

Technocops learn how to dig for cell-phone clues

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By Tom Quigley
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WASHINGTON TWP. | You can delete but you cannot hide.

Crime investigators intent on digging for digital evidence gathered for their final day of classes Thursday at Warren County Community College.

The subject: ferreting out text messages, illicit photographs and call records residing deep inside those tiny "computers" called cellular phones.

It's a byte-by-byte process and investigators are learning about such things as "nibble switches," codes, and just plain rooting through a cellular hard drive to find its hidden secrets.

"We are teaching the basics of cell phone technology," said Randy Becker, an instructor with Warrington, Pa.-based BK Forensics.

It's a tedious task evidenced by the occasional groans from some of Becker's 21 students.

The text-seeking techno-cops include investigators from throughout Warren and Hunterdon counties, state police investigators from New Jersey and Pennsylvania and even an investigator from the distant East Whiteland Township Police Department in Chester County, Pa.

Becker said investigators are learning how to collect the evidence from cell phones using methods designed to ensure its admissibility in a court of law. Private investigators also take the classes to hone their skills at detecting things like corporate espionage.

"The ultimate goal is to make them better witnesses in criminal or civil court," Becker said. "A successful prosecution." The driving force behind bringing the federally-funded program to Warren County is Washington Borough Police Department Detective Wendell Whitmore.

"It's not easy," Whitmore said of the grueling three-day program. "It's very tedious work and a lot of information to absorb in three days."

Whitmore said the skills learned will help investigators solve crimes.

Criminals who delete text messages, photographs and phone numbers from a cell phone may think they've completely removed it from the phone's hard drive, Becker said.

Not so. He said just like a desktop computer, deleted items remain on the drive and there are ways to find them.

Child pornography, text messages between criminal conspirators and incoming and outgoing phone numbers are all right there on the hard drive, Becker said. Voice messages are not kept on the drive, he added.

Lopatcong Township Police Department Detective Michael Patricia attended the classes. Patricia's penchant for high-tech crime-solving techniques drew headlines when he twice solved crimes using DNA evidence he collected at the scene.

"Computer forensics has been around for awhile," Patricia said. "Cell phone forensics is just starting."

Reporter Tom Quigley can be reached at 908-475-8184 or by e-mail at tquigley@express-times.com.