NCW 2007: The Many Faces of Chemistry

Career Profile: FBI Special Agent

by J. Douglas Kouns

Describe your present position.

I am a Supervisory Special Agent in the Indianapolis Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), supervising the Field Intelligence Group. I recently finished an 18-month temporary assignment from the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Countermeasures Unit, Chemical Counter-Terrorism Team at FBI Headquarters in Washington, DC.

Did you get to your present position because of your background in chemistry and area of specialization or did life experience(s) take you there?

After earning a B.S. in chemistry at college, I first taught high school chemistry and then worked in the electroplating industry. At one point, I ran into an FBI Agent, Tom Smith (now retired) who had been my junior high school English teacher. Through him, I became interested and took the entrance exam. About a year later, I was off to the FBI Academy in Quantico, VA. My first assignment was to the Sioux Falls, SD Resident Agency. I worked a variety of types of criminal and national security investigations during my six years there.

In 2003, I was transferred to the Bloomington, IN Resident Agency. About two years ago, I successfully applied for an 18-month term supervisory position in the WMD Countermeasures Unit at FBI Headquarters. My chemistry background definitely helped me attain this position.

In what areas of chemistry did you specialize?

I would say I specialize in the chemistry of weapons of mass destruction. Of concern to me in my position are: nerve agents such as Sarin, Soman, and VX; choking agents such as chlorine and phosgene; blood agents and poisons such as cyanides; blister agents such as mustard and Lewisite; and a variety of toxic industrial chemicals that could be potentially used as a WMD. It is important to understand the production processes, types of precursors, equipment, storage, legitimate usage, and availabilities of the chemicals to prevent terrorists from acquiring, producing, and using them as weapons.

Do you use chemistry on a daily basis? Describe what you do on a day-to-day basis.

On the Chemical Counter-Terrorism Team I used my background in chemistry to some degree on a daily basis. I was involved with many inter-agency working groups involving agencies that also have chemical WMD concerns. We work closely with the chemical industry in finding solutions to chemical security issues. We also are involved with the governments of other countries that have the same concerns and issues with the potential threat of chemical WMDs.

In my current position, I don't use chemistry every day and actually very rarely. It is, however, very helpful from time to time when an investigation arises involving a potential threat of the use of a WMD.

I would say I specialize in the chemistry of weapons of mass destruction.

photo by SA Russell Coleman

J. Douglas Kouns

Describe the personal skills that have played an essential role in your present position.

Although I don't use chemistry every day, my background as a science teacher and chemist has helped me immensely in my job. The problem-solving skills I attained as a chemist have carried over well into the FBI. The interpersonal skills I learned as a teacher are important too. Being able to communicate and relate to people, including those who may have committed a crime, in a way that induces them to give you the information you need is crucial.

What advice do you have for those who wish to pursue this or some other nontraditional career path?

The FBI typically has about 60,000 applicants for the Special Agent position each year. About 500 make it through the selection process and training program. I would recommend that anyone first finish their education and do exceptional work. In addition, do everything you can to set yourself apart. For example, learn a language, become a pilot, be involved in community service and volunteer work, take up a martial art, coach a youth league, etc.

There are also many non-Agent positions for chemists in the FBI. In addition to the WMD Countermeasures Unit, our laboratory in Quantico, VA generally has openings in units such as Chemical and Biological Sciences, Hazardous Materials Response, and Explosives.

How and where can readers learn more about this type of career?

For more information, visit *http://www.FBI.gov*, or contact your local field office's applicant coordinator.

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FBI Special Agent, continued

In striving to achieve, we will all make mistakes and make them regularly; what makes us successful is how we learn and deal with them.

Are there other thoughts or lessons learned that you would like to share with our readers?

I've learned the most important things about my job and life from my failures rather than my successes. In striving to achieve, we will all make mistakes and make them regularly; what makes us successful is how we learn and deal with them.

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Related Resources

1. Gooch, E. Eugene. Chemistry and Warfare: A General Studies Course. *J. Chem. Educ.* **2002**, *79*, 820.
2. Kovac, Jeffrey. Review of *The Eleventh Plague: The Politics of Biological and Chemical Warfare* by Leonard A. Cole *J. Chem. Educ.* **1997**, *74*, 765.