

Anthropology & Sociology Department Newsletter
Fall 2019 - Fall 2020



Editor's Welcome

Dear alumni and friends of WCU's Department of Anthropology and Sociology,

Welcome to the 2020 edition of our department newsletter. Over the past year our alumni, students, faculty, and staff have made noteworthy achievements and important contributions to their communities. We have welcomed new colleagues to the department, and we have celebrated the retirement of a beloved faculty member. We have also adapted to living, learning, and teaching under the shadow of a global pandemic, climate crisis, and a national reckoning with our country's history of racism and social inequality.

In the pages that follow you will find highlights of department activities, honors, and awards along with news about alumni, students, and faculty. This year's newsletter was written with the help of two excellent student editors, Malaika Newsome and D Germain. In addition to reading this newsletter, a great way to stay up to date with our department and the related disciplines of Anthropology and Sociology is to like and follow our Facebook page, *WCU Anth and Soc*, at:

<https://www.facebook.com/WCUAnthropologyandSociology/>

Finally, if you would like to make suggestions for future newsletters, please contact faculty editor Dr. Ben Steere (basteere@wcu.edu).



Student editor D Germain at Anthropology Day, 2020, one of the last live events before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. John Williams announces retirement and plans for the future

In 2019, after a remarkably productive 40-year career in academia, Dr. John Williams announced his retirement. In this article by Anthropology major D Germain, we learn about Dr. Williams' winding journey to Cullowhee:

Dr. Williams started his undergraduate experience as an engineering major, but switched to anthropology after one introductory class. He developed an interest in physical anthropology and declared the subfield as his concentration while adding a biology minor to complement it. Dr. Williams was accepted into The Ohio State University for graduate school where he would be paid to teach at the same time. With his teaching job at Ohio State and interests in genetics and paleontology, he knew in the end he wanted to obtain his PhD to teach for a living.

Dr. Williams would be fortunate enough to obtain a one-, two-, then ten-year professor position at the University of North Dakota where he specialized in paleontology. However, bioarchaeology would shift his interest in the discipline as he learned that knowledge of the skeleton can apply to other prehistoric remains. One last shift of interest would occur when he discovered forensic anthropology, as many people were not in the field, and bioarchaeology was becoming more difficult to practice.



Dr. Williams has contributed much to the field of forensic anthropology as he has had quite the impact on the world throughout his career. Dr. Williams has helped with open cases that typically involve missing persons, has been ABFA and AAFS certified for over 25 years, and is referred to as the “historian” in the AAFS for the anthropology section. When asked

about his biggest achievements/accomplishments he said that, “I am most proud of my work with DMORT during 9/11. 9/11 had the biggest impact on people’s lives.” Today, Dr. Williams is still a national instructor for DMORT.

Dr. Williams mentioned his most memorable case, entitled “It came from the Sky.” This case involved a paper bag of human cremains supposed to be scattered and ended up punching through a person's backyard deck. He stated that this was his “most intriguing and satisfying case as no-one's life was in balance and it is well remembered amongst my colleagues.”

At WCU, Dr. Williams is proud of the extraordinary program he has help create while teaching here as well as creating the Forensic Osteology Research Station (FOREST), the second human decomposition facility in the world. He has created long lasting relationships that he will hold close to him, but he stated the one thing he will miss most about WCU is the students.

I, as an up-and-coming professional, asked Dr. Williams, “What are your thoughts on “passing the torch” after your incredible career as a forensic anthropologist?” He stated that, “the next generation will have to find different ways of applying themselves and working in academia, or working as a medical examiner, or working as a morgue assistant. You will need to also find more ways to apply yourselves at a PHD level where you are rather restricted. I believe that morgue assistants will become more important in the future and can definitely see them conducting autopsies or being more involved with the death investigation system and needing only a bachelor’s degree and in-depth training. In all, I am ready to see what the up-and-coming undergraduate students will do in the future.”

One message Dr. Williams wanted to convey was how crucial it was to not forget that we are anthropologists first and that we are a part of a subfield within a subfield of anthropology and we cannot forget about cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology either. He believes that individuals in and out of the field need to realize that forensic anthropology is a part of a bigger picture.

When asked to provide a quote for the next generation of anthropologists he stated, “don’t lose sight of being an anthropologist first; don’t miss the forest for the trees. I believe we specialize too much and don’t look at the big picture as we are different from the other social sciences and other scientists out there, we look at things in a holistic concept, we are anthropologists. “

When asked what he plans to do after he retires Dr. Williams stated that he would like to do the following things: “travel to Australia for an international forensics conference, travel around the US (especially by railroad as it is one of his interests/hobbies), hike along the Appalachian trail to see more of the western mountains, conduct volunteer work with my church and a variety of organizations, and lastly, spend more of my free time on model railroading & amateur radio.”

The department is planning a belated celebration for John’s retirement in Spring 2021. Stay tuned for details!

An adventure and a career starting at Western Carolina University

In this letter from the field, Anthropology alumnus Shawn Jones reflects on how WCU prepared him for a career in archaeology and led him into unexpected adventures. Shawn writes:



Attending Western Carolina University as an undergraduate in 2002, I knew I wanted a fulfilling career working in preservation. After speaking with Dr. Jane Eastman about the archaeology program, I realized my career path was also going to get a little dirt on my hands. From this point on I never looked back. I studied archaeology and forensic anthropology with an amazing group of peers. This led to my first work in archaeology where I truly became hooked. After a few years of

traveling and excavations, I decided that I needed another challenge, so back to Jane and WCU I went for graduate school. I still feel like this was one of the best times in my life! Working with amazing, challenging, and supportive professors as well as a bright dedicated group of student peers was more fulfilling than I can put into words. That experience is what came with me as I ventured out into the big wide world.

I mentioned that I wanted a challenge, and I definitely got one in the form of an Alaskan adventure. The first position I accepted after graduate school was with Klondike Gold Rush (KGLO) National Historic Preservation in Skagway Alaska. What was supposed to be a summer adventure turned into a 10-year career. At first, as a seasonal archaeologist for the National Park Service, I helped with the preservation process of 8 historic structures as well as documented the archaeology along the world renowned 33-mile-long Chilkoot Trail. In the winter, I traveled working on the North Carolina coast, disaster relief with the gulf oil spill, and as an archaeologist with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

In 2014, I accepted the position as the (KLGO) cultural resource program manager and made the transition from a nomadic to a stationary career. Over the years, I have completed some incredibly fulfilling projects such as a full survey of the Chilkoot Trail's twin, The White Pass Trail, which is now used as the White Pass and Yukon Railroad route. Another project I am particularly proud of was the initiation of reoccurring Ice Patch archaeological surveys within KLGO to preserve resources that are now becoming exposed for the first time in millennia. The article produced from this work, "Parkaeology and climate change: Assessing the vulnerability of archaeological resources at Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Alaska" was published

in the *Archaeological Review* from Cambridge. Although this was all a grand adventure, I knew that I always wanted to return home to the mountains of western North Carolina.

In early 2019, I accepted the position as forest zone archaeologist at the Nantahala National Forest and the long trip back home began. I am looking forward to these new adventures and would love the opportunity to work with WCU and interested students to begin their adventures.

Department Welcomes New Faculty

Diana Messer



Dr. Diana Messer is a new faculty member in the ANSO Department. Dr. Messer received her undergraduate degree in Biological Anthropology from Southern Connecticut State University, during which she conducted research in Peru studying cranial vault modification. She received her master's degree in Forensic and Biological Anthropology at Mercyhurst University and her thesis focused on craniometric sexual dimorphism in world populations. Her doctoral degree is in Anatomy from The Ohio State University. Her dissertation focused on, and her primary research

interest is, fracture healing in children - examining what variables influence time of healing in order to assist with cases of suspected child physical abuse.

As a forensic anthropologist, Dr. Messer has worked on over 100 forensic cases, including many forensic archaeological searches and recoveries. She has trained with multiple American Board of Forensic Anthropology-certified forensic anthropologists at various institutions including the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Dr. Messer worked for two years as a forensic anthropologist in support of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) in Hawai'i, where she was certified to work on forensic anthropology cases and material evidence. She worked primarily on the Cabanatuan Project, which represents DPAA's effort to identify unidentified service members from a WWII POW prison camp cemetery in the Philippines. Dr. Messer has mentored undergraduate and graduate students in forensic field recovery, laboratory analysis, and case report writing, including as a postdoctoral faculty member at Mercyhurst University. She has also supervised students on bioarchaeological field sites around the world including Poland and Oman. For fun, Dr. Messer enjoys being outdoors, painting, traveling, and all forms of dance.

Department News and Kudos

- Dr. Sara Snyder Hopkins was awarded a Provost's Scholarship Development grant to do research for a critical edition of the Cherokee singing book for the Sounding Spirit series at Emory University.
- Dr. Preethi Krishan won a College of Arts and Sciences Research Grant for her project titled "Gender, Domestic Violence, and Rights: Patterns in Domestic Violence Adjudication".
- Dr. Katie Zejdlik and her co-investigators Lisa Briggs, and Nuwan Perera received a Provost's Scholarship Development Award for research related to the cadaver dog program. This is the second Provost's grant Dr. Zejdlik has won this year.
- The American Academy of Forensic Sciences recently awarded Dr. Nick Passalacqua with its Outstanding Early Career Achievement Award. This is a major academic accomplishment. Congratulations, Dr. P!



Please Keep in Touch!

Don't hesitate to contact us with your questions, comments, and suggestions. We want to include more alumni news and updates in future newsletters, and we need your help. Please click this link to update your contact information and provide comments, suggestions, or information that we should include in future newsletters: [WCU ANSO alumni survey](#). We want to tell you stories!

You can also contact our newsletter editor, Dr. Ben Steere, at basteere@wcu.edu, if you would prefer to relay updates and stories via email.

Your WCU Anthropology and Sociology Legacy

Here in the Anthropology and Sociology Department, we're adapting to the new realities of university life in the time of COVID-19. Whether we're meeting remotely, sitting far apart and wearing masks in McKee 110, or carefully rotating our students a few at a time through our forensic anthropology lab spaces, we're continuing the important work of teaching, learning, and carrying out research about human cultures and societies. Now more than ever, the world needs the unique perspective that our majors can bring to bear on social issues such as racism, social inequality, and public health.

On behalf of the departmental fundraising committee, Dr. Yiqing Yang, Dr. Jim Veteto, Dr. Sara Snyder-Hopkins, Dr. Ben Steere, and Dr. Katie Zejdlik, we are reaching out to ask for support for our department's Cornerstone Scholarship Fund. The Cornerstone Scholarship is an annual scholarship given to a major or minor in Anthropology, Sociology, or Cherokee Studies with a strong record of academic achievement and demonstrated financial need. Your donation to the scholarship fund directly benefits our students. It relieves them of some of the burdens of student loans and allows them to focus more of their energies on scholarship and community engagement.

Any gift will be deeply appreciated, but please consider a donation of \$50 or more. You can make a gift online at the WCU Make a Gift website. Click [this link](#) to navigate to the site. On the Make a Gift page, choose "Your Gift, Your Choice," and select "Anthropology and Sociology." For more information, or to get helping making a donation, contact: Dr. Ben Steere, Chair of the Fund Raising Committee at: basteere@wcu.edu.