High-tech tools used to fight area crime

By Crystal Bonvillian
Staff Writer

Lafourche Parish police investigators are using some new technology designed to catch criminals in lies.

The Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office and the Thibodaux Police Department have recently begun using the LanternPro voice stress analysis machine, the most technologically advanced system available to detect changes in a person's voice, said Sgt. Chad Shelby, one of three Sheriff's Office investigators trained on the machine.

The Web site for the Diogenes Co., which produces the LanternPro, explains that the machine picks up on tiny tremors in a person's voice that stretch the laryngeal muscles, a condition reflective of the person's level of stress.

That stressed condition can be observed in components of the individual's speech and, when displayed by the instrument, interpreted by trained voice stress analysts, the Web site said.

Although the LanternPro cannot say for certain if a person committed a crime, it can tell detectives if they need to investigate that person further, Shelby said.

"It is kind of like a compass, showing us if we're heading in the right direction," Shelby said.

He said the system was used in recent months to crack two cases where people reported armed robberies of shops in Larose and Bayou Blue. Both turned out to be "inside jobs," he said.

On Dec. 1, June Bruce, 39, of Cut Off, was arrested for felony theft and criminal mischief after investigators discovered she had reportedly taken $1,700 from the Bayouside Poker Room, where she worked. Initially, Bruce told detectives an armed black man wearing pantyhose over his head had come in and demanded the business' money.

Shelby said detectives were suspicious of Bruce from the start, because "her story just didn't make sense."

"Nothing gelled with the story," Shelby said. "But she had it down pat, with all the details."

When Bruce was tested on the LanternPro, detectives were further suspicious because the machine indicated she was lying, Shelby said.

A few days after the robbery, Bruce broke down and admitted to taking the money herself, police reports said at the time.

Shelby said another case in which

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the LanternPro aided investigators occurred around that same time, when a robbery was reported at the Sunrise Fried Chicken restaurant in Bayou Blue. Detectives had no suspects until word began getting around that someone claimed to have robbed a bank.

Investigators traced those rumors back to Shelby Ward, 25, of the Blue Bayou Trailer Park, which is located near the chicken restaurant, said Sgt. D.L. Mosely, who assisted in the case.

Shelby said when detectives went to talk to Ward about the bank robbery rumors, he told them, "This must be about the chicken place."

"He kind of killed himself with that," Shelby said.

Ward reportedly admitted committing the robbery of the daiquiri shop in the restaurant and told investigators the bartender, Roxanne Votaw, was also involved.

Votaw, 20, of Houma, denied involvement and initially refused the voice stress analysis, Shelby said. When she finally consented to take the test, it reportedly showed she was lying.

Votaw reportedly admitted her involvement in the robbery and was subsequently arrested Dec. 3, along with Ward. Both were charged with felony theft and Votaw was charged with criminal mischief.

Shelby and Thibodaux Police Lt. Malcolm Dupre, who has also been trained on the LanternPro, said the results of the system are impressive.

"It is fabulous," said Dupre, who experienced the abilities of the machine firsthand during training. "It is unbeatable."

Dupre said one good aspect of the machine is that investigators can fax or e-mail results to experts in the field of voice analysis if they want a second opinion.

Shelby said that the LanternPro could not replace a thorough investigation, however.

"It is a tool we use, but it does not take the place of old-fashioned police work," he said.

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