The latent print examiner faces his questioner, palms sweating. He licks his lips, knowing some hard questions are coming his way. Questions that will challenge his analysis, that will try to rattle him into admitting he’s not sure of his results.

On this day, the “questioner” is an expert examiner and the “examiner” is a student in the Latent Print Examiner Training Program funded by the Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and hosted by the National Forensic Science Technology Center (NFSTC). On another day, the trial and the testimony will be real, and the no-longer-student examiner will face the same kind of questioning from a defense attorney.

“It was extremely nerve-wracking. Every one of us had the jitters,” says Chris Gary, a latent print examiner with the Greenville County (S.C.) Department of Public Safety. “If I had to pick one of the 10 sessions in the training, I would say the mock testimony was the most difficult and the most rewarding. If I can be adequate in front of the expert, I hope I can then do as well with a defense attorney.”

Over a span of eight months from October 2009 through June 2010, Gary and 14 other students made five two-week trips to the NFSTC facility in Largo, Fla., for the mock testimony session and other training classes related to latent print examination. In between sessions, the students worked on extracurricular assignments and networked online with each other and with their instructors using the NFSTC Online Learning System.

Instructor Mike Jordahl of Ron Smith and Associates, the agency that contracted with NFSTC to develop and present the curriculum, says the course is geared toward a beginning examiner trainee and it provides intense immersion in a number of different areas. Prior to NIJ’s funding this type of immersion training, examiner trainees had to search for single-unit courses offered at various agencies. Following that route, it could take them years to achieve the same level of knowledge.

Jordahl says that the Latent Print Examiner Training gets new examiners “off on the right foot and gives them all the classes they need to get started in the field. It’s a whole lot better to have all your training at the beginning and then be able to apply that training to your work experience. The students learn correct procedures right from the beginning.”

Both Gary and Shelly Progovitz, a forensic science technician with the Charles County (Md.) Sheriff’s Office, found themselves needing to move into latent print examination due to pending retirements within their departments. Progovitz, a crime scene technician, has returned to her agency and worked with the soon-to-retire examiners in preparation for moving into the field permanently.

“There were so many different techniques I learned that I’ll be able to apply in my work,” she says. “The most interesting was learning about palm print techniques, and how to properly position partial palm prints based on ridge flow and use that to ‘search smart’ to decrease the amount of time in the analysis phase.”

“Right now, with all the funding issues that local police departments face, they really need these trainings that are sponsored by NIJ for their beginning examiners. It’s a great opportunity,” Jordahl says, adding that he recently retired from the Rapid City (S.D.) Police Department and his former employers received the benefit of having their new examiner selected to attend the training.

Local police departments can use this training to stretch their funding because NFSTC, the host agency for NIJ’s Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, offers it at no cost to students and their agencies. Food and lodging expenses are also paid. Potential trainees do need to apply and pass a visual acuity examination before being accepted into the program.
“The visual acuity assessment is completed online by the training candidate under the supervision of a proctor,” explains Eileen Fynan, instructional services manager at NFSTC. “This assessment is designed to measure ability to identify very specific criteria such as fine detail, including gradients, pattern similarities and differences. The results are evaluated by an independent panel of pattern evidence examiners and are used in part to determine acceptance into the training program. All candidate names and agency information are replaced with a unique code for evaluation purposes.”

The students selected received training from nine different instructors over the course of nine months, 10 sessions and 472 hours of training. At the end of the program, all 15 trainees achieved scores of 80 percent or better on individual course assessments and on the comprehensive overall program assessment. In a three-part mock International Association for Identification exam, students achieve average grades of 85.4 percent on the written assessment, 98.4 percent on pattern recognition and 76.8 percent on comparisons.

The classroom instruction that helped students achieve those outstanding scores was not the only benefit derived from the class, according to Gary.

“Not only did we learn the foundation of the science and get hands-on experience with fingerprints, but because we were together in the classroom for 10 weeks, we built a strong network we can use for the rest of our careers,” he says.

The next session of Latent Print Training will start in fall 2011. Register on the Really Simply Syndication feed at the NFSTC website (http://www.nfstc.org) to receive announcements about this and other training opportunities.