

## CSI: Westhampton

Hampshire Regional students go high-tech on trail of 'perpetrator'

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer



CAROL LOLLIS

*Ashley Hagelstein, 16, swabs a water bottle for cells containing DNA, part of a Hampshire Regional High School genetics class taught by Shelley Seymour.*

[Originally published on Saturday, May 24, 2008 ]

WESTHAMPTON - Hampshire Regional High School juniors and seniors did not expect to face a whodunit when they took their seats in Shelley Seymour's Genetics and Biotechnology class Thursday.

Yet there they were facing a crime scene (OK, so it was a mock crime), but nonetheless solving it required some thought and diligence. Someone had stolen the senior class records between 6:11 and 6:18 that morning, they were told. And, using what they learned in the course's forensics unit - as well as tools recently purchased through a grant - it fell to the students to find out who.

The records, which prove seniors have met all district and state graduation requirements, must be given to the Department of Education for diplomas to be valid.

"Without this important paperwork, seniors will not graduate and juniors will not be promoted," Seymour said to her students. Time was of the essence, after all, since some students would be graduating in a couple of weeks.

She added that the crime scene was left untouched for examination by the students, according to proper police protocol. Students bearing "Hampshire Regional Bureau of Investigation, U.S.

Department of Justice" badges then headed to the scene of the crime, a conference room where the files were once stored.

When students got there they found two filing cabinet drawers open and a chair on its side, evidence that they photographed.

Wearing gloves, the students took fingerprint samples off of the doorknobs and cabinet drawers. They also took a hair sample that was found in the cabinet. There was even a strand of hair that didn't belong to the culprit, but someone else who had handled the files before the crime.

"It's pretty fun finding the clues and trying to connect it to the perpetrator," said Nick Fisher, 17, a junior at the high school.

The theft occurred before the start of the school day, putting teachers who have access to the building's alarm code on the "persons of interest" list.

The students' job was to narrow that list to a suspect base through questions and, if a solid alibi wasn't given, collect DNA in cheek swabs, fingerprints and hair follicles.

In groups of three, the students searched the building to question English teachers Kim Lech and Mike Braidman, foreign language teacher Michele Higgins, art teacher Karen Tetrault, math teacher Matthew Geertsma and science teacher Thomas Smith.

"Instead of just going through a lab protocol that almost just tests their ability to follow directions, this gives them the opportunity to work in teams and apply stuff they learned," Seymour said. "Part of it is just for fun - it involves teachers from across the school."

Charlotte Turner, Karissa Gorman and Derek Luong, all 17, walked into Smith's class room and asked him what he was doing around 6:15 that morning. "Checking soccer scores," Smith said.

"Isn't that a little early?" asked Gorman, who later said she believed Smith's motive to steal the records is because he "loves his seniors so much" and wouldn't want them to leave.

"No," Smith replied.

"Would you mind if I took a DNA swab?" Gorman asked.

Smith agreed, but then he "lawyered up," as they say on the crime shows. "I'm not going to answer any more questions until I hear from my lawyer," said Smith.

Students heard a range of alibis. Tetrault said she was feeding her llamas, while Lech said she was feeding her son and Geertsma claimed to be riding his bike.

Some teachers were cooperative, like Braidman, who gave his fingerprints, hair sample and cheek swab. Others were less so. Geertsma said "this is borderline harassment" when students collected his DNA from his hat and water bottle.

Students took the samples back to the lab, where they used micropipettes to load the DNA for analysis. The micropipettes, which were purchased through a grant from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts, cost about \$100 each. On Friday students continued to examine their evidence by running the DNA through gel electrophoresis. It takes about five minutes to load the gel, and about an hour for the current to run through the electrophoresis chamber. The gel is then stained and de-stained for another hour or so, before the DNA can be amplified and separated.

On Tuesday - the seniors' last day at HRHS - students will be able to see the bands in the gels and determine if any suspect's DNA matches that which was found at the crime scene. Once the evidence is put together, students hope to obtain an arrest warrant for one of the suspects.

"Doing this is wicked cool ... it's fun, it's different, it's active learning," Molly Clifford, 16, said Thursday as she loaded a DNA sample using a micropipette.