

Winning trial by computer

Tempe firm helps convict ex-Klansman

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A Scottsdale software company this week helped nail a former Klu Klux Klan member in the 1963 Alabama church bombing that killed four Black girls.

A unique database developed by Blue Knight Technology Inc. helped the U.S. Attorney's Office in Birmingham organize the enormous amount of evidence, testimony and historical data that helped convict Thomas Blanton Jr., 62, Tuesday in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

The bombing was the nation's deadliest single act of violence during the civil-rights era.

The database, called EL CID! for electronic case investigations database, was created by company founder John Stevens, a former senior assistant U.S. attorney for Arizona. He developed it as a tool for prosecuting his own complex cases.

"In 1985, my first case in Washington (D.C.) on the court side was a massive racketeering case, and we had rooms filled with stuff we had to go through," Stevens said. "When we finally got convictions, it had eaten up a year of my life and a year in the lives of my colleagues. I said there has to be a better way."

Stevens, 49, said he began learning the ropes of computer programming when laptops became available for courtroom use.

"I literally taught myself database design and programming," he said. "It was a case of enlightened self-interest."

EL CID! is designed to not only store and organize all the data needed in a criminal case, but also to continuously update the material with courtroom notes, interviews and testimony. In the courtroom, a single laptop can take the place of legal assistants running back and forth with documents.

"Lawyers are constantly looking for stuff, and it drives them crazy," Stevens said. "With EL CID!, everything is at their fingertips."

Bill Smith, litigation support specialist for the U.S. attorney in northern Alabama, said Blue Knight's software was essential in sorting through nearly 11,000 pages of evidence, some of which was 38 years old.

"I can't imagine how you would do it manually," said Smith, who discovered the EL CID! software before the trial at a U.S. Justice Department demonstration.

The EL CID! software is under consideration for use nationwide by the Justice Department, he said. For presenting evidence to the jury during trial, Smith said his office relied on the "sanctions" software produced by another Arizona company, Tempe-based, Verdict Systems.

Stevens said that to make his program available to prosecutors around the country, he had to quit the U.S. Attorney's Office to avoid a conflict of interest. He opened Blue Knight about a year ago, along with his partner, Jimmy Wood, who is now chief operations officer.

Blue Knight is about to market a related database for use by attorneys in civil cases, according to Eric Jones, vice president of business development for Blue Knight.

Stevens said that the use of EL CID! in the Alabama hate-crime case is especially gratifying.

"I feel very proud," Stevens said. "It's the highest purpose to assist in bringing someone like that to justice."



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John Stevens (left), founder of Blue Knight Technology, and Eric Jones, head of business development, are covered by a projection of EL CID! software, which helped convict a former Klu Klux Klan member of murder.