

# 'DNA IS THE MODERN-DAY fingerprint'

Vanessa Lynch chats to Bridget McNulty about losing her father and launching a brand-new career by setting up a non-profit organisation called the DNA Project

**V**anessa Lynch, 43, lives in Cape Town with her husband, Dr Stuart Geldenhuys, and their daughter. In 2005, she left her career as a commercial attorney to start the DNA Project, after her father was murdered during a house robbery.

**When my father was murdered eight years ago, it motivated me to make a difference to other families in my position.**

The way in which his crime scene and case were handled made me realise that it wasn't just crime that was a problem in South Africa, but also the fact that nobody was being held accountable for it. In my dad's case, critical evidence was lost at the crime scene, a tragedy if you consider that such evidence is the only way to link a perpetrator to the crime.

**Up to 70% of DNA is found on the victim's clothing in contact crimes, but my dad's clothes were thrown away at the hospital.**

The men who killed him were drinking brandy and coke in the garden before they came into the house. The bottle was collected but was thrown away because the investigator said they didn't have the technology to lift DNA from it. I discovered that's not true. Well-meaning friends cleaned up the crime scene because they didn't want my family and I to see it, but that erased possible traces of the criminals.

**DNA has become the 21st-century fingerprint because the science behind**

**it is objective and certain** – either it's yours, or it isn't. At the time of my dad's death, my friend's father, a forensic pathologist from Germany, asked me if we had a DNA database in South Africa. I looked at him and said, "What's a DNA database?" He explained that countries with developed DNA databases are able to solve crimes by collecting biological samples from crime scenes, analysing them for a DNA profile, and entering that onto a database. They profile everyone who is arrested, and compare the results against DNA collected from a crime scene. An idea took root in my mind, and I decided I wanted to play an active role in changing the way DNA evidence is handled in South Africa.

**I approached Rob Matthews, whose daughter, Leigh, was murdered shortly after my dad.** I told him I had an idea that I thought would make a difference, but that I needed someone with a public voice to help me. Leigh's death had garnered so much media attention that Rob had the necessary public profile to help me put my concept into action.



PHOTOGRAPH BROOKE AUCHINCLOSS STYLING RENE REAY-REEVES HAIR AND MAKE-UP LOUISE

**I left my job as a lawyer to focus on the DNA Project full-time.** Initially, the project was formed as an arm of The Leigh Matthews Trust. We helped with fundraising drives and, with the money we raised, we bought equipment for the forensic science labs in Cape Town and Pretoria, as well as software for blood-splatter analysis and other forensic tools to assist crime scene investigators.

**In the beginning, the DNA Project was mostly just me working from home,** but as word grew about what I was doing, I was flooded with requests from people who wanted to get involved. Because it was such a new concept, I spent a lot of time trying to explain what I wanted to achieve, and why. I knew that the only way we'd expand our DNA database was through facilitating DNA legislation.

**We need to push the government to pass legislation that changes the way South Africa uses DNA** – we want the collection of DNA profiles from convicted offenders, at crime scenes and every time somebody is arrested, to be mandatory. You only need a minute quantity and it's so easy to take from an arrestee – a cheek swab will do it – and in a country where there's a high rate of recidivism – where you don't have one crime per criminal – this is an incredible tool, which we should be

maximising. In order to do that, we needed to have a law passed, and that meant

I needed someone within government to champion the cause.

**My breakthrough moment was securing a meeting with a Cabinet Minister in 2008.** He gave me 20 minutes to convince him and, by the end of our meeting, I had his full support. That same year, the DNA Project began to operate separately from The Leigh Matthews Trust – by then it had an identity of its own, and willing donors. The first draft of the DNA Bill was approved by the previous Cabinet in December 2008. It has taken five long years for the second draft of the DNA Bill to be approved by the present Cabinet, which will now finally be reviewed by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Police. Public submissions will be called for shortly and we're expecting the DNA Bill to be passed this year.

**We do have a DNA database in South Africa, but there's less than a 10% chance of a match being found** because our database is still so small. We need to build up our reference database – the bigger it is, the greater the chance of a hit or match. It's not the golden bullet because you still have to build a case and have good police work, but it's the next logical step. We've also created a DNA forensic analyst degree at honours level at universities so that we have more skilled people to work with DNA.

**The main objectives of the DNA Project are crime-scene awareness, passing necessary legislation and education.**

We raise money and provide free DNA awareness training workshops to first-on-crime-scene responders, community police forums, paramedics, community members, the public – to anyone who needs it. We not only teach people why they need to preserve a crime scene and what DNA is, but we also try to show them what a valuable tool it can be in securing convictions.

**You give away more information in your ID number than you do in your forensic DNA profile.** Your DNA profile, which is your full genetic make-up, is made up of millions and millions of numbers, 95%

of which don't code for anything. In the criminal intelligence profile they look at between 10 and 13 locations in the non-coded regions of your DNA, and that's enough for them to determine whether it's your DNA profile or not. No private information other than your gender is revealed in a forensic DNA profile.

**People often ask if I think it would have been easier if they'd caught my dad's killers** – if there would have been closure. But you don't get closure, or resolution, in death. In time, you simply learn to deal with your grief. I don't think you ever get over a death, but over time, it's not so raw.

The science behind DNA is certain – it's yours or it isn't

**I never felt angry or bitter about my dad's death.**

Rather, I felt compelled into action. Doing something about it was the only way I could live with what had happened. You

have choices in life: you can throw your arms up and say, this is terrible – or you can say, something is very wrong here, how can we change this? I knew nothing would bring my father back, and I didn't want to carry my fury with me for the rest of my life, so I chose instead to look at the bigger picture. I didn't want his death to have been in vain.

**My dad has taught me so much through his death.** We were very close, and almost all the life lessons he taught me have been put into action following his death. It's the most remarkable thing, I've been able to apply those lessons in a greater context since losing my dad, and I know that this is what I was meant to do with my life.

**The most incredible thing about the journey I've been on is that it has exposed me to the worst part of human nature,** but through the work that I do, I've seen the most unbelievable side of human nature too. I'm amazed every day by what people are willing to do to make a change and to support what we do, and that's what keeps me going. You see the incredible compassion and willingness of South African people – they really are prepared to make a difference. I think that's what I love about South Africa: the spirit that keeps triumphing despite adversity.

For more info, visit [dnaproject.co.za](http://dnaproject.co.za) w&h



Above: Filming one of the project's TV ads. Below: Vanessa with fellow director Carolyn Hancock

