

{ Alumni Profile }

# RAPID DNA TECHNOLOGY: COMING TO A POLICE STATION NEAR YOU

by Crystal Stryker

*Chris Asplen '89 has a vision: that forensic DNA should be tested and matched against a national database in just ninety minutes. Traditional crime labs would be free of routine identifications and turn their attention to more challenging DNA tests, for example, involving mixed samples or aged specimens.*

*The new model is based on new "rapid" DNA technology. Asplen's vision is to make rapid DNA a global practice. The technology to do this, according to the Global Alliance for Rapid DNA Testing—the trade organization he directs—is about eighteen to twenty-four months away from the beginning stages of implementation.*

## HOW IT WOULD WORK

A typical forensic DNA test examines sixteen loci on the vast DNA double helix; however, by the time samples are processed through the backlog of previously submitted evidence and go through the traditional analysis process, it can take weeks or months for profiles to be developed and submitted to the databases for comparison. With rapid DNA instrumentation and chemistry, the test would be simple enough for a layperson to conduct in a police station or mobile unit—without the need for an outside lab. Results are in the same form as those developed at a lab, and, like the national fingerprint database, the profile can be checked against arrestees, convicted offenders, and crime scene profiles in other states.

"The databasing technology is as important as the actual analysis technology," said Asplen, a resident of Doylestown, Pa.

In the United States, 156 labs that meet accreditation standards test DNA, but given the length of time it takes in that system,

Asplen said he would rather have testing instruments that are capable of analyzing more simplistic samples that don't require the expertise of a laboratory and that can be used in thousands of places nationwide (and perhaps globally), such as police stations and border crossings.

"Imagine how great it would be to have an instrument in every U.S. consulate's office," he said. "If someone claims they deserve a visa into the United States because of a familial relationship, we could have that person provide a cheek swab and have that child provide a sample. In ninety minutes we could figure out whether this claim is legitimate."

Part of Asplen's day job is consulting; he founded Asplen and Associates last year for the purpose of educating people on "how to integrate forensic DNA and DNA databases into criminal justice systems in a way that is consistent with privacy and human rights concerns."



He advises governments, law enforcement organizations, corporations, and even a few venture capitalists interested in investing in various forensic technologies.

Over the course of his career, he has testified before the Parliament of South Africa and the Parliament of the Philippines, and worked with the ministers of justice for The Netherlands, Turkey, and Chile.

Prior to establishing Asplen and Associates, he was vice presi-

dent of international public affairs for Gordon Thomas Honeywell Governmental Affairs.

“My approach is to offer ideas and options, not to tell a government or law enforcement agency what to do,” he said. “I explain the technology and its potential as a crime-fighting tool. When a concern is raised, I offer information as to how other countries might handle this particular issue or how they balance civil rights and crime fighting.”

## BECOMING A DNA EXPERT

Asplen entered the Law School in 1986, specifically intent on becoming a prosecutor more so than an attorney. He quickly found that he’d chosen the right place and found a mentor in Professor **Gary Gildin**.

“Professor Gildin really drilled it into us that we would win 95 percent of our cases before we ever walked through the courtroom door,” he said. Along with National Trial Moot teammates **Brian Ansell ’89**, **Lori (Barger) Ulrich ’89**, **Susan Evashavik ’89**, **Charles Haddick Jr. ’89**, and **Wendy (Strickland) O’Connor ’89**, he remembers competing and doing quite well.

His first job after law school was in the Bucks County District Attorney’s Office investigating and prosecuting sexual assault crimes and child abuse. In 1996, he became director of the National District Attorney’s Association, where he managed a Department of Justice (DOJ) grant and happened to be at the forefront of DNA evidence as its use became more common. After first being appointed as an assistant U.S. attorney, then-Attorney General Janet Reno appointed him executive director of the National Commission on the Future of DNA Evidence at the DOJ. There, he managed twenty international experts, including two Nobel Prize winners, on various aspects of forensic DNA with the goal of maximizing its potential in the U.S. criminal justice system. For his work on the commission, Reno’s successor John Ashcroft awarded Asplen the Attorney General’s Award for Contributions to Public Safety.

Asplen left the DOJ for the private sector in 2002. Since then, he’s taught, lectured, and founded DNA 4 Africa, an organization dedicated to implementing DNA testing to combat human rights violence, such as genocide and mass rape.

When asked what the most rewarding part of his career has been, Asplen’s answer is a practical one. “At the time I was working at the DOJ and trying to maximize the crime-fighting potential of a relatively new but powerful technology, my daughter was just a couple years old,” he said. “I would look at her and think: how much safer am I making the world for her? That was my biggest motivator.”

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