

Danville

With help of online database and serial number, police track down stolen Danville merchandise

By Quashon Avent qavent@registerbee.com Dec 9, 2019

It seems that new technology has made turning to an old standby for getting rid of stolen goods — a pawnshop — a fairly risky venture.

On the morning of Oct. 27, a home on Aspen Street was burglarized and a 55-inch TV taken, Danville Circuit Court records show. A neighbor told police they saw someone in a “blue sports-type vehicle” parked in front of the home five minutes after the homeowner had left, Danville Police Department detective William Merrill Jr. wrote in a search warrant.

Later that day, city police discovered a similar TV was sold to a local pawnshop. Investigators found out by searching for a property match in an online database — LeadsOnline.

Leads is a web-based system for businesses such as pawnshops, secondhand stores and scrap metal recyclers to report their transactions. All Danville pawnshops use the system, police confirmed.

As it turns out, the website also has a system for civilian use — ReportIt. This system allows property owners to store serial numbers, item descriptions, pictures and scans of receipts so items can easily be identified as stolen.

“LEADS played a role in solving that case-because the homeowner had serial numbers,” wrote Lt. Richard Chivvis, spokesman for the Danville Police Department.

Police said it is commonplace for thieves to try to sell stolen goods instead of keeping the items.

“It does happen, but it just depends on their motivation,” Chivvis said. “With my experience in these cases, a drug user is usually stealing to make sales to support their habits.”

It also is commonplace to see stolen goods show up at pawnshops or secondhand stores, Chivvis said, but the frequency has declined in recent years. Now many stolen goods show up at property-exchange kiosks in stores (mainly for cellphones), online marketplaces or simply turn up when police search the suspect’s home.

“A decade ago, a lot of stolen property showed up routinely at pawnshops,” the department spokesman said. “Now it more commonly shows up on the streets.”

The handful of local pawn shops reached out to for comment on this story seemed skittish when contacted by the Danville Register & Bee.

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“As far as comments go, I don’t want to comment,” one store owner said.

Emmet Murphy, a spokesman for the National Pawnbrokers Association explained the pawnbroker industry is a heavily regulated industry — both federally and locally.

“Pawnbrokers and pawn transactions are covered by 15 federal statutes and regulations,” he wrote. “State and local laws govern other aspects of pawn transactions, including record keeping and transaction information requirements.”

Regulations vary depending on the state. For example, Virginia law requires pawnbrokers to keep a record of the full name, address, telephone number and driver’s license number of the person pawning goods. The store also must keep records of item descriptions, serial numbers, and the time, date and place of the transaction.

When asked how to prevent future thefts, authorities recommended recording the serial numbers of important items.

“Either serial numbers, owner applied numbers or something unique etched into the item,” Chivvis said. “Somehow we have to describe it and verify that it’s yours.”

In the case of the Aspen Street burglary, investigators learned the TV was sold to a Danville pawnshop “within hours” of the burglary, a search warrant states.

“The accused was [seen] on surveillance video from [the pawnshop] operating a blue sports type vehicle, the stolen television was removed from inside of the blue sports type vehicle, and carried into [the pawnshop],” Merrill wrote in a search warrant to collect DNA and fingerprint samples from the suspect.

Detectives eventually charged Samuel Curtis Carter Jr., 60, and John Henry Totten Jr. in connection with the Aspen Street burglary.

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DNA could be key to home-invasion case

By Quashon Avent qavent@registerbee.com Dec 6, 2019



A single cigarette butt left at the scene of a 2018 sexual assault might be the key to solving the case, court records show, and displays the importance of DNA in investigation.

Two men — both armed with guns and their faces covered — rushed through the back door of a home on the 500 block of Ingram Street the night of Sept. 19, 2018. It was here that one of the men sexually assaulted the woman who lived there, according to a search warrant recently filed in Danville Circuit Court.

Later, as one of the assailants ransacked her home, the other smoked a cigarette.

After taking a couple puffs, the search warrant states, one of the assailants offered his cigarette to the woman. She took the cigarette and left it on the ground, “knowing the suspect’s DNA would be on it,” Det. C.B. Morris wrote.

Now, police are trying to link the DNA from the cigarette to a suspect currently being held in a Lynchburg jail.

This type of ingenuity by a victim has happened before, stated J. Thomas McClintock, a forensic scientist specializing in DNA analysis and owner of DNA Diagnostics, Inc., in Lynchburg.

“Victims [and/or witnesses] have held on to ‘evidentiary’ samples for later analysis that would link the suspect to a crime,” McClintock wrote in an email.

He went on to say saliva from cigarettes is a great source of biological material. This biological material can be used to link a suspect to the crime scene, he explained, much like investigators intended to do in the search warrant.

Wrote McClintock: “I’ve had cases where an individual’s [the perpetrator] DNA was ‘pulled’ from a cigarette thus linking him to the crime scene.”

DNA evidence also has been used in solving other such crimes as burglaries and thefts. Danville police recently looked into DNA samples and fingerprints to try to link a suspect to the scene of an Aspen Street burglary, court records state.

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“DNA is needed for comparison with the DNA from the t-shirt that was collected from the burglary scene,” Officer W.R. Merrill Jr. wrote in the search warrant for that case.

Although DNA evidence has linked suspects to all sorts of crimes, it is especially helpful in sexual assault investigations, explained Erin Robinson, spokeswoman for the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, based in Washington, D.C.

“Since 2005, there have been more than 475,800 matches of crime scene evidence to offender’s DNA,” she said.

As with the case of the reported Danville assault, looking to a cigarette for evidence is not necessarily a new technique, explained Suzanna Ryan, DNA analyst and owner of Ryan Forensic in Carlsbad, California.

“Cigarette butts are typically a very good source of DNA — this is assuming that they’re relatively fresh and haven’t been outside exposed to the elements for an extended period of time,” she wrote in an email.

In the Danville case, when investigators sent the DNA sample to a lab for analysis, the lab sent back a certificate stating there was a match — the suspect currently in the Lynchburg jail. He is being held by Lynchburg authorities on multiple firearms charges, court records show.

No charges have been filed in the Danville rape case, confirmed Danville Police spokesman Lt. Richard Chivvis.

The “case is still under investigation,” he wrote.

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In addition to emergencies, Danville Life Saving Crew tries a holistic approach to medicine

By Quashon Avent qavent@registerbee.com Dec 1, 2019



Danville Life Saving Crew's Peyton Parrish and Colton Jones arrive to the scene of an Tuesday call and take a stretcher from the back of the transport truck.

Quashon Avent/Register & Bee

Editor's note

On Tuesday morning, Danville Register & Bee staff writer Quashon Avent was allowed to ride alongside the Danville Life Saving Crew for four hours. It's part of an occasional series going behind-the-scenes of public safety operations in the Dan River Region.

It was a chilly Tuesday morning when emergency medical technicians Colton Jones and Peyton Parrish strapped themselves into the front seats of a Danville Life Saving Crew transit truck and responded to a chest pain call.

Parrish, a seven-year veteran of the crew and emergency medical technician, sat in the passenger side as Jones, a four-year EMT who volunteers with Ringgold Volunteer Fire and Rescue, drove the vehicle.

The caller was an elderly woman, who frequently calls for a chronic health condition. As Jones and Parrish sped out the bay doors of the Clayton T. Lester Crew Hall, the truck began to rock back and forth, with medical supplies sliding around inside their cupboards.

“It rides like a covered wagon,” Jones said, minutes before they entered the vehicle.

The orange flashing lights and loud sirens drowned out any hint of conversation between the two. Cars rushed to pull along the side of the road, hoping not to face a head-on collision with first responders. The stragglers who hesitated to pull over faced the cacophonous horn of the response vehicle, and quickly relocated to the curb.

After minutes of blaring sirens, shrieking horns and the constant shaking inside the truck’s cabin, they arrived at the woman’s home. This call was the first of their shift, but one of many that occur throughout the year, according to Danville Life Saving Crew personnel.

The patient was kind, friendly and knew both EMTs. Her home was small, with TVs and papers piled intermittently throughout her living room. Jones and Parrish pricked her pointing finger and checked her blood pressure. The patient decided not to go to the hospital, stating the pain in her stomach had subsided. She wanted someone to take her to her doctor’s appointment, however, as her hospital transport had failed to take her earlier that morning. Parrish spoke with her, and got her scheduled for a transport to the doctor’s office.

“Our community paramedical program gives people rides to the doctors,” she said, after returning from the call. “We try to do a lot of holistic approaches to medicine.”

Holistic medicine is focused on the treatment of the whole person and looks at mental and social factors. One social factor is the problem of gaining access to health care, she explained. To her and many others at the crew, it isn't always about treating the patient's symptoms.

"They might need something else, but they call 911," Sapounakes explained.

For almost an hour, Jones and Parrish spent their time in between the calls by eating and chatting with their co-workers. When a second call came in, it was for an elderly woman who could not get up after a fall. Jones and Parrish turned on their flashing lights and sped off to help a new patient. Like clockwork, the truck continued to intermittently shake and rumble going down city roads.

On arrival, a Danville Fire Department truck was parked inside of a cul de sac. The street was barren, save for a light blue Chevy sedan parked one apartment away from where the patient lived. Parrish and Jones parked parallel to the vehicle, ran to the back of the transport truck, and flung the doors open. They slid the stretcher out of its floor attachment, got it set up, and ran up to the front door of the beige apartment complex.

A fireman ushered them in, and minutes later an elderly female appeared on the back of the stretcher. They gently placed her into the back of the transport truck, and went to work immediately. Jones and Parrish put a stethoscope against her chest and strapped her up to an electrocardiogram machine. They also questioned her. They wanted to know her name, how she felt and other questions meant to gauge how her fall had occurred. She answered quickly and calmly, but struggled to move.

She was taken to a local hospital, in a section marked only for authorized personnel. She was carted in carefully and placed in a hallway near other patients. Jones explained to a nurse what they were able to glean about the woman's condition.

Jone and Parrish pushed the now empty stretcher into the back of the vehicle. In the row of green seats placed on both sides of the back of the ambulance, they rested for a couple of moments. They prepared themselves — and the truck — for the next call. They placed any out of place items in the correct area, checked their phones and sat back to drink water.

When asked about the type of calls they get, and whether these are the most common, both paused to mull it over.

“It all depends on the day,” Colton said.

“Sometimes you get the trauma [that] needs helicopters, but it’s rare,” Parrish said.