

Analyzing Penmanship

Dawn Chase / April 5, 1999 / 5 Minute Read

Cina L. Wong was a teenager in boarding school when she first experienced the FBI truism: “There is more crime committed at the point of a pen than at the end of a gun.”

A group of girls had targeted her for harassment, Wong said. They mugged her, cut her with fingernail clippers and left her bleeding and unconscious. The incident was followed by a series of notes with death threats.

The headmaster collected the notes from her and promised to have them analyzed by a police handwriting expert. The matter was never resolved to Wong’s satisfaction. But the experience led her to resolve that she would become the best handwriting expert in the United States, to keep herself and others from being victimized.

Moved to Norfolk

Her quest led her from her native California to Norfolk, where she studied under David S. Liebman.

Now 36, Wong boasts a resume that reflects solid training and experience in document examination. Her teachers have included experts from the FBI, the US Secret Service, and a specialist in how handwriting can be affected by health problems and medications.

She currently is vice president of the National Association of Document Examiners, and she has qualified in numerous courts nationwide as an expert in the many forms document forgeries can take.

In one Virginia case, she was able to liken the writer of racist hate notes to a message scratched onto the side of the victim’s Mercedes. In a New York case, she was able to send police into the headquarters of a life insurance

scam that targeted Jews with a detailed description of the dot-matrix printer that had produced the paperwork in the scam.

JonBenet Ramsey

Wong's most publicized case so far involves the murder of 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey of Boulder, Colo. She and Liebman were hired by a self-styled victim's rights attorney to compare a copy of the three-page ransom note in the case with samples that the lawyer said were written by JonBenet's mother, Patsy. The lawyer, Darnay Hoffman of New York, has sued to force a prosecution in the case.

Wong opined that the note matched the sample on 30 points, and that the writer of the samples probably wrote the ransom note with the opposite hand. Such details as teardrop-shaped rounded letters, such as "o" and "b", curved exclamation points, and "g's" with the tail shaped as a right angle were consistent between samples and notes.

Wong asserts that she believes there is a 95 percent likelihood that, if Patsy Ramsey produced the samples, she also wrote the ransom note. Hoffman has included their findings in documents related to his suit, but so far Wong and Liebman have not been called to present their findings to the grand jury in the case.

Pens hold clues

Meanwhile, Wong has added a new job to her busy schedule – selling pens at the Colorado Pen Company's store at the new MacArthur Mall in downtown Norfolk. There, she not only has an opportunity to hand out her business card to lawyers who come in to shop, but she continues to educate herself as she watches customers test the pens.

She observes how they hold the pens, how they move their hands and arms, and the characteristics of different inks and manufacturers.

You never know when the observation might lead to an epiphany in a case, she said.