

00:09.23

Scott Fulmer

Debbie, welcome to the show.

00:11.94

Debbie

Hi, how are you doing?

00:13.46

Scott Fulmer

I'm doing good. um'm I appreciate your time. I'm excited to talk to you about your role in this manhunt for ah for Aaron Bassler. I think 35 years old is what he was, I believe. The interesting thing is, unlike most of the folks that I interview who who were in on whatever happened, you were kind of in the back You were behind the scenes as a criminalist and a subject matter expert. But before we talk about what what happened and what your role was, could you just, let's start at the beginning. Who who was Aaron Bassler? What do we know about him?

00:45.63

Debbie

Well, what we know is that he, as a young person, he was very, uh, he grew up in a rural rugged area on the, in the Northern coast, um, heavily forested area. Um, somewhere in about his teens, he became, uh, people started to describe him as awkward, um, like a loner, very solitary.

01:13.84

Debbie

ah He grew up hunting, hiking, camping um in that area. And then as a teen, he started drinking and smoking pots. And then eventually he was he did some he grew some pot gardens in the forest area. And he was very familiar with the terrain and very accustomed to it.

01:38.07

Debbie

He also experimented with some psychedelic mushrooms and had, ah prior to this incident, had a couple of arrests, um one for ah sending a package to the Chinese consulate in San Francisco. He was released from that. And then in 2011, he also had a DUI where he crashed his car into a fence near a school.

02:05.15

Debbie

ah When he was arrested for that, he was very combative. So that's that's the Aaron Bassler I am familiar with.

02:13.51

Scott Fulmer

Normally one does not send packages to the Chinese consulate.

02:17.97

Debbie
Correct.

02:19.61

Scott Fulmer

If you're thinking that's weird, it's because it was. There was nothing, yeah it wasn't espionage related or anything like that. So he gets a, I know he got a DUI in in March of 2011, which is about five months before the events happen that we're going to talk about.

02:27.71

Debbie
That's correct.

02:37.19

Scott Fulmer

And they took a blood sample from him, which would be important later on. I wanted to ask you just some general information about ah blood samples. ah How do you compare them? I mean, I don't know if you use a comparison microscope, but is there a blood sample database? I mean, how do you know we need to find, yeah how do you match this one with something else like in a big database? What do you do?

02:59.77

Debbie

We ah take some of the blood and ah in this case, I put it on an absorbent material, let it dry out. ice I can send it to a DNA laboratory and they can develop a DNA profile from it. So in that in that sense, there is, of course, a database.

03:21.96

Debbie

It's not all from blood samples, but it does it is one of the bodily fluids that can be used to determine someone's profile. um And then there's ah there are state databases, local databases, and then the national database, which is CODIS, the Combined DNA Index System. And interestingly enough, when I started my career with the California Department of Justice, I was actually helping build the DNA database from all the offender samples at the time.

03:51.73

Scott Fulmer

Excellent. Yeah, I don't know why I thought it was like just blood. I get it now. It's it's a DNA that you're comparing from the blood. ah Because I was thinking, it's like a blood bank somewhere.

03:59.72

Debbie

Exactly.

04:03.00

Scott Fulmer

But you know, you're the expert. I don't know what I'm talking about. Well, The events we're going to talk about occurred in August and September of 2011. And they involve a couple of homicides in ah a really remote, really thickly for a thick forest forested area near Westport and Fort Bragg, California. I had to look up Fort Bragg, California. I thought that was a typo because I was in the Army and I've been to Fort Bragg, which is not in California.

04:30.47

Scott Fulmer

But anyway, it's actually, that's a small town in California and it's real. But this, the area that's around is known as the Emerald Triangle. Can you kind of describe that area, you know, what the terrain was like? Cause it's, it's instrumental in why it was so difficult to find him. And why is it called the Emerald Triangle?

04:48.48

Debbie

Okay, well I'll start while it's why as to why it's called the Emerald Triangle. um It consists of three counties um that are considered to be the Emerald Triangle, and that's Mendocino and Humboldt and, whoops, sorry, can I start that over again?

05:10.33

Debbie

Sorry.

05:10.55

Scott Fulmer

Yeah, sorry, go right ahead.

05:12.16

Debbie

okay Give me one second.

05:13.95

Scott Fulmer

No, you're fine.

05:24.37

Scott Fulmer

No worries.

05:41.72

Debbie

Okay. Uh, the Emerald Triangle consists of three counties in Northern

California. That's Humboldt County, Mendocino County, and Trinity County. Um, it's called the Emerald Triangle because actually it is, it's one of the largest pot growing ah marijuana growing, uh, areas in the country, especially at the time, um, of this, these crimes that we were talking about.

06:11.20

Debbie

and before marijuana became legalized as a recreational drug in so many states. um It grows very well outdoors and of course indoors. um And parts of the Emerald Triangle, I mean, they've been ah become experts at growing marijuana ah since like the sixties. So that's actually part of the Emerald Triangle name. um But then also it is a very,

06:41.21

Debbie

heavily forested terrain with redwoods, which are very tall, large trees. It has um thick brush and it creates a dense canopy from overhead. And then there's a lot of ferns, so ah ferns and other bush so that the litter or the the the duff, the dead and decaying plant matter that's on the ground is really thick. um So it's really hard to to to traverse any area that's not that doesn't have trails cleared away in it.

07:15.76

Scott Fulmer

Well, and that's going to be instrumental in what happens to the difficulty of the terrain. So the first murder happens on August 11th. And it's a 42 year old man named Matthew Coleman, where he was shot and killed. ah Where were you working at the time and how did you get involved in all of this?

07:33.92

Debbie

I was working for the California Department of Justice Laboratory in Eureka, California. And that laboratory actually serves Mendocino, Humboldt and Del Norte counties. So Mendocino County was an area that was in my territory for our laboratory. And we would analyze evidence from Mendocino County and also assist any law enforcement in those counties ah with processing crime scenes if they requested help.

08:05.83

Scott Fulmer

So Matthew Coleman is shot and killed and initially it was thought to be a bear attack for some reason. I don't know if that was the nature of his injuries, but at this point, Aaron Bassler is kind of an unknown or there's no way to tie it to him. But you were instrumental in having one of the investigators return to this. This was the first crime scene. You were instrumental in having one of the investigators

return and get some additional evidence. What what kind of evidence did he recover and and why did what did you do with it?

08:34.82

Debbie

um He thought that originally when the investigators were processing the area, they thought that there was a sample that was left behind that would be appropriate for DNA collection and identification.

08:47.13

Debbie

And unfortunately, it is not it was not a good type of a sample for that. So I asked him if he was calling us out for assistance. And at that point, he actually told me he was done processing the scene. And I was i was really concerned um because he did tell me that it was they believed it to be a shooting scene.

09:12.16

Debbie

and that the person who had fired upon Matthew Coleman had policed his brass, meaning he picked up his the cartridge cases, and that there wouldn't be any firearms evidence that remained behind.

09:26.33

Scott Fulmer

Yeah, very disciplined.

09:28.35

Debbie

And so for DNA, i I said, you need to go back to the scene, and I need you to look for something that would have a better biological sample for DNA such as ah partially eaten food or a can or a bottle um that he might have taken a drink from, aye even chewed gum. um And then a common thing is cigarettes.

09:53.58

Scott Fulmer

So what did he what did he bring back to you?

09:56.89

Debbie

he They did go back to the scene. um They found some Hershey's Kisses wrappers and they also found basically a tin foil marijuana joint. So instead of being rolled with traditional papers, it was made of tin foil and that in itself was a little unusual.

10:17.88

Scott Fulmer

and So this is like 13 years ago and I know the way DNA has is processed is constantly changing. How long did it take back then to

get the DNA results back?

10:30.38

Debbie

Under normal circumstances without any let's say political pressure or um any other sense of urgency, such as like a pending trial date, um three to six months would be normal.

10:45.97

Scott Fulmer

Right.

10:49.28

Scott Fulmer

That is, why why so long? why does it Why did it take so long? It was because they had a ah backlog?

10:58.71

Debbie

Part of it is due to backlogs everywhere, especially at the time. um And then part of it has to do with just having proper equipment that can be purchased and proper training of analysts, hiring enough analysts. So part of that is budgetary constraints as well, having enough personnel that can perform the DNA analysis as well as do tech review and administrative review for each other.

11:28.53

Debbie

and maintain accreditation in that discipline of forensic sciences.

11:34.24

Scott Fulmer

but Okay. And um I believe, didn't you also do like a bullet trajectory analysis with at the first crime scene?

11:42.25

Debbie

Yeah, I did um perhaps one to two days later, they had taken Mr. Coleman's truck and um they being Mendocino County Sheriff's Office and they had stored it at um a garage on their property and they asked me to come and do, ah you know, take a look at it to see if I found any other evidence and also to do a trajectory analysis um to see if that would give them any additional information about the possible suspect of this crime.

12:15.61

Scott Fulmer

And how do you go about doing that? I mean, is it lasers, yarn? I don't know.

12:20.61

Debbie

um You can do lasers. ah Yarn is a little bit thin, but ah you're thinking along the right lines. um Basically we have...

12:29.19

Scott Fulmer

You're the expert. Remember, not me.

12:31.19

Debbie

Well, you seem you see like you know what you're talking about as well. um We have basically what we call trajectory rods, and they're small, um thinner, basically kind of like dowels.

12:44.71

Debbie

except for they can connect to each other. They're generally plastic and then they kind of screw into one two one another ah depending on the length that you might need um bit and depending on where you're doing trajectory work. um Whenever you do bullet trajectory work, you need to have at least a pathway that contains at least two holes um so that you can feed, ah put a dowel through it to determine the directionality of the bullet If there's just one hole sticking a rod through it, um there's too much slack, and so you you can't really get any sense of directionality. However, when it's reinforced with a second hole, um you know an intermediary target perhaps, or in this case, a door of a vehicle which has many panels in it,

13:39.11

Debbie

um You can stick a rod through the interior side of the door to the exterior or vice versa, and that is enough provides enough rigidity to be able to to determine the directionality of the bullets.

13:54.34

Scott Fulmer

Was the analysis, your analysis at this first crime scene, is specifically the bullet trajectory analysis, was it was it particularly helpful at all or or no?

14:04.46

Debbie

Unfortunately, it was not. I didn't see any other types of evidence in the vehicle and they already had a good idea of where he was shooting from. So they didn't really need, um they didn't really learn anything more just knowing the directionality of the bullets.

14:22.33

Scott Fulmer

So Matthew Coleman is killed on August 11th, and initially, at that time, law enforcement thought it was a an isolated incident until something else happens. But let's take a quick break and I'll be right back.

14:42.44

Scott Fulmer

I am back with Debbie Stone-Barger, private investigator, criminalist, and owner of Analytic. Let me try that again. and I guess that word every time. Analytic, I gotta say it real fast. I'm back with Deborah, and Stonebarger is how they pronounce it, is that correct? Stonebarger?

15:02.74

Scott Fulmer

Good, I'm glad I asked. I'm back with Debbie Stonebarger, private investigator, criminalist, and the owner of Analytic Investigations, and we're talking about the manhunt that eventually ensues for Aaron Bassler. So we discussed, prior to the break, we discussed the first homicide, a second homicide occurs on August 27th, which is a couple of weeks later.

15:25.75

Scott Fulmer

And this man is a city councilman. He was the the former mayor of Fort Bragg and his name was, I think, Jerry Mello. Is that how it's pronounced?

15:35.75

Debbie

Correct.

15:36.43

Scott Fulmer

Okay. So Jerry Mello was shot and killed, ah but this time there was a witness. He he he was accompanied by a man named Ian Chaney, and Chaney was able to identify the shooter in terms of you know what he looked like, that type of thing. So with as far as the second crime scene, what kind of evidence was recovered and what did you discover after you processed the DNA from that second crime scene?

16:00.63

Debbie

ah That scene was worked by one of my colleagues who responded to that area, and what he brought back was some fired cartridge cases, ah Hershey's Kiss's rappers, interestingly enough, and another kind of unique tinfoil joint, similar to the first scene.

16:21.60

Debbie

I had swabbed both tinfoil joints and sent them away for processing ah to our laboratory that did DNA at the time since the Eureka laboratory did not. And what we found at that time was that it was the same person.

16:39.00

Debbie

at each scene. They have the same DNA profile. So we knew if we could fully identify this person, we would know who actually committed both crimes and not just the one crime where there was an eyewitness description.

16:53.70

Scott Fulmer

Now, I think the blood sample that was taken from, sorry, just a second, I apologize.

17:05.27

Scott Fulmer

oh Okay, there we go. ah I think the the blood sample taken from from ah Aaron Bassler during that DUI that happened, you know, five months prior, was that instrumental in any way and in identifying him with the is ah as the cause of the shootings as ah as a suspect?

17:24.28

Debbie

Yes, that's correct. um So once we knew that it was the same person at each scene, that the same DNA profile on those tinfoil joints from each scene, then we have the verbal description and and ah visual identification of Aaron Basler.

17:41.39

Debbie

Um, he had not been apprehended, so we didn't have a way to get a known DNA reference sample from him, uh, because he wasn't sitting in jail and he was not already in CODIS. So what we did have is we still have that blood sample from his DUI arrest, uh, a few months prior to that. And so in that case, I made the bloodstain card and sent that to our DNA laboratory.

18:08.43

Debbie

And it turns out, so that was the reference for Aaron Basler, all three profiles were the same and Aaron Basler was the person who committed both homicides.

18:19.86

Scott Fulmer

So normally, um I don't want to spoil how this ends, or I don't want to talk about how this ends yet, but normally then would you testify

in court as to what you did on similar cases?

18:30.96

Debbie

Yes.

18:32.33

Scott Fulmer

Yeah, that's pretty that's pretty ah that's excellent. I and i like ah how you did that. it's Certainly, ah your role is certainly critical for investigative work. So with this second homicide,

18:44.51

Scott Fulmer

Suddenly we have the U.S. Marshal Service and the Mendocino County Sheriff's Department and their begin a manhunt for bastard. And again, it's in this emerald forest area where everyone is trying the emerald triangle where everyone is Where it's very difficult to find people and one of their there's a couple of incidences that occur with SWAT teams and the first one The SWAT team actually exchanges fire with bastard as they run into it, but nobody was hurt this first time What and but you have a role in that as well because there's a protocol for officer-involved shootings I'm interested knowing what is the protocol and why you know, why are you involved in it?

19:24.82

Debbie

um the I'm involved in it because I am a firearms examiner as well um as other disciplines of forensic science. um And so I knew that there were fired cartridge cases, um at least that were recovered at the second scene. um And the hope would be to eventually take a look at Aaron Basler's gun to find out if he fired those.

19:53.33

Debbie

and then At the same time for any officer involved shooting, I take a look at all of the weapons involved. um I check their functionality. I do a counting of the cartridges or the bullets that are in their ah in the magazines and in any spare magazines. um And primarily, that is to help them determine, you know, make sure who fired rounds and how many rounds that they fired, as well as if a bullet is subsequently recovered, I can decide which or I can determine which gun fired it.

20:37.08

Scott Fulmer

So you can determine what weapon fired, what what specific round and and and tie that back to, you know, who who who the person was with the weapon then.

20:46.27

Debbie
Correct.

20:47.52

Scott Fulmer

All right, well, let's move ahead to October 1st. This is about 36 days later from when this in whole manhunt and this whole thing begins. So a second SWAT team is is there in the in the woods and they are kind of setting up and they began exchanging gunfire with Basler again.

21:06.97

Scott Fulmer

But what happened this time?

21:09.63

Debbie

This time the ah SWAT team was successful in hitting their target. None of the officers were were hurt. However, Aaron Bassler was killed on site.

21:23.49

Scott Fulmer

And I think that you knew, because of your role, you knew many of the law enforcement officers that were involved in this manhunt, including the the county sheriff, the Mendocino County Sheriff. I'm interested in knowing what was the the affect of these officers during and afterwards. Did they express to you how they felt about the whole situation?

21:43.08

Debbie

ah Yes, very regularly since this hunt took so long due to the terrain, um I did have contact with them for other cases or other evidence analysis or if I was in town for court. um you know the The whole town um was on edge. People were worried because the officers had as of yet had not been able to stop him.

22:13.82

Debbie

Uh, by that point, people knew that, you know, he had some mental issues. They knew he had guns with him. He had also been spotted in various cabins throughout the woods, like hunting cabins, um, and on game trails. And he'd been seen, uh, uh, with his AK 47 rifle. So people knew that in the town knew that there was this person that was eluding capture.

22:42.28

Debbie

and they knew he was armed and he was making his way around the forest

without being caught. So they were worried about more more homicides. They were worried about you know could they go to their own hunting cabin or would that be dangerous? So then of course that is the citizen citizenship of the area.

23:04.11

Debbie

that if affects law enforcement too. Obviously they've they want to do their job and they want to keep the locals safe and they don't want any more homicides or any more violence if they can if they can ah prevent it.

23:18.84

Debbie

um And they're also, after this much or even throughout the time, they're concerned, um excuse me, I'm so sorry, ah they're concerned with whether or not

23:30.74

Scott Fulmer

okay

23:34.95

Debbie

You know, are they going to have to, are they going to be able to capture him? Will they, you know, will they be, it will it end in violence? You know, another officer involved shooting. Um, and they also told me the same, um, they told me that, you know, the ones that had spotted Aaron Basler in the forest, that he basically walked uphill with, with the ease of which all these other trained officers walked downhill.

24:02.19

Scott Fulmer

Wow.

24:02.34

Debbie

So they knew it was very challenging for them ah to and they just wanted to be able to to find him and put a stop to the violence. But also the length of the challenge and the number of officers involved because ah SWAT teams from all over California came in addition to federal marshals.

24:24.24

Debbie

you know They were also amped up. I mean, there was a lot of adrenaline. you know No one knew when they when he might be seen again or when he might commit another crime. um I had been having lunch actually, I was in town for court and I had been having lunch with a

district attorney investigator and you know I was concerned for all of the law enforcement there because they were my friends. I had a i had a good relationship with them and we were talking a little bit about the case and Uh, it may sound a little cold-hearted, but I told him that I hope that the next time I get called to a scene, it's involving Aaron Bassler's death because I was, I was really concerned for the officer's safety since he had already fired upon officers. If it was going to be one or the other, I would have preferred that the suspect was taken out of the picture and that the officers and the citizens stayed safe.

25:20.20

Scott Fulmer

Oh, absolutely. He, uh, certainly did not look like one that would be, uh, uh, arrested and, and, and, you know, comply with, with the direction of the officers, obviously.

25:30.93

Scott Fulmer

Well, he's, he's eventually killed, as I said, he's killed, or as you said, he's killed by the second SWAT team.

25:31.27

Debbie

Correct.

25:38.10

Scott Fulmer

So we're not able to talk to him, but do you have, do we have any idea why, why he killed these, uh, these two men?

25:47.53

Debbie

the The theory is mostly because, well, partially due to his own ah mental illnesses, He had never had any officially diagnosed according to his family. However, he showed allegedly showed symptoms of various mental illnesses, including schizophrenia. um But basically, he was you know he was doing marijuana grows out in the forest. He also was growing some poppies to try to do you know to try to maybe get um heroin and such other drugs from from that.

26:27.26

Debbie

So, and he was doing all this in the middle of the forest with, you know, away from prying eyes. He had various bunkers set up throughout, ah in various locations throughout the forest. And so, essentially, um both of these men came upon his territory, or what he viewed as his territory, and he felt that they were a threat, and so he killed them.

26:53.80

Scott Fulmer

Well, it's and certainly one of the unfortunate aspects of this case is his mental health. And as you mentioned, he was never diagnosed. In fact, it was his father that believed he was suffering from schizophrenia. So I'm sure it may be that I'm not and I'm not a psychiatrist. I do know that the majority of schizophrenics are not dangerous and they don't then you know, they don't provide and they don't mean to harm anyone.

27:21.17

Scott Fulmer

But obviously this is, it contributed to what happened. I did want to say, if you or someone you know, this is for the listeners. If you or someone you know is having a mental health crisis, you can contact the Mental Health Hotline at 1-866-903-3787 or online at [mentalhealthhotline dot.org](http://mentalhealthhotline.org). So please call because there are people that want to help you. Well, speaking of the Emerald Triangle, like the Emerald City, you were the, you're like the great and powerful Oz behind the curtain, so to speak.

27:51.34

Scott Fulmer

with all the all the stuff that you do with ah with the DNA and whatnot. How did you feel about that? I mean, do you are you comfortable being behind the scenes or have you ever wanted to be in on the chase, so to speak?

28:05.54

Debbie

I am um quite comfortable behind the scenes in the laboratory and you know at the crime scenes as well. um I do, you know when I was somewhat younger, I i you know i found crime and mysteries um interesting, much like many of your listeners, I'm i'm certain. um However, I could never picture myself um wearing a bulletproof vest and carrying a gun and running around under those circumstances. But what I did know that I could do is use my brains and scientific training and ah start to analyze evidence so I could help those officers and ah attorneys in the justice system in general.

28:54.16

Debbie

ah pro you know prosecute the people who have committed crimes and hopefully provide exculpatory evidence in cases where they might have ah have apprehended the wrong person. I knew I could do that from behind the scenes and still have um still feel like I was really part of everything. um I did get to go to crime scenes. I did ah work with the officers and you know very regularly So that was plenty of action for me.

29:27.50

Scott Fulmer

understandable. You're a private investigator now with your own company. What do you do now? Tell us a little bit about that.

29:33.76

Debbie

ah Primarily, I am doing a subject matter expert research expert consulting in criminalistics. um And it started off with investigations, ah being a licensed investigator.

29:49.90

Debbie

so that I can you know help other investigators understand some of the forensic science aspects of their cases. um A lot of, at least in criminal cases, investigators are reviewing discovery with with their attorneys. And I knew that a lot of them, when they come across these hundreds of pages of scientific words and and data and notes that they don't really understand,

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Debbie

um I knew that they would probably A, be really bored by that or B, not really understand it or probably both. So I wanted to specifically kind of reach out and start my focus there with other investigators um because I knew that it was a limited resource and that they didn't really have access access to to experts in criminalistics.

30:51.10

Debbie

As far as I know, I'm possibly the only licensed private investigator that's a criminalistics expert and certainly in the state of Arizona.

30:59.79

Scott Fulmer

Wow.

31:00.03

Debbie

um And that has ah that has been good for me. So while technically the investigations aspect, I'm certainly capable of that. I have worked in investigations as a private investigator for actually about five years, six years now altogether. um I did work previously as a private investigator. So I do have all that experience and technically I usually work for you know the public defender or pro per clients are the ones who who end up having me appointed to their cases to review the work.

31:39.65

Debbie

But also now the investigators understand that there's someone local

that they can point their attorneys to and that they can point their clients to to help answer any questions they might have and also help them understand if the evidence that is against that they have against them is significant and how significant it is.

32:01.96

Scott Fulmer

So you work primarily for the defense then.

32:04.76

Debbie

That is correct.

32:06.48

Scott Fulmer

Well, Debbie, your work was absolutely critical in the, in the master case, that's for sure. And I want to go ahead and give you the last word. What do you take away from this, this whole experience?

32:19.97

Debbie

Um, I think then the main thing I took away from this, um, and again, I am a scientist, so I am kind of nerdy. So I just might not be super exciting, but at the time, um, what I was learning, you know, I had been, uh, helping to build the DNA database starting in the year 2000 and CODIS grew and grew and law enforcement.

32:47.90

Debbie

and ah attorney understanding, and actually public for that matter, thanks to CSI and similar shows. ah all those All those people's understandings of DNA increased during that time, and they understood the value of DNA um at that time. However, this case made me realize there was still a lot that officers didn't know about DNA, such as and appropriate samples for collection.

33:16.07

Debbie

and Um, another thing that officers, you know, didn't really understand, um, especially earlier on, they didn't understand that, uh, you need a DNA reference for comparison is basically, you know, you, you get a DNA profile from a known, uh, sample as well as an evidence sample, which is considered an unknown and you're comparing the two. It's just like fingerprints. You have to, you compare unknown fingerprints to known fingerprints.

33:44.43

Debbie

But they didn't really understand that at the time. So this case just gave me a better understanding of how officers in the field um viewed

evidence and particularly DNA evidence. They recognized the power of it, but they didn't recognize some of the limitations and what appropriate samples were at the time for them to be collecting.