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## His Day Started When Other's Ended: *A Tribute to the late Dr. Halbert Fillinger*

*By Gailynne M. Ferguson*

I was 17 years old when I first heard of Dr. Halbert Fillinger. As a young emergency medical technician, I only knew that he performed autopsies on some of the worst cases in Philadelphia and I was now being asked if I wanted to hear him at a sex crimes presentation for EMS and healthcare professionals at the Women's College of Osteopathic Medicine. I had no idea what I was getting myself into or what I was about to see or hear, but his presentation made a lasting impression.

We have all been exposed to sex crimes by some manner of media, but to visualize it through the photo-

graphs and words of this nationally renowned medical examiner left me with a feeling of helplessness. But "Doc" Fillinger, as he liked to be called, had a way of making those that were called to the scene more aware of what they saw and more conscious of scene preservation so as not to disturb any evidence the police or medical examiner may need to determine the cause of death.

He realized that the scenes were often horrific as were the ways in which the victims suffered and eventually succumbed. There is no humor to these scenes, only sadness, but the daily exposures to death led Doc Fillinger to develop his own "defense mechanism" to cope with the cruel

scenes he witnessed. With life comes death and Doc Fillinger was always there to answer how someone died even though he may not have fully understood what could have outraged another person to commit such an act. It was his constant quest for the truth that made him admired by many and feared by others. He was the expert witness the prosecution relied upon to pull the pieces together to ensure the true cause of death was known. At times in doing so, he butted heads with others, which sometimes included politicians. He firmly believed that the deceased deserved to have their story told which was evident in the death of Stephanie Rubi-

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## A Tribute to Dr. Halbert Fillinger

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nowitz, the Main Line woman who was believed to have drowned in the bathtub and who it was later determined had been strangled by none other than her husband.

Though my experience in the courtroom has been limited to the cases I testified in as a police officer, Dr. Fillinger's presentation that day reaffirmed my childhood questions of "what if", "how", and "why" that so often need to be asked in the legal and medical professions. He was a pioneer for this area in the field of forensic pathology, before Quincy and CSI. He brought the dead "back to life", so to speak, to allow their stories to be told, even if only for a short period of time. He allowed families to bring closure to their loss, the courts to bring closure to cases, and the public to bring closure to rumors. Dr. Fillinger served as the assistant medical examiner in Philadelphia from 1960-1988, Bucks County deputy coroner from 1988-1992, and from 1992 until June 13, 2006, he was the Montgomery County coroner. He will be greatly missed, but I'm sure will always be remembered for his rye humor and intelligence, his dedication to science, but above all, he will be missed for his respect for the deceased.

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