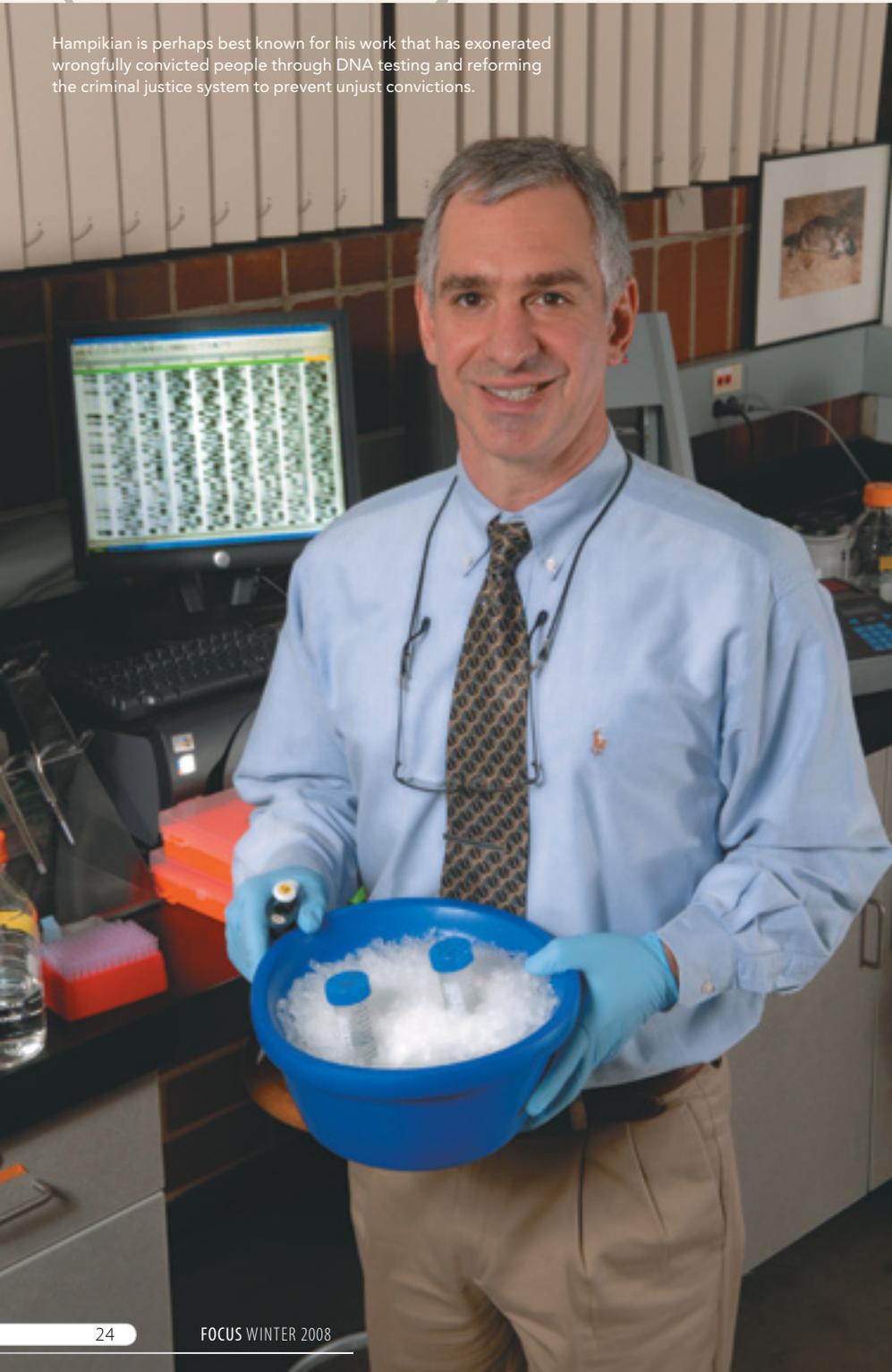


The Power of Mixing Art and Science

BY MIKE JOURNEE

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Professor Greg Hampikian describes himself as a storyteller.

It's probably not how most forensic DNA scientists describe what they do. But Hampikian, who has a dual appointment in the Boise State Biology and Criminal Justice departments and a penchant for telling folks that "DNA can tell you where your genes have been the last 100,000 years," isn't an ordinary scientist.

His father was an MIT-trained physics professor who kept a laboratory in the basement of Hampikian's childhood home. His grandfather was a poet who edited a daily newspaper and wrote the editorials in iambic pentameter.

"They never understood one another," Hampikian says. It seems that Hampikian's progenitors have made their peace in his genetic makeup.

A quick perusal of his online biography reveals the expected academic pursuits of his father's son: research, teaching, community outreach and a long list of academic publications. But it's certain that his late grandfather, whom Hampikian never met, would be proud of the entries that point to his grandson's yen to write plays and poetry.

Two of his works were performed at Clayton State University in Georgia, where he taught before coming to Boise State in 2004, and his play, *Your Name in Bold*, won the Percolating Playwrights award in 2003 and was performed at Theater in the Round in Atlanta as a staged reading.

"There are few things more exciting to me than a blank piece of paper and

a pen,” Hampikian says. “But I rarely get a chance to really indulge that anymore.”

Instead, Hampikian scratches his storytelling itch by making the often esoteric details of his work and research in cell biology, DNA and forensics accessible to elementary school students, his undergraduate and graduate students, journalists, juries, potential supporters of the university, and just about anyone or any group who wants to tour his lab.

“Greg has a gift for talking in a way that allows those who don’t have formal training in science to understand it,” says Jim Belthoff, chairman of Boise State’s Biology Department. “It’s an important component of bringing science and research to the public and creating a scientifically literate society that understands what is science and what’s not.”

Hampikian is perhaps best known for his work with the Innocence Project, an organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people through DNA testing and reforming the criminal justice system to prevent unjust convictions.

Nikki Gerhard, a volunteer intern for the Innocence Project in Idaho and a criminal justice graduate student, says it’s Hampikian’s passion for what he does that allows him to communicate so well.

“It’s rare to see someone with as much passion for their job as he has, and I think that comes through in the way he talks about it,” Gerhard says.

While it’s the proof of science that ultimately makes the case in his



“Greg has a gift for talking in a way that allows those who don’t have formal training in science to understand it,” says his department chair.

Innocence Project work, Hampikian says bringing that science to bear in an effective way is really “nothing but telling the story with data. You’re weaving a compelling narrative about someone who’s innocent but has been convicted and has already lost all of their appeals and has nowhere else to turn.”

Most recently, Hampikian was part of a team from the Georgia Innocence Project that overturned the 1979 rape conviction of John White, who was released from a Georgia prison in December. White was the fourth wrongfully convicted person Hampikian has helped exonerate.

Since joining Boise State, Hampikian has brought the Idaho Innocence Project (IIP) under the university’s umbrella as its director. With help from University Advancement, Hampikian recently secured \$70,000 in funding for the IIP from the Angora Ridge Foundation and \$25,000 from the Interest on Lawyers’ Trust Accounts, which funds law-related public interest programs.

“A trial is really about the art of

two combatants telling their side of the story in the courtroom,” Hampikian recently told a group of colleagues. “The winner is the one who tells the best story and tips the balance of confidence that their version is the right one. And that balance of confidence might not always reflect the truth. That’s where DNA can come in and correct the verdict years later.”

But it may be his description of how the spatters of Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionist paintings were an inspiration for the study of blood spatters by forensic scientists, and other examples of art influencing science, that best sums up his philosophy on the power of mixing the creativity of art and the difficult minutia of science.

His point? Not only does art help non-scientists understand and develop an interest in science, it also helps scientists ask the questions that have not yet been answered.

“It turns out that novelty is the lifeblood of science,” Hampikian says. “Just as in art, no one’s really interested in your work if someone has already written the same story.”