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# Cool job: forensic entomologist cracks the case



*by Kenya McCullum | June 25, 2012*

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When Adrienne Brundage first learned about entomologists in preschool, she came home and announced to her mother that this was what she wanted to be when she grew up. When her mother asked what that meant, Brundage declared "I can play with bugs for the rest of my life."

Now, as a forensic entomologist, she gets to combine her love of bugs with her love of mysteries -- and use

her knowledge of the insect world to help solve crimes.

### **What kind of cases do you generally work on?**

These are usually decomposition cases. My expertise comes in when the medical examiner's bag of tricks is empty. I come in when most of the physiological things that the medical examiner looks for -- like body temperature, rigor mortis and potassium levels in the eyes -- have equalized.

After somebody's been dead for more than four or five days, and everything has equalized, the insects are the next step because they are feeding directly on the body. I look at the age of the insects on the body, and assuming that the insects showed up right after death, the age of the insects is going to equal how long that person has been dead.

### **Do you ever see any weird, "Silence of the Lambs" type stuff?**

I've never had an inserted pupal casing in the back of the throat or anything like that, but that would be amazing!

Every case is unique, which makes it very interesting. I've had cases where I got to tell where the person was killed based on the maggot mass and this was interesting because the maggot mass wasn't actually on the body -- it had dug down underneath and was feeding on the drippings from the body since it was so hot out.

I had a case where somebody was asking if a cockroach was feeding on a body because this person was pretty mangled and, as I found out afterwards, the suspect was in a lot of trouble for post-mortem mangling of the body. When cockroaches feed on a body, it looks like burn marks, so people may have died of natural causes, but it looks like they've been burned with cigarettes all over their body. Insects do a lot of damage; they do a lot of interesting stuff.

### **Do you testify in court a lot?**

Not very often. Usually, they'll get to the point where somebody pleads out.

Testifying is a really high-pressure situation because as an expert witness, you're for one side or the other -- and one side is going to try to discredit you, while the other side is going to try and build you up.

### **Do forensic entomologists learn how to testify when they're in school?**

Not really. One of the issues that forensic programs have is that they're training expert witnesses, but not really teaching them how to testify.

Court is a very interesting environment because it's very theatrical. You're trying to impress a jury, you're trying to impress a judge, and you're trying to make it sound like you know what you're talking about without talking over people's heads. It's a particular set of skills, so you get a little of that in school when you give scientific presentations in front of a class.

### **In your own career, how did you become accustomed to giving testimony?**

I minored in theater. There's nothing that prepares you for court like taking theater courses. That's really what

testifying is. As sad as that sounds, court really is theater.

**As a woman who is deathly afraid of bugs, I was surprised to find a female entomologist. Are a lot of women in the field or are you just unique in that you're not freaked out?**

Actually, entomology and forensics are predominantly female now. I think it's a relatively new phenomenon, but it's one that I've noticed changing over the past 10 years. I think that women are just drawn to these particular fields for one reason or another, and they just seem to take to it so well that any squeamishness is easily gotten over.

Admittedly, once or twice, I've kind of been wiggled out by things -- but it's usually more of a surprise factor. I put my hand in a nest of cockroaches once and they all kind of ran up my arm and down my pants. This was not too long ago, and even though I've been doing this for a long time, it was very surprising and upsetting.

**What advice would you give to anyone interested in pursuing forensic entomology?**

I would say take as many entomology classes as possible and then work as many cases as you can. I worked for free for many years, and that's what you have to do because experience is everything. Once you have a good grasp of the science, you want to be able to find somebody that you can shadow -- another forensic entomologist, a detective or a medical examiner. Nothing is better than experience.

**More about Adrienne Brundage**

**What did you eat for breakfast?** An egg and sausage muffin thing.

**Which day of the week is your favorite?** The day I can sleep in.

**Which day of the week is your least favorite?** Mondays because I work about 17 hours.

**What was the first job you ever had?** I was a babysitter.

**What makes you angry?** When students talk when I'm talking. And when somebody is not being treated with respect.

**What makes you joyful?** Teaching.

**If you could have any job other than your own, what would it be?** This is the hardest question yet! I'm doing exactly what I want to do. I guess I would be a writer.

**If you had the time and the money to study anything at all, what would you choose?** If it had to be something other than forensic entomology, it would be genetics.

**What did you want to be when you grew up?** An entomologist and Wonder Woman.

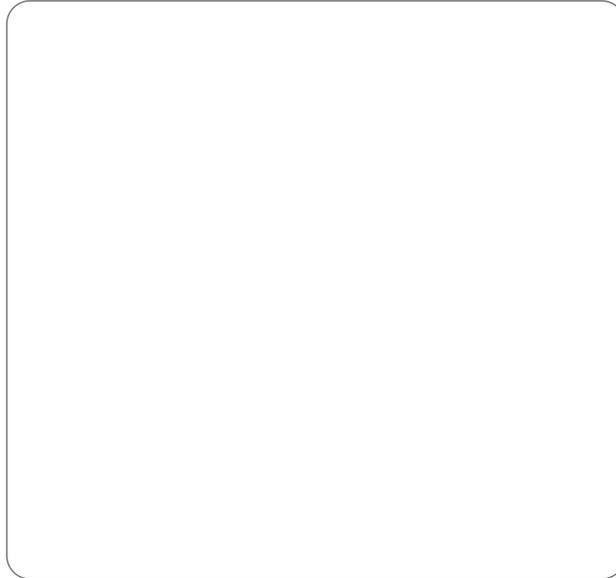
**Can money bring you happiness.** No, but it does make some things easier.

About the Author

*Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in California.*

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