

CLEANING THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

CLEANING up after a horrific crime can be a messy business, but someone has to do it.

BY ALEX J. COYNE / PIC: FOTOLIA



“WEIRD but true, I really enjoy my work,” says Petro van der Westhuizen, who is in the unusual business of cleaning up the scene of the crime. “I always wanted to be a cop.”

After Matric, she went straight to the police; she worked at a police station until 1995, and found herself working as a crime scene investigator for 18 years. “For the last six years, I was the commander of the Forensic Office in Paarl, but I hated not being able to be on crime scenes.”



Her love for working the beat saw her resign from the SAPS and start Crime Scene Solutions, her own double-barrel venture cleaning crime scenes and doing private investigations. Experience has served her well. "I take pride in my work delivering a service to others who do not need to be traumatised."

Petro says there are no clear-cut rules about cleaning crime-scenes in South Africa, barring Health and Environmental laws.

"Other countries do require certification, and I did my training through an American company just to be on the safe side."

Most of their job requests come from family members, health and safety officers and trauma counsellors at suicide scenes. "We are not fussy, and I tell everyone, 'if you can't find anyone to clean it up online, we'll usually do it.'" Weird requests have included everything from sewage spills in apartment blocks to babies throwing a soiled diaper in the house; of course, drunken party clean-ups, too. "You name it, we've probably done it."

On the crime scene, they are the last people to arrive. "Everything has to be done in regards to the investigation of the police on the scene first.

Sometimes we get calls while the body is still on the scene and have to jump in cleaning as soon as it's removed."

The job is a 24-hour on-call position, especially when you're dealing with public places with a lot of tourist presence.

Petro says there are no average days, though everything is usually fast-paced from the first call. "I try to keep a one-hour reaction time. Once on the scene, I assess first, provide a quote, and if they accept, we dive in."

The space that made her think 'how in the world am I going to do this?' came in the form of a long sewage pipe shaft at an apartment building. "Starting from the top, a space about 60cm by 60cm; we had to hang in there with brushes and chemicals, going down floor by floor while cleaning around you – it's a good thing we stay in shape!"

The weirdest *object* to clean so far has been a dog. "It's still alive, but wow, it's tricky to get them to stand still... And

she admits that you do what you have to do, but some things are just worse than others. "I will clean up bodily fluids, bodily fats, maggots, you name it; but I am absolutely not fond of sewage. I have a thing about old food, too. I would rather pick up someone's blood before I clean a fridge. A fridge is so much worse than blood and goo."

A strong mind and stomach are essential for the job, and

Petro says those who can't handle strong smells should

steer clear. "I've photographed hundreds of scenes in my career for the police, but it's different if you have to pick up what's left after the body is removed. You have to distance yourself

from the deceased and traumatised family, otherwise

you will go bonkers. When my workers and I are alone and cleaning, we start chatting about everyday things. Talking about what you are doing and how it is while you're taking a break is good." Petro says the team has developed a unique sense of humour, but it's what helps keep them sane. "It helps, so we can do our work properly."

Then, there's the crime scene 'mascot' named Teddels that travels everywhere with the team – a huge, brown teddy-bear brandishing a T-shirt warning people of a clean-up in progress.

"I try to leave a teddy bear on a scene as well, especially if a close family

member was affected badly or kids are close to the victim. It helps us and them to do our jobs."

How do they de-stress? "I usually come home and ask the husband to pour me a whisky. I have hobbies like painting, but a good plate of food and a whisky after a shower usually do the trick. Then you just need a bed."

When hunger kicks in on the job, they thank their lucky stars for garages with 24-hour food stops.

"Work satisfaction is all in seeing the relief on a client's face when the job is done and the space has been purified. "We just have a slightly dirtier and riskier job than the average person. I am still passionate about my job. If you love what you do, you do not have a job; you get paid to do what you love."



Petro van der Westhuizen

'SOMETIMES we get calls while the body is still on the scene and have to jump in cleaning as soon as it's removed.'

Verdict

BY WALTON GOLIGHTLY

DEATH OF A MYSTIC

ONE of the oldest and most brutal cold cases in Detroit history remains unsolved.

On the evening of July 3, 1929, Benny Evangelist, 43, and his family were brutally murdered in their home on St Aubin Street in Detroit. Armed with an axe, the killer butchered Benny's wife, Satin, and their children.

Mario, 18 months old, was found lying across his mother's chest. Angeline, seven, and Margaret, five, were found in their beds, their skulls smashed in and one of the girl's arms almost cut off at the elbow, according to a contemporary newspaper account.

Benny himself was nearly decapitated in his study – although a report at the time claims his head was found on a chair 'in a tableau reminiscent of the stories of St John the Baptist'.

Benjamin Evangelista had changed his name upon arriving in the US in 1904 aged 19. Two years later, he began receiving 'visions' from 'God'. Declaring himself a divine prophet, spiritual leader and mystical healer, he began writing what would turn out to be a four-volume book entitled *The Oldest History Of The World: Discovered By Occult Science*.

Since Benny could barely speak English at the time, it's a difficult read. An extract: "My story is from my own views and signs, that I see from 00h00 to 03h00. I began on February 2, 1906 in Philadelphia, and it was completed on February 2, 1926, in the city of Detroit. On this new earth the last one was created by God the Father Celestial and the great prophet Miel. We call it today the great Union Federation of America. I am with the power of God and I respect this Nation."

Evangelist built a strange apparatus in his basement that included nearly a dozen wax figures depicting various 'celestial planets', as well as a huge 'eye' that was lit up from the inside. The device served as an altar for Evangelist's sermons, and featured prominently in his healing rituals. Benny charged for each 'healing', which earned him a fair sum of money – and perhaps more than a few enemies.

A few days after the killings, Inspector Fred Frahm of the homicide squad received a letter signed 'The Murderer'. It directed the police to a house where the writer claimed the axe used in the murders could be found. A thorough search failed to turn up the weapon and Frahm, probably rightly, decided the letter had been a hoax.

Over the years, multiple theories have surfaced that attempt to explain the Benny Evangelist murder mystery. Some believe an angry client, milked of their money by the Evangelist's rituals, carried out the killings. Others suspect a disgruntled cult member did the deed, or members of a rival congregation anxious to silence Evangelist's teachings. Others still believe the deadly act was the work of a random killer. Perhaps a violent man passed through the area, and had heard about a spiritual leader named Evangelist with several hundred dollars in cash on hand, they say.

Yet Benny's day job as a carpenter might provide the best clue as to what happened to his family that gruesome night in July. The day before, Evangelist had called upon the watchman of a house being torn down. He said he had purchased all salvageable lumber from the wrecking company, and had arranged for the wood to be picked up and delivered to his home the following day. Evangelist said he would meet the truck there the next morning to pay the deliverymen. However, nobody showed up.

"It's obvious why Evangelist was a no-show," notes one crime writer, "He and his entire family had been slaughtered. By how did the deliverymen know not to arrive?" Benny would have had a sum of cash on hand to pay them, yet none was found in the house after the murders.

This set Frahm and his team on the trail of the men Benny had hired. Or rather, they thought it was a lead worth pursuing – but, frustratingly, the name of the delivery company was never recorded. And one of the oldest and most brutal cold cases in Detroit history remains unsolved. A copy of Benny's book can be downloaded for free from www.globalgreyebooks.com.