



Understanding the Criminal Mind

Dr. Rosemary Erickson Serves as Expert Witness

By Thea Miller Ryan

As a forensic sociologist and owner of Athena Research, Dr. Rosemary Erickson of Sioux Falls investigates some of the nation's worst crimes and criminals. Then she serves as an expert witness in civil trials, testifying about what might have kept the violent crime from happening.

What kind of traumatic incident would make a girl who grew up on a farm near Davis, S.D., study violence? "The answer isn't anything shocking," Rosemary says. "I had a 'Leave it to Beaver' childhood."

"One thing that probably impacted me most, though, happened in my freshman year of high school when my dad announced that we were moving to California. I went from a class size of 23 in

Centerville to a class of 753 in San Diego," she says, adding that she also inherited her mother's curiosity and her father's sense of adventure.

After only three years in San Diego, however, one of her two older brothers wanted to return to farming, so they moved back to the farm. She graduated from Centerville High School and then received her bachelor's degree in psychology at Augustana College.

She worked one year in Pierre at the Department of Health as a state mental health representative. Then, she returned to San Diego and worked for a California think tank. "It was a dream come true," Rosemary says. "We received government funds to study social problems, including crime... I learned

about crime by having criminals on my staff—robbers, murderers, rapists, thieves, and con men. In turn, they interviewed other criminals, both in and out of prison. From that I learned about how criminals think, why they do what they do, and how they pick their targets.”



The research led to the robbery and violence prevention program for 7-Eleven and other stores nationwide. The program resulted in signs that state, “Clerk Cannot

Open Safe,” and “We Don’t Accept Large Bills” as well as height-strip markers by doors to identify a robber’s height. Those changes along with training reduced robberies by 75 percent in convenience stores nationwide.

Rosemary received her master’s degree in sociology at San Diego State University and returned to Sioux Falls in 1989. She married Arnie Stenseth, and they moved to Washington, DC, where he pursued his acting career and she received her Ph.D. in sociology and justice from American University.



Today, Arnie works with his wife at Athena Research. “I send him to prisons to do interviews,” she explains.

He quips: “She sends me to prison, but I keep coming back. She works with suits and lawyers, and I work with cops and perps.”



Rosemary knows all about the horrors of violent crime, and after being an expert witness in more than 200 cases, she admits that her work is like what people see on television.

She says women who travel alone should be hypervigilant. “Hotels can’t protect you once you’re in your room,” she says.

Her career and travels have helped her see that “the balance in life is a result of coming home” and she says she is at home in Sioux Falls because she feels safe here.

Learn more about Dr. Erickson at www.athenaresearch.com.



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