

Crime scene clean-up: **Not** for the faint-hearted



A crime scene can be a messy place. When someone has been killed, blood and other body fluids are spilled all over the scene. Once police investigators have completed their investigations at a crime scene, it is no longer the police's responsibility, and the result is that the grieving family members are left with a bloody, messy room to be cleaned.

It is the responsibility of the victim's family to remove the bloody evidence of a violent death. For many people, the trauma of cleaning up their loved one's blood intensifies their loss. Fortunately, there are people, such as Roelien Schutte and Eileen de Jager from Crime Scene Clean-up, who are skilled in cleaning up a violent death scene.

SERVAMUS spoke to these two sisters, whose business is to ease the pain of those who have lost a loved one through a violent death. Roelien says that they started their business in South Africa in October 2000 after they had an opportunity of cleaning crime scenes in the UK when they were much younger. To them, it is not just a job - it is their passion and calling in life. Although they work nationally, they realised at one stage that they cannot do this on their own. Therefore, they established franchises nationwide and today, there are 16 franchises across the country. Roelien added that those who buy in are just as passionate about the work as they are.

What is cleaned?

In South Africa, unlike in the USA and the UK, it is not a legal requirement to have crime scenes cleaned professionally. However, people do not know how important it is to clean every centimetre of a scene. If it is not done properly, people who spend time in that scene can get very sick (see infra).

Roelien and Eileen explain that they clean up at every type of crime scene where body fluids are involved. These include:

- Suicide scenes;
- murder scenes;
- armed robbery scenes;
- vehicle hijackings; and
- hoarding scenes.

The SAPS refers families who are suffering from the trauma of a violent death to Crime Scene Clean-up to assist them. Eileen told **SERVAMUS** that some insurance companies also use their services following burglary/accident or murder incidents.



By Kotie Geldenhuys

The job

Cleaning up a crime scene is on most people's lists of worst possible jobs. Not all of us have the stomach and heart to mop up blood, brain matter and skull fragments after a traumatic death. It requires a special person to do this job, which is hazardous, gruelling and not for the faint-hearted.

The people who clean up these traumatic death scenes have to remove any signs of what happened and any biohazards that resulted from it. Biohazards refer to all bodily fluids, which means that any blood or tissue at a traumatic death scene is considered a potential source of infection. Therefore, they work in biochemical protection suits to protect them from potentially hazardous bacteria.

Cleaning up a scene after a violent death can be a lengthy task, but it all depends on the type of trauma and the amount of biohazardous material at the scene.

Those who clean these scenes must clean and disinfect (decontaminate) every drop of blood from all surfaces, including ceilings, walls, light fixtures, windows, artwork and appliances. They scrape brain matter from walls and collect bone fragments. They also rip out and discard or clean blood-soaked carpeting, upholstery and curtains with special chemicals and equipment.

As mentioned earlier, the cleaners only move in after the police have finished their work on the scene. Roelien says it sometimes happens that, when they move in to start the cleaning process, they discover additional evidence that the police did not find because it was buried under a heap of blood. They then immediately stop their processes and call the police back to the scene.

The cost of a crime scene clean up depends on the amount of cleaning that has to be done, the distance travelled to the scene and the number of hours spent cleaning the scene. A quotation is provided at the scene to suit the family's budget. However, Eileen and Roelien say that they have occasionally cleaned a room for a family for free. "We want to serve the family and do not want to traumatise them further," Eileen says.

At this stage, they are doing approximately 200 clean-ups a month. Roelien adds that the season also plays a role with regard to suicide scenes that they have to clean up. There are generally more suicides committed in January and February, as well as over special days such as Father's Day, Mother's Day and Valentine's Day, when people are lonely.

It is clear that a crime scene cleaner needs at least three qualities: a strong stomach, the ability to rationally detach themselves from their work, and a sympathetic nature. Cleaning a traumatic death scene is not as glamorous as it is made out to be. It is nothing like it is portrayed on television programmes like *CSI*. The cleaners work on their knees in warm suits with respirators and chemicals. They know that they are doing a high-risk job, as they can get very sick and even die from what they are exposed to. This is no nine-to-five job and can be very

emotionally difficult. However, both Roelien and Eileen agree that they love their job.

Trauma to the family

As mentioned earlier, it is the responsibility of traumatised families and friends to clean up murder or suicide scenes, which is often the last thing that a person traumatised by the death of a loved one can bring themselves to do. In addition, it is not recommended that the family clean up such a scene themselves. Crime scene cleaning companies can save families from unimaginable trauma by cleaning everywhere and disposing of all the materials that have been contaminated by blood and other bodily matter.

By cleaning up crime scenes, professional crime scene cleaners are therefore able to take away some of the psychological trauma suffered by people who have lost a loved one. One can argue that they help to ease the grief of families by cleaning up blood and other bodily matter which would otherwise severely traumatise the already traumatised family and friends.

The cleaners do not get involved with trauma counselling for the family. Cleaning up the scene and trauma counselling do not go together. The cleaners clean while the trauma counsellors pay attention to the family's emotional needs. Roelien says that it is not good to associate the cleaning up process with the trauma counsellor.

Importance of debriefing

"We never know what to expect and every scene is different," Roelien says. But after the adrenaline wears off, they debrief each other by talking about their experiences. They do not visit psychologists to keep them sane. Eileen says: "We will traumatise them." Even Ilse Salzwedel, who wrote the book **Blood sisters**, which was all about these two sisters' experiences became traumatised. "It is traumatic to us as well, but we know we help people," Roelien says. They add, however, that they do not clean up scenes where people whom they know are involved.

The worst part of the job

When asked what the worst part of their job is, both agreed that scenes involving children, such as family murders, are the worst and most emotional scenes to clean. Roelien says that farm murders are also traumatic to clean, due to the extreme violence that typically accompanies these attacks.

South Africa, with its high violent crime and suicide rates, has a need for the services and expertise offered by these two sisters. Families are urged never to try to clean up the scene themselves, as it may result in further trauma to them. Instead, call in the help of the experts.

Contact them at tel: (012) 548 1711; cell: 084 433 3999 - they are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.