

Fraud Buster

How local handwriting expert exposed forged murder witness statement

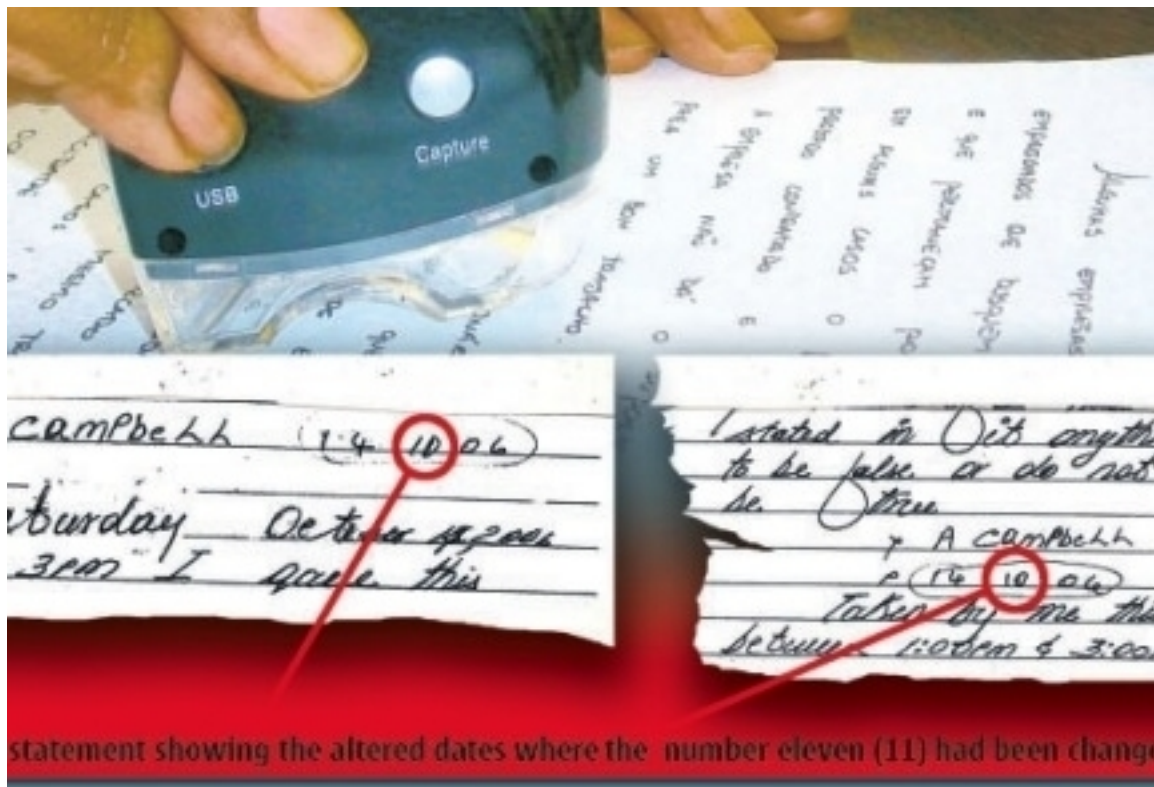
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LITERALLY with the stroke of a pen, a high-profile murder case involving the alleged leader of the notorious Stone Crusher gang was reduced to tatters two weeks ago when handwriting analysis by forensic document examiner and master graphologist Beverly East, proved that a dead eyewitness' statement was fake.

The eight-page statement was purported to have been written by Detective Sergeant Michael Sirjue — a man with 26-years' experience in the police force under his belt — who is now on the run, having fled the island after the fraud came to light in court.



statement showing the altered dates where the number eleven (11) had been changed

Sirjue had testified under oath that the eyewitness, Artley Campbell — who, on September 10, 2006 reportedly saw his friend Robert Green of Salt Spring, St James being killed — was himself murdered on December 16.

But the defence played their trump card — a report from East, whom they had hired — that showed the statement was a forgery.

East's report said that the writer of the statement (Sirjue) was the same person who signed Campbell's name to it. Not only had signatures been forged, but dates had been changed. The prosecution's expert concurred with East's report.

The story that eventually emerged was one that would have been the basis of a complex and gripping big-screen murder mystery, or an episode of CSI.

It is now believed that Sirjue's determination to get his murder suspects — Eldon Calvert, the reputed head of the deadly Stone Crusher gang, his brother Gleason Calvert, and Michael Heron — may have overtaken his sworn duty to uphold the law. Evidence provided by East showed the detective wrote and signed the statement fingering the three on November 14, 2006, a day after Campbell, his sole eyewitness, was killed.

But Sirjue didn't count on East's forensic examination of the handwriting which showed that the date on the forged statement had been altered to read as though it were written a full month earlier, on October 14, 2006.

The pen strokes changing the date 14.11.06, to 14.10.06, might not have set off any alarms for the average eye, but it jumped out at East, who quickly pinpointed the discrepancies, including where the number '11' had been rounded out to look like '10'.

The lawyer for the defence, hearing of work she had done for a colleague, had shown her the statement and had only one question at first — had the documents been altered?

"I was able to validate that it was altered," East told the Sunday Observer. "Then a couple days later it was still on my (computer) screen. You know, I had scanned it and enlarged it on my screen. He (the lawyer) wanted me to look at the signature on the statement. I asked him for a signature to make a comparison."

She needed this sample signature so if she was called up in court to defend her findings, she would have a solid illustration to prove her case. East had a 'Eureka!' moment when she got the sample.

"I noted the letter 'L' in the name Campbell, the signature. Then I looked up at the screen and I saw the same formation of the 'L' throughout the body of the statement," she explained.

This, she said, was an indicator that the same person had written and signed the document.

"Handwriting is very subconscious behaviour, so even when a forger is trying to forge, he thinks he is following the procedure to trace the document or copy the document, but when you sign your own name it becomes so fluid, because you learnt to write your name when you were three or four years old, so it becomes just an automatic motion for you. There are stops and starts that become your own individual pattern for your signature."

She said every signature has a master pattern, which is what the highly trained forensic examiner looks for when presented with a document. This pattern is as individual as DNA.

"Sometimes, someone can copy the signature exactly, but the pressure on the pen may be different," said East in an interview, adding that even though she was reading it upside down from across the table, she could tell by my own handwriting that I am a gentle person, as indicated by how lightly I pressed pen to paper as I took notes.

"Every time your heart beats, your signature shifts based your heartbeat. So when someone is trying to forge your name, they don't have the same heartbeat. So although they can forge the letter formations or think they understand, they are not going to pause in the same places you pause," she said. "And the quickest way to know if a signature is forged is if it looks the same, because you can never get your signature to look the same. So what we look for is consistency. If you write your signature three times, they won't be the same, but the pauses will be in the same place."

In the so-called eyewitness statement, the purposeful pattern of Campbell's faked signature was repeated with uncanny similarity on every page and, too, there were the same changes to the dates on each page. All of these were red flags for the graphologist, who showed the Sunday Observer how the 'L' in Campbell's name appeared as the result of intense practice.

"The person in question felt that all they needed to do was to change the dates and everything criss," she said, slipping into the vernacular.

The shockwaves that were triggered by East's revelation reverberated through the court system, with the accused in the murder case being acquitted.

So grave was the accused cop's actions, that Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) Paula Llewellyn had no choice but to discontinue prosecution of the men, "in the interest of justice".

However, only Gleason Calvert was released, as Eldon Calvert and Heron are facing other murder charges.

Llewellyn also recommended to Commissioner of Police Owen Ellington that charges of attempting to pervert the course of justice and uttering a forged document be slapped on the detective.

This isn't the first time that East — the only qualified black female graphologist of her ilk in the world — has been called on to use her rare skill and training in criminal cases. Discovering meaning hidden in the nuances of simple handwriting is her life's passion.

"I love the work I do," she said. "Every case is totally different; no two cases are the same."

Offering definitions of what she does, East said Graphology is the analysis of handwriting, while forensic document examination is about handwriting comparison. It's not as simple as it looks.

There are 21 different things she has to look at when examining a document, she said.

She pulled out her mobile laboratory which consisted of, among other things, a UV (ultraviolet light) and a powerful digital microscope that she plugged into her computer. This microscope magnifies handwriting up to 140 times. Her tools can show the slightest indicator of forgery, including perforations, scratches, indentations and eraser fluid.

East, who also has offices in London and Washington, DC, noted that her services are more in demand than ever across the world, but assisting in court cases in her native Jamaica keeps her busy.

"I've become a better handwriting expert since I've been practising in Jamaica," East said with a chuckle. "Because we are good! Even when we are bad, we are very good."

"The work I do in America is very cut and dry. Here in Jamaica the components of it are many; there are so many extra layers."

"Most of the work here is land, transfers, wills... land transfers, wills..." she repeats.

"When a person dies, two wills appear," she adds. The tinge of humour in her voice seems an acknowledgement that Jamaica is a country where suspicion of the authenticity of a person's last will and testament is often a source of familial rancour, violence and even murder.

"Sometimes, with the land transfers, the person is living overseas and someone will go to the land register, they change things on the document and when the person comes home, they find that the document has been altered and someone else's name is on it. That happens quite a lot."

Technology, and the invention of the 'cut and paste' computer feature have made it easier for the forger, she also noted.

"There is a lot of cut and paste now, people take things off the Internet and cut and paste it. I was working on a case the other day, in which the signature was clearly the man's signature. But then there was a part where, on close examination, you could see more things. Maybe one minuscule thing wasn't matched up correctly, and under the writing, the font wasn't matched up with the rest of the document. The signature had been cut and pasted," she explained.

The case involving Sirjue was difficult for East, since she is in the process of training police officers in handwriting decryption for the new Forensic Document Examination Division. She said, proudly, that in a matter of months, the JCF will have its own analysts whose skills will enhance the investigative and case-building capacity of the force. They will eventually take the places of the only other two trained graphologists in the island, besides herself. One of them is a retired former cop, while the other will retire from the JCF shortly.

As emotionally conflicting as this case was for her, East has had to give her expert opinion in gut-wrenching cases involving divorces and wills. She told the Sunday Observer that it is critical that she remains objective in the most trying scenarios, which wasn't easy for her when she first started in the business.

She said she used to sit and cry when she saw people's cruelty unfold in front of her as she analysed a document.

"People are being devious, deceitful. I mean, it takes so much effort to sit down and recreate (forge) something. You see this divide in one family," she lamented.

"I had a lady that was gonna lose everything she had. She wasn't married to this man she was with and his family was going to push her out of the house after he died. They changed everything. She didn't have any money. We sat down and worked out a plan where she made monthly payments to me. She won her case in court and I never once had to call her about the money. It was in my bank account every month," said East.

In another case, a man died and left everything to his second wife, excluding his children from a previous marriage. That family refused to believe the man had been so cruel and, convinced that the second wife had altered a document, they called in East.

"It was his signature, it was his signature," she mused.

In another case, a woman mysteriously got a lot of money from her dying employer. In the end, East found she had been forging her boss's signature for some time.

She said she has now learned to separate herself from the work emotionally, although it still disturbs her when she has to decrypt ransom notes, especially in cases involving children.

The master graphologist, who owns the handwriting-analysis firm Strokes and Slants, has decrypted for governments and Fortune 500 corporations. East has also practised the science of Forensic Document Examination for 23 years. Most of her clientele ask for verification of the authenticity of signatures and comments for fraud and malpractice in relation to cheques, wills, contracts and medical records.

But the demand has increased lately for her skills in personality profiling through handwriting as employers search for honest and competent employees.

"Right now, I am working for a company [that] all they want to know is, is the employee honest?" East said she can study a few hand-written words on a page and figure out key aspects of the writers' personalities. Over 56 per cent of corporations in Europe use Graphology as part of their recruitment process.

East is no stranger to the international talk circuit, having made guest appearances at the House of Commons in London, the World Bank, and at conferences. Major television networks have showcased her work, including ABC-TV (on Good Morning America), MSNBC and the BBC. She has been interviewed by the Washington Post, HR Magazine, Gold Digest, among others. She holds a communications degree, a Masters in Graphology and is author of the best-seller Finding Mr Write - A New Slant on Selecting the Perfect Mate and Reaper of Souls, about the 1957 Kendal crash.

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