



News Bureau

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News Release

March 20, 2009

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DNA lab at NMSU can dramatically reduce wait time for evidence to weeks or less

It's not uncommon for a crowded state crime lab to take a year or more to process evidence from crime scene, but now that process can be reduced to just weeks or less with the help of The Forensic Testing Laboratory at New Mexico State University.

"People have been conditioned to think a backlog of cases means it can take up to a year for results. We don't have a backlog here," said Stefan A. Long, general manager of FTL. "We can basically take DNA from a cold case, and in about an hour we can have a result telling us the ethnic profile. Identifying people through DNA would take us about a week or two."

"Right now, because of what we are able to do in this lab, people don't think we are real," said Jack Ellis, vice president for FTL. "We have a lot of very qualified people who have stuck their neck out and taken us to the next level."

FTL is part of a group of DNA and forensic testing businesses spun off from NMSU in 2005 and still partially owned by the university. In addition to FTL, the group also consists of The Genetics Testing Laboratories, The Clinical Testing Laboratories and Fire and Crime Scene Advanced Continuing Education. Each operation is housed at NMSU's Arrowhead Genesis Center.

FTL is fully accredited to handle criminal evidence and has already helped the Las Cruces Police Department and the Dona Ana County Sheriff's Office with cases, including the Katie Sepich murder investigation. Sepich was a former NMSU student killed in 2003. Her case was solved in 2007 with the help of DNA evidence.

"People want closure," Long said. "People don't want to wait for a year to have their loved ones identified or find out what happened to them."

Long said using DNA evidence to profile the ethnicity of a criminal allows investigators to set aside large portions of possible suspects, saving time and resources.

FTL is one of only nine full-service forensic testing labs in the nation. The lab can use mitochondrial testing to test a single strand of hair, bones or even cremated bone dust. They have advanced testing that can help with a rape investigation up to 18 hours after an attack. They have successfully taken human DNA from tobacco spit. Their forensic scientists guest lecture in NMSU criminal justice courses and teach DNA testing techniques to law enforcement.

Both Ellis and Long credit Garrey Carruthers, NMSU's vice president for economic development for helping with their company's success.

"These are good-paying, high-tech jobs that we offer. We're keeping jobs and money in the state. There is no reason FTL can't grow from three jobs now to 30 jobs, plus student employment, in the next year. Another 30 to 60 jobs in the coming years are very realistic," Long said.