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Laura Graham '07

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Crime lab brings focus to career

With a flash of her ID badge, Rebecca Price '05 entered the Arizona lab to help process rape kits, examine portable alcohol tests and analyze the print on confiscated documents.

This was not an episode of "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation." It was a typical summer day for Price during her internship at the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

Interest in the sciences seems to run in Price's family. Her mother has taught science for 25 years, her father is the senior mechanical engineer at Palo Verde Nuclear Power Station, one brother works for the Department of Neuroscience Medical Biology, and another is a research engineer for an embedded system software company.

Her interest in forensics, using science and technology to establish facts for criminal or civil court cases, was piqued during her senior year of high school as the field became more popular.

At Linfield, biology Professor Michael Roberts became her guide. With his background in forensics, he explored the subject in-depth with her, enhancing her fascination.

"Becky has always been an able and hard worker," Roberts said. "She was always eager to learn about forensic biology."

But after three years of study, Price, a chemistry and biology double major, was unsure of her career direction.

"I knew I was interested in forensics," she said. "But it was difficult to figure out what different career fields I wanted to go into."

A tour of the state public safety offices in her hometown of Phoenix helped her focus.

"The tour guide was impressed that I knew about the various instruments," Price said. "He told me about the internships offered by AZDPS and recommended that I apply."

There she learned about the specialties of each section in the lab, including DNA, toxicology, blood and breath alcohol tests, latent fingerprints, questionable documents and controlled substances.

"In each lab as you showed understanding or interest, the technicians would let you be responsible for more and more tasks," Price said.

The internship gave her some career direction and a start on a major research project analyzing alterations in the printer toner of forged documents.

The current process destroys the suspicious document, eliminating key evidence in a criminal or civil trial. Price investigated an alternative method, which uses a beam of radiation to examine differences in composition of various printer toners and keeps the document intact. She collected data for the project at AZDPS and continued her analysis at Linfield last fall. Price presented her findings at an Oregon Academy of Sciences conference, the American Chemical Society national convention and at a Linfield poster session.

"My internship brought together all the different classes I took at Linfield," Price said. "I saw how instruments could be applied for real-life uses, not just for classroom assignments."

"Internships are a great benefit to students because of the direct contact with professionals in the field," Roberts said. "In Becky's case the internship was a great fit, and her experience encouraged her to pursue a career in forensic sciences."

Price, now planning to pursue a doctorate in biology at Northern Arizona University, said, "Forensics gives me the opportunity to help solve cases and maybe help a family or victim gain closure."

— Laura Graham '07

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Michael Roberts, professor of biology, and Rebecca Price '05 in the laboratory at Linfield