

Bringing Justice to Cold Case Sexual Assault Survivors: 3rd Annual Cold Case Sexual Assault Symposium Presenter Bios

Shannon Hodder

Shannon Hodder serves as a Senior Assistant District Attorney with the DeKalb County District Attorney's Office in Decatur, Georgia, where she leads the Cold Case Task Force and prosecutes complex homicide cases, including those that have remained unresolved for decades. She has tried more than thirty murder cases to conviction—several of them cold cases, including a serial rapist and killer whose crimes spanned five states, a 20-year unidentified child homicide, a no-body murder, and a rape and double murder from 1990 involving Investigative Genetic Genealogy (IGG).

A founding member of the DeKalb County Cold Case Task Force, Ms. Hodder collaborates with the FBI, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), the Medical Examiner's Office and private lab partners to bring resolution to long-unsolved cases. She has been instrumental in securing more than one million dollars in federal grant funding to advance cold case investigations and to identify unidentified human remains through IGG. She is FBI-trained and certified in IGG, bringing cutting-edge forensic techniques into the courtroom.

In addition to her trial work, Ms. Hodder frequently presents at national and regional conferences on cold case prosecution, forensic genealogy, and strategies for engaging communities in long-term missing persons cases. Her expertise has been featured on A&E's *Killer Cases* and Oxygen's *Snapped*.

Ms. Hodder holds both a Juris Doctor and a Bachelor of Arts in History and Philosophy from Georgia State University. She has dedicated over 15 years of public service to the pursuit of justice, with a particular focus on giving a voice to the voiceless and bringing long-awaited closure to victims' families.

Matt McLendon

Matt McLendon is a Supervising Investigator with the DeKalb County District Attorney's Office, where he leads specialized units addressing Cold Case, SAKI, Human Trafficking/Internet Crimes, Crimes Against the Elderly and Disabled, Firearms Violence Prevention, and Anti-Corruption. A 20-plus-year law-enforcement veteran, he is a recipient of the International Homicide Investigators Association (IHIA) Award of Excellence for Homicide Investigations, recognizing leadership on complex, victim-centered homicide work.

McLendon began his career with the DeKalb County Police Department, serving as a Detective and later a Sergeant in the Homicide/Assault Unit. He joined the DeKalb County District Attorney's Office in 2020, where he was assigned to the Major Case

(Homicide & Gangs) Unit. From 2022 to 2024, he supervised the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Unit, and he now oversees multiple specialized investigative teams countywide.

A founding member of the DeKalb County Cold Case Task Force established in 2022, with partners including the Medical Examiner's Office, DKPD, GBI, FBI, and a private forensic lab, McLendon helped design the task force's framework and secure more than \$1 million in federal support, including the BJA's MUHR Grant (2022) and the Prosecuting Cold Cases Using DNA Grant (2023). These investments expanded investigative genetic genealogy (IGG), unidentified-remains work, and a countywide audit of unsolved homicides. He is among the first Georgia law enforcement officers to complete the FBI training in IGG.

McLendon's DNA-driven strategy helped resolve the 1990 double murder and rape of siblings Pamela and John Sumpter. By ensuring national DNA uploads and correlating an out-of-state assault, he identified and arrested Kenneth Perry. On March 11, 2025, a jury returned guilty verdicts on all counts, resulting in three consecutive life sentences plus 100 years.

Known for a victims-first, data-driven approach, McLendon blends advanced forensics, disciplined case management, and community engagement to deliver justice in the most challenging cases.

Troy Armstrong

Sergeant Troy Armstrong began his law enforcement career in 1991 and retired in 2020 from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department. In 1999, he was assigned to the Cold Case Homicide Task Force, where he developed a deep expertise in cold case investigations. Upon the disbandment of the unit, Sergeant Armstrong transferred to the Sexual Assault Unit, and in 2002, he began independently pursuing cold case sexual assault investigations.

In 2005, Sergeant Armstrong proposed and successfully established the Sexual Assault Cold Case Unit, where he served as the unit's full-time detective for nine years. Under his leadership, the unit made significant strides in bringing justice to victims and their families, working on over 2,200 cold case sexual assault cases and resolving more than 230. The unit, widely regarded as one of the few of its kind in the 2000s, was recognized for its innovative approach to solving these difficult and often time-sensitive cases.

Sergeant Armstrong is featured in the book "Delayed Justice: Inside Stories from America's Best Cold Case Detectives," which highlights his significant contributions to the field.

Throughout his career, Sergeant Armstrong received numerous accolades for his dedication and achievements. Among these is the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department's Medal of Valor, its highest honor. He also earned the North Carolina

Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCCASA) Legislative Award and the CMPD Chief's Award of Excellence for his instrumental work in the creation of the North Carolina Sexual Battery Law. In 2011, he was awarded the Excellence in Policing Award for his successful investigation and prosecution of a serial rapist from the 1990s. In 2015, he received the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office's inaugural Above and Beyond Award for his work on a complex cold case rape prosecution. In 2024, he was commended by the North Carolina Attorney General for his contributions to addressing the state's backlog of sexual assault kits.

Sergeant Armstrong has also played a key role in assisting law enforcement agencies both in the United States and internationally, including units in the Netherlands and Canada, in establishing and advancing their own cold case investigative efforts.

Currently, Sergeant Armstrong serves as a Cold Case Investigations Specialist with the North Carolina Department of Justice, where he continues to apply his extensive expertise to solving cold cases and supporting law enforcement agencies across the state.

Angela Garcia-Lamarca

Angela Garcia-Lamarca is a Senior Assistant District Attorney in the Durham District Attorney's Office. She is the SAKI cold case prosecutor and Team Lead for the Special Victims Unit. Garcia-Lamarca was a Mary Dowd Scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she earned a bachelor's degree with honors in History and Music Performance. Several years later she returned to UNC-Chapel Hill to complete the JD/MSW dual degree program. Garcia-Lamarca was an Ilene Nelson Fellow, a Bergstrom Child Welfare Fellow, and recipient of the North Carolina Child Welfare Collaborative Scholarship. At UNC, she served as a staff writer for the First Amendment Law Review Journal, Law-Related Education Coordinator on the Pro Bono Board of Directors, Guardian ad Litem Coordinator for the Child Action Student Group, and co-founded the Latino Legal Initiative. As an ADA who has served in both Mecklenburg and Durham counties, she has prosecuted primarily domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse. In April 2023, she received the Victim Services Award for Distinguished Prosecutor from the U.S. Attorney's Offices for the Eastern and Middle Districts of North Carolina and the Victim Services Interagency Council of North Carolina. Garcia-Lamarca's area of interest is prosecuting complex, violent crimes because it presents an opportunity to provide meaningful interaction with and advocacy on behalf of those who survive them.

Tammy Tavaréz

Tammy is a Victim Advocate with the Durham Police Department's Cold Case Unit and Victim Services Unit. Tammy Tavaréz has approximately six years of experience working with victims affected by violent crimes including sexual assaults, domestic

violence, and aggravated assaults. She has a Bachelor of Science in Criminology from The College of New Jersey where she was inducted into the Criminal Justice Honor Society, Alpha Phi Sigma. In Durham, Tavarez was hired through the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative grant (SAKI) where she played a vital role in addressing the city's sexual assault kit backlog and enhancing victim engagement. Prior to her current role, she was a Domestic Violence Advocate with Safe Horizon in partnership with the New York City Police Department (NYPD). Additionally, to her advocacy work, Advocate Tavarez has earned her certifications in Mental Health First Aid Certification for both adults and youth as well as a Victim Services Practitioner Certification through the North Carolina Victim Assistance Network (NCVAN). Most recently, in August 2025, she achieved her National Victim Advocate certification through the National Advocate Credentialing Program. Tammy Tavarez is passionate about victim advocacy and committed to the victims she serves.

Samantha Pendergrass

Samantha Pendergrass has been an Assistant District Attorney in the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's office for over 27 years. She has prosecuted homicide, sexual assault, child physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, and juvenile crime. She teaches sexual assault law, cross examination, evidence-based prosecution, and expert testimony to police departments, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners, and prosecutors across the state. Pendergrass graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill with majors in History and Philosophy. She also completed her Juris Doctor at UNC. She enjoys the challenges that cold case sexual assaults present, and the deep satisfaction gained from seeing survivors finally achieve justice. Pendergrass currently supervises the Misdemeanor Special Victims Team and serves on the Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team and the Domestic Violence High Risk Team.

Heather Waleski

Heather is a Family Nurse Practitioner for the Atrium Health Child Protection team and Dove House Children's Advocacy Center. In this role Heather conducts Child Medical Evaluations for children who may have experienced child maltreatment in the forms of neglect, physical or sexual abuse. Heather was previously the Forensic Program Coordinator at Atrium Health Union in Monroe, North Carolina for 7 years. Heather has been a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner since 2008 and has been teaching SANE training courses since 2011. Heather is currently one of the lead SANE content experts for Fayetteville State University's SANE training. Prior to becoming a Family Nurse Practitioner, Heather was an Emergency Department Nurse for 17 years working in several different emergency departments and level one trauma centers in Charlotte and New York City.

Nathaniel "Nate" Thompson

(Retired) Assistant Special Agent in Charge (ASAC) Nate Thompson was the supervisor of the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (NCSBI) Cold Case Investigation Team. ASAC Thompson was employed with the NCSBI for 28 years. He graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is also a graduate of the North Carolina State University 74" Administrative Officers Management Program (AOMP) for law enforcement executives. During his law enforcement career, he has investigated numerous homicides, high level drug trafficking organizations, fraud, and corruption investigations throughout the state of North Carolina. ASAC Thompson and his team assist law enforcement agencies across the state pursuing unsolved homicide and unidentified human remains cases.

Destinie Denny

Destinie Denny is an Assistant Special Agent in Charge within the Cold Case Investigative Team of the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation. Prior to the NCSBI, she attended Appalachian State University and began her law enforcement career as a patrol officer with the Burlington Police Department. She served as a uniformed patrol officer for several years before beginning her career with the NCSBI in 2015. She served as the criminal agent for Rockingham and Caswell Counties for ten years before being assigned to the Cold Case Unit. She has been involved with the use of Forensic Investigative Genetic Genealogy to solve cold cases, to include the Mary Davis case with the Lexington Police Department.

Ruffin Sykes

Ruffin is an Assistant City Attorney with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department's Cold Case Unit. In this position, Ruffin works closely with cold case homicide and sexual assault detectives to evaluate cases, review evidence, track down witnesses, develop investigative strategies, and make charging recommendations. Prior to joining CMPD, Ruffin served as an Assistant District Attorney with the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office on the Special Victims Team, where he prosecuted adult sexual assault cases and crimes of domestic violence. It was in this position that Ruffin developed a passion for seeking justice for cold case sexual assault survivors. Ruffin began his career as a prosecutor in Forsyth County, where he prosecuted a range of general felony and misdemeanor offenses. Ruffin received his undergraduate degree in 2009 from Duke University and his law degree in 2015 from Campbell University School of Law.

Michael Melendez

Michael Melendez is a 26-year veteran of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, where he currently serves as a Cold Case Detective. In this role, he works to bring resolution to long-unsolved violent crimes by re-examining evidence with modern forensic techniques, developing new leads, and providing closure to victims' and their families.

Over the course of his career, Detective Melendez dedicated more than two decades to the Sexual Assault Unit, investigating complex and sensitive cases with diligence and compassion. He has been recognized for his commitment to justice and public service, including the 2022 Detective of the Year award, the Chief's Award for Excellence in Policing (2024), and the "Above and Beyond" award for Exemplary Work in the Field of Law Enforcement (2024) by the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office.

Jamie Markham

Jamie joined the School of Government faculty in 2007. His area of interest is criminal law and procedure, with a focus on the law of sentencing, corrections, and the conditions of confinement. Markham earned a bachelor's degree with honors from Harvard and a law degree with high honors from Duke, where he was editor-in-chief of the *Duke Law Journal*. He is a member of the North Carolina Bar. Prior to law school, Markham served five years in the United States Air Force as an intelligence officer and foreign area officer.

Jeff Welty

Jeff joined the School of Government in 2008. He founded and contributes regularly to the *North Carolina Criminal Law Blog*, an award-winning resource visited by approximately 100,000 users each month. He has written for, appeared on, or been quoted in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *TIME*, *Newsweek*, National Public Radio, Bloomberg News, *Lawyers' Weekly*, the *Raleigh News and Observer*, and many other media outlets. His books about capital punishment and digital evidence are widely-used legal references. Welty previously served as the director of the North Carolina Judicial College, which provides training and education to the state's judicial officials.

Welty completed a federal judicial clerkship and worked in private practice before coming to the School. He has taught police, prosecutors, and judges in the United States, Mexico, Canada, Nigeria, Ghana, and Zambia. From 2020 to 2021, he spent two years on leave from the School at the North Carolina Department of Justice, where he led the Special Prosecutions and Law Enforcement Section. Welty earned a J.D. from Duke University School of Law with highest honors.

Michelle Hannon

Michelle Hannon has been with the NC State Crime Laboratory since 2004 assigned to the Forensic Biology section. Michelle is currently a supervisor in Forensic Biology, coordinating the outsourcing of sexual assault kits, the STIMS Administrator and assists the NCSBI Cold Case Investigator Unit.

Amanda Overman

Amanda Overman has been with the lab for over 20 years. Her first experience was as an intern in the Forensic Biology Section. After graduating from UNC Chapel Hill with a B.S. in Clinical Laboratory Science, she was hired by the lab as a DNA Database Analyst. Amanda processed Convicted Offender samples for CODIS in this role. She then pursued a position in the casework section. As a Casework DNA Analyst, Amanda worked a wide variety of cases and testified to the results in court when needed. Amanda has served as a Supervisor and the CODIS Administrator for North Carolina during her tenure with the lab.

Karen Morrow

Forensic Scientist Manager (FSM) Karen Morrow graduated with a B.S. in Biology from The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in 1999. Karen has been a member of the Latent Evidence Section of the NC State Crime Laboratory since May 1, 2000. Karen's primary role since 2012 is to oversee the daily administrative and technical operations of the Latent Evidence Section, which provides latent fingerprint and footwear/tire impression analysis on items of evidence submitted to the NCSCL. Karen is a Certified Latent Print Examiner (CLPE) with the International Association for Identification (IAI), a Certified Public Manager, a North Carolina General Instructor, a current member of the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD), a Certified ANAB Accreditation Assessor, a current member of the North Carolina chapter of the IAI and Chair of the North Carolina AFIS Committee.