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CSI: Stockton — 'Murder in the Pines'

Students investigate, try case at week-long Crime Scene Investigation camp on the college campus

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GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP

— The woods surrounding Richard Stockton College of New Jersey offer an ideal setting for a murder ... camp.

Twenty-five high school students invaded those woods this week for CSI: Stockton, a week-long investigation into a student "murder" that took the campers through the State Police crime van, the county Medical Examiner's Office, the county jail, and finally, on Thursday, to trial.

The case involved the "murder" of a female student, who was found stabbed and stran-

gled in a wooded area on campus. The victim, Michelle, was played by a State Police dummy.

"The State Police brought their crime scene van in and showed us what they do," said Stockton criminal justice professor Christine Tartaro, who, with professor Josh Duntley, organized the camp. Students spent the next two days taking field trips, reviewing the evidence, interviewing witnesses and suspects, and finally deciding to charge student Amy Katz (played by Katz) with the murder. Her motive? Jealousy. Her

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Sarah Louz, left, Amy Katz and Michelle LeFaucheur take part in the courtroom portion of the mock murder case staged this week for high school students taking part in a camp at Stockton.

Staff photo
by Edward Lea

CSI

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fiancee, Zach Robertson (played by Robertson) had admitted an affair with the victim.

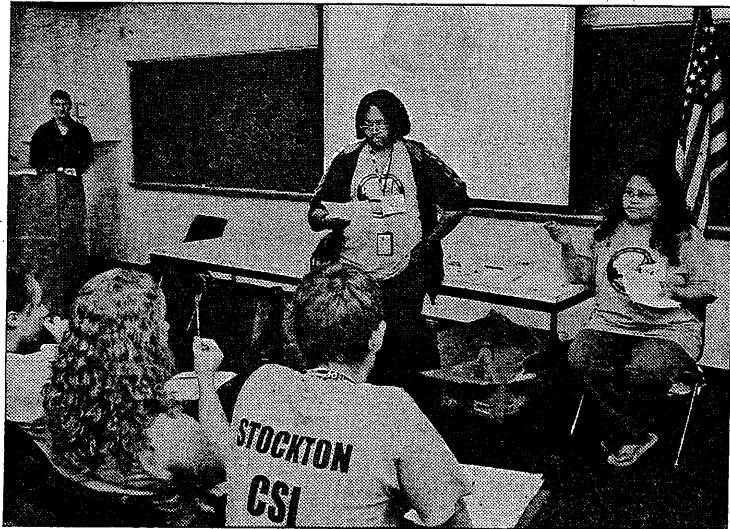
The campers were divided into prosecution and defense teams, with experts to explain how the forensic evidence had been gathered and examined.

The evidence was a bit contradictory. Amy's fingerprints were found on a knife at the scene and her and Michelle's blood were found on a T-shirt. But Zach's DNA was found under Michelle's fingernails, and his prints also were on the knife. Students played the role of fingerprint and blood experts, explaining how they had obtained and analyzed their evidence.

In a surprise twist, the defense brought in camper Sarah Louz, of Atlantic City, as a forensic anthropologist who testified that Amy was not big or strong enough to have strangled Michelle and broken a bone in her neck. The prosecution vehemently objected, saying they had not been informed of this expert, and the defense later admitted they planned the surprise. Louz credits her Atlantic City High School anatomy class with giving her the idea for the defense.

"The evidence we were given seemed to make it obvious that Amy did it," said student defense attorney Rhett Williamson, of Egg Harbor Township.

"We needed something that would show doubt," Evan



Staff photo by Edward Lea

Sarah Justus, left, and Sarah Louz take part in Thursday's mock trial at Stockton.

Horvath, of Absecon, said.

The jury came back with a guilty verdict on manslaughter, saying that even if Amy had not done the strangling, they believed she had done the stabbing and participated in the murder.

Juror Nick Sena, a Stockton student, said they were very impressed with the campers' passion.

"You could see both sides really believed their case," he said. "And I'm a little afraid of the prosecution. Any flaw in the defense, they just jumped on it."

The trial ended with a video of the "murder," which will not be revealed in case the staff wants to use the case again. Let's just say, there's a surprise twist.

Students interviewed during deliberations said the week was a valuable and very fun peek into an area they are considering as a career. Saymara

Nieves, of Atlantic City, called it "the best experience I've ever had." A few asked if they could sign up for the second week.

"I've been interested in the forensics," Williamson said. "Now I'm interested in the law, too."

For Sarah Justus, of Marlboro, the daughter of a prosecutor, serving on the defense team showed her the other side of the law.

"I used to think of defense attorneys as evil," she said. "But this showed me how you have to look at all the different angles."

Stockton will offer a second week of CSI camp for high school students from July 8-12. The cost is \$879 and includes room and board on campus. Information is available online at www.stockton.edu or by calling (609) 652-4559.

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