

## **Jack Bauer, Magnum, P.I. and—Bernie Youngblood, Register of Deeds**

WAYNE COUNTY, MICHIGAN - Government agencies are often engaged in exciting, covert crime fighting activities that could and sometimes do, make great action-movie fodder. State-of-the-art crime investigation procedures are developed and executed to trap even the savviest criminal minds. The masterminds of these crime fighting measures are among the elite in the ranks of the CIA, the FBI, federal and state special forensics units across the nation and—the Wayne County, MI Register of Deeds office?

Yes, it is true, Bernard J. Youngblood, Wayne County (home of Detroit), Michigan Register of Deeds, has introduced covert undercover investigating and other creative procedure to root out fraud and stop other crimes related to his office. A Register of Deeds' office, which is charged with recording documents such as deeds, titles, mortgages, oil and gas leases and death certificates, is not typically known as a place for TV-drama-esque crime investigation tactics, but Youngblood says it is his job to protect the integrity of his office and the documents he is charged with recording, and that if that means getting creative in tactics, he'll do it.

“I became Register of Deeds in 2001, Early into my second term in 2004, I knew we had some people in my own office perpetrating fraud,” said Youngblood. “The integrity of county records was in jeopardy, as well as that of my entire staff.”

Youngblood became aware of possible fraud when he discovered a recently recorded document bearing the registration number from a past year. Youngblood knew he would need to investigate, but feared that a formal investigation utilizing internal law enforcement within a county of this size would be the talk of the water cooler and, as the perpetrators would be aware of the investigation, would yield less than desired results.

So Youngblood set-up a covert undercover operation with a private investigator posing as a worker with a private contractor with which the Deeds office was already planning to do business. Hart Intercivic of Austin Texas had been hired to transfer and manage the land records for Youngblood's office. Youngblood worked with David Hart, Chairman of Hart InterCivic to plant a private investigator in Hart Intercivic's Wayne County team. The county Prosecutor agreed to support Youngblood's plan.

When the new Hart contract was announced to the deeds' office staff and the Hart team was introduced, standing amongst the Hart employees wearing a bright HART logo shirt was an undercover P.I. For large, two million-plus population county like Wayne, the records transition Hart was conducting was anticipated to be extremely complex and very vendor interactive. The employees were expecting to be called upon to assist the Hart personnel in gaining in-depth knowledge of the current system. The undercover P.I. was as employees expected all Hart employees would be, very thorough in his questioning of staff members. Within just a few months, two employees within the office were discovered to be the ones perpetrating the crimes Youngblood suspected, the employees were released of their duties and subsequently submitted guilty pleas. Youngblood's set-up worked—not bad police work for a guy that records documents for a living.

Shortly after busting his internal perpetrators of fraud, Youngblood uncovered a large, related property tax payment scam involving over 300 homes that has resulted in ongoing civil action.

The experience gave Youngblood a penchant for catching crooks and Youngblood is now a national leader among Registers of Deeds in fighting document fraud. In 2005, Youngblood founded and funded the first in the nation Document Fraud Task Force within his office. Currently, four sheriff deputies and two prosecuting attorneys are joined with specific members of his staff and located within the Registers facilities. This task force is directing 100% of their time toward investigating mortgage and deed fraud within the county. Thus far, over 200 cases have been opened and the team has earned a 100% conviction rate on perpetrators brought to trial. And just last month, the Wayne County Register of Deeds successfully activated their land records data management system designed in cooperation with Hart Intercivic to streamline the recording process and make it not only more secure, but also eventually provide same-day document recording.

The Wayne County Registers of Deeds office may not yet rival the FBI in its covert operations, and Youngblood may not be the next Jack Bauer, but he has developed and effectively utilized highly innovative procedures and helped put perpetrators of fraud behind bars. But Youngblood remains modest saying simply, “The people of Wayne County elected me to this post to, among other things, protect the integrity of sensitive documents and keep them secure. I and my staff are going to do that however we can.”