been the rapist,” says Hampikian, who has a Ph.D. in genetics from the University of Connecticut and was formerly a professor of