



## Operation: CSI DNA

Vanessa Lynch was a high-flying lawyer when her father was brutally murdered. She tells *Tracy Melass* how the tragedy transformed her into an anti-crime activist.



**T** **THIS IS WHAT** I was meant to do with my life. I have a strong sense of purpose now." Vanessa Lynch's voice is matter-of-fact and determined. She's not one for well-meaning sentiment – she has been through too much for that. As founder of the DNA Project, which campaigns for legislation and greater awareness around the critical value of DNA in solving crimes, she has been in dogged pursuit of her goal for a decade – ever since her father became a crime statistic.

Except he wasn't just another statistic to her: He was the man who read her poetry after dinner, sparked her thirst for knowledge and taught her valuable life lessons. They were exceptionally close (she's the only

daughter of four kids). But it took his murder – and the sloppy police work surrounding it – to spark something in his daughter, and transform her grief into a force for good.

Like many others whose lives have been shattered by loss through violence, Vanessa could have thrown her hands in the air in despair and refused to carry on; or emigrated, as two of her brothers did (one has since returned). "But I didn't," she says. "It changes you, when someone is taken from you so violently. There is no right or wrong way of dealing with it, but I realised we have a problem, which needs a solution."

Vanessa's solution has brought her to a cramped office in busy Green

Point, Cape Town, packed with rolls of crime-scene tape, DNA Project pamphlets and other training paraphernalia. It's a far cry from the slick, well-heeled world of corporate law where she cut her legal teeth. Wiry, energetic and passionate, Vanessa's evidently a woman with a clear sense of her mission.

### A New Direction

What started as an ordinary day in March 2004 suddenly turned tragic when Vanessa received the call that her father, John, had been shot during a burglary at his home in Joburg. What followed was a surreal scene of Vanessa watching her husband, Stuart, a doctor, giving her

mother advice over the phone on how to try and keep her father alive. "I felt I was looking down on what was happening," she says. Her father died in hospital that night. She'll never forget arriving at her parents' house the next morning and her mother, "this broken bird of a person," collapsing in her arms. "I thought to myself, You're never going to recover from this."

Unbelievably, the police closed the file on her father's case just two weeks after the murder. The reason? All DNA evidence had been destroyed. A series of blunders, from well-meaning family members who cleaned up afterwards, to police who destroyed evidence thinking they didn't have the technology to uplift it, to the paramedics who threw clothing away, to the security guards and community police forum members who carelessly walked all over the crime scene, meant there was simply no DNA to work with.

"When the policemen told me this, I knew it was wrong," says Vanessa. "I felt I had to do something. I could either go for counselling or drive a project. And it came to me quite soon what it had to be. You don't know what life's going to throw at you, but when it does throw it at you, you've got to decide what direction you're going to take."

Out of months of soul-searching, the DNA Project was born. Co-founded

with Rob Matthews – the father of murdered student Leigh Matthews – and co-directed by Vanessa, Allan Thomson, who started the Change a Life Trust after his brother was killed, and geneticist Carolyn Hancock, PhD, the team has been plugging away ever since. It was a learning curve for Vanessa, who knew little about DNA. She left her well-paying job and threw herself into learning about forensic science, enrolling in courses and visiting the Netherlands Forensic Institute and the Forensic Science Services in the UK.

To date, the group has achieved extraordinary successes: creating the first forensic honours degree in Africa, running training programmes for legal, medical and crime-fighting professionals; lobbying for legislation and boosting public awareness.

### Moving Forward

In November last year, a decade-long journey of long hours and seemingly never-ending obstacles came to an end for Vanessa when the DNA Bill was rubber-stamped in Parliament. (At the time of going to press, it still needed presidential assent.) This legislation means all prisoners and arrestees will have their DNA taken and their profile entered into a database, allowing for simpler cross-referencing in police investigations. It's hoped this will go some way towards curbing the high rate of repeat crime in South Africa. "The real work starts now. This is not a magic bullet. But we're moving in the right direction," Vanessa says.

She admits there was a time when she was too immersed in her

campaign – that it was a vehicle to escape her grief – but these days it's less a crusade than a full-time job. When the office door closes at the end of the day, she detaches herself from the coalface of crime. Then she puts on her hat of wife to a husband she adores and mother to her young daughter; she loves to socialise and take her mountain bike out for a spin in the foothills of Table Mountain. "I process it by switching off," she says. "Maybe this is my therapy – the fact that what I'm doing can change people's lives." Her journey will only end "when there is no more crime in South Africa," she says.

### It Gets Better

Before the event that set Vanessa on her present path, she used to wonder how people survived such tragedies. How did they come back from this kind of loss and pain? Now, she says she has a greater understanding of human resilience. Her work exposes her to the darker sides of human behaviour, but it has also revealed great courage, kindness and compassion. "I have such respect for people who have to endure extraordinary circumstances. South Africans are strong. This work inspires and humbles me."

Against all odds, her mother is in a happy relationship. "We all thought her life had ended, but she has got a new chapter ahead of her. Triumph can win out over tragedy. I always tell people it will take time but it does get better." Her journey has also shown her that people can do anything if they put their minds to it. "I was the only one who didn't doubt myself when this began – and now I know I can do anything." **Q**

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