

The 'New' Coroner's Office

Six months in, O'dell Owens is making change

By Nichelle M. Bolden

Pensively sitting in a nondescript county office building on a recently redeveloped corner in Corryville, Charlene Walker -- mother of Kenneth Lackey, Cincinnati homicide victim No. 51 in 2004 -- waits to talk with Hamilton County Coroner Dr. O'dell Owens.

The two met at the Avondale Branch Public Library during a meeting of "Who Killed Our Kids," a support group for the families of victims in unsolved homicides. This particular session focused on issues contributing to the escalating number of unsolved killings, including a lack of witness cooperation and problems in police/community relations. Owens was asked to discuss the role his office plays.

"The coroner's office is here to support justice," he said. "We're neutral. The science speaks for itself."

He elaborated on the various functions of the coroner's office, which is required under Ohio law to investigate the cause of death in cases of homicide, suicide, drug overdose and all children younger than age 2. In the death of someone who is developmentally challenged the coroner's office examines the body to check for signs of physical trauma and reviews the medical history. The office also conducts laboratory tests in rape cases and ballistics testing on firearms used in crimes.

The office stays busy. For example, police agencies submitted 602 guns to the ballistics division in 2004. Last year the office investigated 122 suicides and 93 homicides.

At the meeting in Avondale, Owens describes a ballistics test he performed on a .44 Magnum.

"My first reaction was, 'How could anyone say that they didn't hear this?' " he said. "The kickback on it was incredible."

As the discussion continued, the relatives of homicide victims complained that police officials, prosecutors and coroner employees often were anything but sensitive. Emotionally charged, Walker said she received contradictory reports about her son's death from homicide detectives and the coroner's office (before Owens took office). She expressed frustration in trying to get a conclusive explanation of what happened the night he was killed.

"I buried him without knowing how he was killed," she tearfully recounted. "I was told that he was shot in the back and then I read a report saying something else."

Owens listened intently and handed her his business card.

"I can't tell you who killed your son, but I can give you closure," he said. "Make sure you call me."