



Have you seen this woman?

By Debra Filcman

GHS

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Needham — Officer Jack Skinner holds up a piece of paper, with a large oval drawn in pencil.

"This is a re-creation of my first composite," Skinner said, laughing.

Skinner, a patrolman with the Concord Police Department and police sketch artist, explained obtaining accurate eyewitness accounts can be difficult.

"The first thing you ask them is if they'd be able to recognize the perp if they saw him again," Skinner said. "And they'll say, 'yeah,' but then you start asking them for more information and they just don't know. It's hard."

Working on his first composite 10 years ago, the witness remembered just that one detail: The perpetrator had an oval face. But when pressed for greater information, the witness floundered.

Skinner also asks during each interview about the eyes, eyebrows, nose, cheekbones, mouth, chin and hair. He uses an FBI booklet, which provides a variety of real faces with sample features. The photos, with everything blacked out except the feature in question, come from criminals' mug shots and FBI employees.

Skinner, a rare find in Massachusetts police departments, is regularly asked to assist in other departments, including Needham. Just weeks ago, Skinner produced composites, according to eyewitness accounts, of the two armed robbers in Needham Heights.

A few years back, Skinner also assisted the Needham Police Department in nailing the "Hamburglar" who strayed from his McDonald's hold-ups and ventured into a Blockbuster.

"We knew about him," Needham Detective Phil Droney said. "He has a great reputation. Sometimes, you find the guy and his drawing looks like a photograph."

Typically, Droney said, the department uses a computer program to compose a sketch of the perpetrators.

"But we have to pick certain configurations, it doesn't allow us free rein," Droney said.

And that's when the department calls over to Concord, based on Skinner's reputation, and asks his boss, Chief Leonard Wetherbee, for a favor.

"His chief is very good about lending him out," Droney said. "It's such a rare skill."

For Needham's most recent case, Skinner spent more than five hours interviewing witnesses and drawing the composite, Droney said.

On average, he takes between two and three hours per sketch, he said, down from the minimum of four hours it took him years ago.

"I've gotten quicker," he said. "But I'm only as good as the witness."

A 34-year veteran of the department, Skinner graduated from nearby Watertown High School.

"I took art in school and went to the DeCordova Museum on Sundays," Skinner said.

But after high school, two equally appealing options faced him: the criminal justice program at Northeastern University; or the fine arts program at Boston College.

Instead of following his artistic side, Skinner graduated from Northeastern and proceeded directly to the Concord Police Department as a patrolman in 1972, where he's been ever since.

But he dabbled in oil paints, acrylics, even charcoals, continuing to indulge his creativity. He preferred land and seascapes to portraiture, calling it "freeing."

At work, his fellow officers called him the "unofficial department cartoonist," Skinner said, though not everyone appreciated his artistic slant on the department's behind-the-scenes shenanigans.

And it may have taken a few decades, but in 1996, the police department finally found an outlet for his pencil strokes. They sent him to the Stuart Parks Institute for Forensic Art, a school based in Idaho, but with classes in Nashua, N.H.

There, he learned not only about drawing, but also about interview techniques.

"I would never wear my uniform when I interviewed a witness. Sometimes I don't even say I'm a police officer, I'm just the artist," Skinner said. "Then they'd get nervous and say, 'Yes, officer' or 'No, officer.' It's all about making them feel

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In 2000, Skinner applied to three-week FBI forensic art program in Quantico, Va., to sharpen his skills with the pencil. To gain admittance, he had to send in a portfolio of his composite sketches to date, as well as pieces completed on the side.

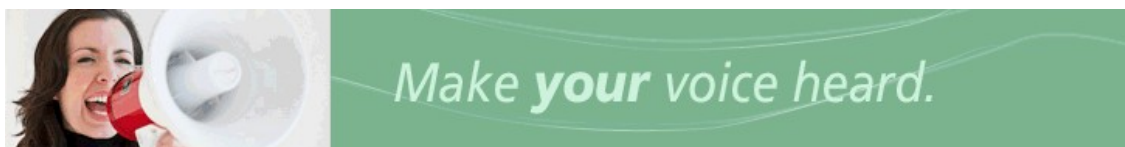
To date, Skinner has produced sketches for 40 different departments because of that reputation, totaling about 280 drawings.

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