

Artist Gets The Tough Crime Cases -- Jean Boylan's Images Often The Most Accurate

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When the FBI called in Jean Boylan to make a new sketch of the Unabomber suspect, she could barely believe what the agent was telling her as they rushed to catch a flight to Salt Lake City.

They were going to see someone who had caught a fleeting glimpse of the suspect 7 1/2 years ago. The FBI said the sketch Boylan produced - showing the Unabomber in dark glasses and hooded sweatshirt - was the first to satisfy the witness and was distributed worldwide.

It wasn't the first time that the Bend, Ore., artist has captured an accurate image where others have failed. She has made a career of it.

This week, Boylan is scheduled to testify in the Oklahoma City bombing trial of Terry Nichols about another of her sketches - one that corrected the image of John Doe No. 2, the elusive suspect sighted at a Ryder truck-rental office. He turned out to have nothing to do with the 1995 bombing that killed 168 people.

It's just the latest in a string of big cases for Boylan.

After the kidnapping of 12-year-old Polly Klaas from her home in Petaluma, Calif., in 1993, Boylan was called in. Her new sketch of the suspect turned out to be much more accurate than the original. The girl was later found slain.

"Do I think it's a gift? No," Boylan said last week from her home on the outskirts of Bend with a view of the snowcapped Cascades. "I think it can be taught."

Boylan got her start in law enforcement in 1977 as a civilian following up investigations for the Multnomah County Sheriff's Department in Portland. She found that what witnesses told her days after the crime didn't always jibe with what they had said immediately afterward. Often, data gathered later was more accurate.

Working for the Portland Police Bureau in the early 1980s, she became frustrated with the standard procedure - showing witnesses pictures of possible suspects, and offering them pictures of sample eyes, noses and chins to build a composite sketch.

"I found that using that system really tended to lead the witness," said Boylan, who is a correspondent for the television show "America's Most Wanted."

Over the years she developed her own technique, which aims to capture the brain's snapshot of something a person sees under traumatic circumstances.

"The trauma necessary for that information to be really encoded firmly in memory makes it more difficult to retrieve," she said. "To me it is like taking a 50-cent piece and tossing it into eight feet of water. It remains intact in the water. But the water creates distortion. So you have to reach down through all that distortion."

During her interview with mechanic Tom Kessinger for her sketch of John Doe No. 2, Boylan peppered her questions about the suspect with talk about motorcycles and life in a small town.

Those kinds of topics help put the person at ease, and Boylan says "that's the level where concentration will surface."