



ATF Forensic Chemist Ray Kuk Named Forensic Scientist of the Year

by Tom Cramer/ATF Office of Public Affairs

Raymond Kuk, a forensic chemist with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, was named Forensic Scientist of the Year in May by the Mid-Atlantic Association of Forensic Scientists.

"I was quite honored, not to mention surprised, to receive the award," Kuk said. "It feels good to be recognized by your peers for the work you have done."

Kuk began his career in forensic science with the Illinois State Police in 1996. Since 1998 he has worked for ATF's Forensic Science Laboratory in Maryland, where he spends much of his time analyzing fire-related evidence.

Kuk has also been a key member of ATF's National and International Response Teams, assisting in major fire investigations across the country and around the world. He was an integral member of the DC Serial Arsonist Task Force.

The enormous amount of work Kuk poured into the DC arsonist investigation proved to be indispensable, according to Greg Czarnopys, chief of ATF's Forensic Science Laboratory.

"Ray examined evidence from numerous fire scenes," Czarnopys said. "He provided critical analyses that linked fires, which were set over a period of several years, to a single individual.

"On countless occasions, when we called Ray at home, he dropped everything and conducted the urgent examinations we needed, quickly, in order to link a particular fire to the serial arsonist."

"Ray's examination of the materials used in setting the fires provided vital investigative leads," added Michael Ethridge, director of ATF's Laboratory Services. "And, of course, Ray discovered the crucial traces of evidence that contained the DNA of the arsonist. His work was critical in the pursuit, arrest and conviction of the arsonist, who was sentenced to life in prison for his role in numerous fires in Washington, D.C; Northern Virginia and the Maryland suburbs."

"Each case I work is important to somebody," Kuk said, "whether it be the victim, the victim's family, or the suspect. I want to provide accurate and quality information to the investigator. And if I can provide a good investigative lead through my work, all the better."

Kuk has participated in many other high profile cases, including the Charles County (Md.) Hunters Brook Subdivision arsons in which 35 homes were damaged. During that investigation, the Maryland State Fire Marshal's Office used an ATF-trained canine to help determine how the fires were set.

"Ray has always been a strong proponent of our accelerant detection canine program," noted Terry Bohan, chief of ATF's Canine Training and Operations Support Branch. "He has worked to train over 100 dogs, and has also provided technical support to their handlers. His role in developing training programs has benefited the entire fire investigation community by improving the quality of the canine handler teams and their interactions with laboratories."

Julia Dolan, Kuk's first-line supervisor and his co-worker for many years, said her associate has always taken on a leadership role in many areas of forensic science by providing training, conducting and sharing research, and mentoring interns and new scientists.

"Ray has been a mentor to so many people in the field of fire debris analysis," Dolan observed. "He has made literally hundreds of presentations to fire investigators and scientists in order to share his knowledge."

"He has conducted research that will benefit working scientists in areas including the composition of ultra clean fuels and the forensic analysis of alternative fuels, such as biodiesel and E85. He has worked tirelessly in the development of standards for canine training, fire debris analysis and various aspects of fire investigation. And he has been a strong ATF liaison to the fire investigation and fire research community."

"Most importantly, perhaps, Ray is always available to answer a question," she added. "He's never too busy to review data or to discuss a tricky or challenging case."