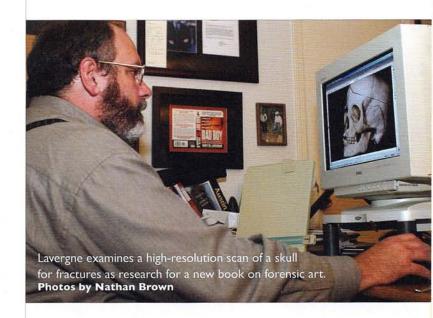
Crime writer in the Tower

He's a UT admissions counselor by day
but stalks serial killers at night

by Missy Lay



By day, in his first floor Tower office, University of Texas at Austin director of admissions research, Gary Lavergne, analyzes hundreds of statistics regarding admissions. By night, however, his research changes from thousands to a handful, writing about some of the country's most notorious and gruesome serial killers.

While Lavergne's day job has earned him the nickname of the "UT research guru," his writing at night has turned into three crime books and fame as one of the country's best crime authors. His work earned him a one-hour special on the History Channel in April 2004, honoring the six best U.S. crime writers, another one being Mark Fuhrman (famous for the O.J. Simpson case). "Why they picked me, I have no idea," Lavergne says smiling. Unlike the other writers honored, Lavergne started writing crime because he was sick of nighttime television during his on-the-road job. He traveled to universities for the College Board helping administrators understand the SAT.

A love for history and research is what really makes him tick as a writer. His curiosity to clarify how events really happened drives him to dig up the unusual side of the infamous men in his books."He is interested in finding details and interpreting what other people would not pay attention to," says coworker Kedra Ishop, UT associate director of admissions. "He can make [the information] interesting to everyone."

Raised in Louisiana, Lavergne attended the University of Louisiana at Lafayette earning a B.A. in social studies education and a master's in education. He never imagined his future would entail writing crime novels. He taught history, was the only person in the United States who held administrative positions for both the SAT and the ACT and between jobs, performed stand-up comedy. When he finally did start writing, it was not for the sake of fame and fortune. Lavergne has a passion for getting historical facts correct, especially when it

comes to depicting mass murderers.

Behind the soft Louisiana drawl, his eyes sparkle when he talks about his beloved research. For many it is hard to believe he could chronicle the shocking material in his books. Lavergne, known for his humor and kind nature, is even a "dad away from home" to Margaret Furber, a senior nursing student who works in the admissions office. "He's such a warm and inviting person, it's so strange that he writes these books," Furber says.

Interest in his crime books has attracted a wide variety of readers and earned him not only a History Channel special, but also interviews on the "Today Show" and C-SPAN. Although the characters in his books may seem surreal, these men have committed some of the most horrific crimes in Texas history.

Charles Whitman, who gunned down 45 people inside and around the UT Tower, is the focus of his first book, Sniper in the Tower. The second, Bad Boy from Rosebud, profiles Austin serial killer Kenneth McDuff, known for his sadistic killings, rapes and beatings.

While researching for this book, the hunt for truth did not stop at the police reports; Lavergne went directly to the source. He met for hours with McDuff while he was still on death row. When coworker Ted Pfeifer, University registrar, heard about his interview, he could not believe it. "I wonder what I would do sitting in front of an animal like that," Pfeifer says, "and I don't mean to degrade the animal species in general."

His most recently published book, Worse than Death, concerns a Moroccan national named Abdelkrim Belachheb who walked into a Dallas nightclub and gunned down seven people. Lavergne asked Furber to proofread one of the chapters. Furber was amazed by how gruesomely real it read, "I felt it had to be something that the author just wrote to grasp your attention."

The TV programs, interviews and acclaim are nice trades for the hard work Lavergne has put into his books, and he feels very fortunate for the success. After all, he entered the whole situation without any idea what he was getting into. He wrote *Sniper in the Tower* not knowing if the manuscript was just going to sit in his attic the rest of his life.

His wife Laura, who Lavergne claims is the "secret to his success," helped him copy edit. She knew how difficult it was to go to print. Laura was a journalism major in college and had many friends who sat on their well-written works never to see them published. Lavergne, luckily, found a literary agent who has remained

Lavergne asserts that crime is the easiest nonfiction to write because the facts are all there, people just need to be good at discovering them. While writing Sniper in the Tower, he found that many people believe incorrect facts. "People think [Whitman] was an honor student and a wonderful

young man," Lavergne says. "His GPA was 1.9 and he beat his wife."

with him through the years.

Lavergne has encountered claims that Whitman suffered from a tumor causing him to commit

murders. "If you look into medical research, there is no evidence that a tumor causes such actions [to last] for two days," Lavergne says. "It could be five seconds, but not a planned-out two-day event."

Even though Lavergne gained the most acclaim for *Sniper* in the Tower, his motivation for the book did not come from his job. All his research on the darkest day in University history was done before he set foot into the building as an employee. "I would have never believed I would be working in the place I spent so much time researching and writing about," Lavergne says breaking from his usual cheerful manner as he walks past the Tower elevator where Whitman made his last ride. It was three years after the publication of the book that Lavergne interviewed for the admissions office job.

Lavergne was not questioned about his book during his interview and says he never receives any questions about his book from coworkers or the University. He does not allow reporters to come onto campus for interviews and tries to separate his two jobs as best he can. "I know about his books from knowing him personally, but if I only knew him through the office I would have never known," Ishop says. "We just don't see that part of him here."

Although he doesn't seek it, reporters have dubbed him the "Tower expert." After all, Charles Whitman was the first school sniper in the United States. Lavergne was interviewed following the DC Sniper Shootings and Columbine, and he has made appearances on "Dateline" and MSNBC. After similar social crimes in Japan, Japanese television turned to Lavergne as an expert, showing up at his home to interview him. "His work can reach so many different audiences," Laura Lavergne says. "He has reached out to true crime buffs, to history buffs, to law enforcement, lawyers and really any general audience."

Lavergne's family is supportive of their husband's and father's books. However, he separates the time he spends with family from his writing. He will stay up until 3 or 4 a.m. working because when he gets home he first spends his evening with his family." He didn't feel like he had the right to interrupt our lives," Laura says. As soon as his family goes to bed, he works late and weekends interviewing and researching for his next crime story.

"I have learned that hard work will bring success because he didn't just stumble into this," his daughter Amy, a sophomore at UT, says. Amy sees her dad as an inspiration and a real example of commitment. "He knew he had to work at it to get there."

As far as focusing all his time on writing, Lavergne has no reluctance saying he would never exclusively write mysteries as a profession. He feels very fortunate to be at UT and writing is not where he was trained. "I'm an admissions guy; I'm going to be here for life," Lavergne says.

Few people have TV specials and acclaimed books for their hobbies, but as far as Lavergne is concerned, it's just moonlighting.

