

# Barry Fisher: Real-Life CSI

BY BETH BOLDUC  
PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY BARRY FISHER



It's New York City in the 1960s; a mother advises her son he should study pre-med while he's at CCNY. But biology doesn't interest Barry Fisher. Now, chemistry, that's fascinating! So begins a journey ending in a career he'd never considered. No wonder Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," resonates with Barry as he reflects on his life choices and a 40-year career in forensic science.

*"...I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in the wood, and I-  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference."*

Indeed, serendipity steered Barry in surprising directions. A blind date set up by his grad school roommate while Barry was pursuing a PhD in chemistry at Purdue University led him to meet the love of his life, Susan, a Los Angeles native. They became engaged in the spring of 1968 and married at the end of December. Although Barry ditched grad school and life on the East Coast to move to LA, at least Purdue wasn't for naught: he received an M.S. in chemistry.



*Barry measures a skull from one of his early cases.*

Then life took another strange turn. Of course, the Viet Nam war was heating up in the 1960s. And Barry, now without a student deferment, could only sit tight and hope for the best. But the California Department of Human Resources contacted Barry about a job opening in the LA County Sheriff's Department crime lab. Even though Barry had never considered a career in forensic science, he

was quickly hired as a criminalist and got a critical skills draft deferment.

Many years would pass before the crime of the century, the OJ Simpson trial, brought crime scene investigation so strikingly to the public's attention. And, thanks to the TV show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, forensic science suddenly became popular and sexy.

Criminalistics is actually applied chemistry, as Barry learned. He started in toxicology, testing for alcohol and drugs in DUI cases. That meant lots of courtroom testimony. At first, this was stressful – he'd never been much of a public speaker. But Barry soon mastered that skill and could explain complicated scientific issues in an understandable way to jurors and lawyers...excellent training that served him well as his career advanced. And he enjoyed it, too.

After stints in toxicology and narcotics analysis, Barry transferred to Major Crimes. This is when he got the shock of his life: his first crime scene, an axe murder in Redondo Beach. Years later, having viewed countless gory scenes, Barry says he still has dreadful flashes of that first experience with all its horror. He says his years in Major Crimes introduced him to the "underbelly of society" and proved to him beyond a doubt that not everyone has "some good" inside.

Then, of course, there were autopsies and visits to the morgue with its pungent smells and unbelievable sights and sounds. Here, Barry points out, real-life crime scene investigation is *not especially romantic*; and cases *aren't solved* in a matter of hours or even days like they are on television. Investigators never solved the axe murder case, but they did unravel many other equally horrific crimes.

After 20 years in the ranks, Barry was appointed Crime Laboratory Director with almost 300 people reporting to him – one of the largest municipal crime labs in the US. His attention shifted to staff management, training, and representing the Sheriff's Department at professional organizations, seminars, and important conferences worldwide. Barry helped establish the Consortium of Forensic Science Organizations, and he and his colleagues lobbied Congress to get funding and to influence public

Barry pictured with the original CSI cast.



policy on behalf of crime labs and medical examiners nationwide. During one set of hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee, William Peterson, star of the CSI TV show, came to Washington, DC, to testify about crime lab needs – even though Senate staffers would have preferred Marg Helgenberger!

Barry has been a tireless advocate for scientific training and advancement. In 1994, his quest began for a new crime lab to replace the seriously overcrowded one. Fourteen years later, a \$100 million new lab, home to the LAPD and Sheriff’s crime labs plus the criminal justice school at Cal



Barry and staff review blueprints for the Hertzberg-Davis Forensic Science Center.

State Los Angeles, became a reality. The Hertzberg-Davis Forensic Science Center on the CSU campus opened in May 2007. The Center represents the collaboration of university learning and on-the-job training within one of the finest crime lab environments in the US.

In the late 1970s, Barry was asked to revise a

classic criminal justice textbook, *Techniques of Crime Scene Investigation*, originally published in Sweden. Over the years he has continued his revisions and is now updating the ninth edition.

But Barry is not working alone. His son David, who often visited his father at work, soon was hooked on forensic science, too, and followed in his father’s footsteps. David is now a supervisor with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner’s Department of Forensic Biology in New York City, where he specializes in DNA analysis. David worked on the identification of victims from both 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Father and son have collaborated on two books and share many common interests.

The choices we make and the paths we follow open up the world to us. Barry Fisher certainly has seen a vast cross-section of human behavior. Using his knowledge of science to untangle and uncover the accurate story of a crime has been a true calling. As Barry says in his book, “Those of us who apply science and technology to the solution of crimes have a duty to do our best for the criminal justice system we serve in the interest of justice.”



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