

CREATING A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE FORENSIC SCIENCES AND FAMILIES

Scholar-Citizen Essay

By

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According to the National Institute of Justice, there are over 40,000 sets of unidentified human remains curated in Medical Examiner's offices and other laboratories throughout the United States. This translates to thousands of families wondering about the fate of their missing loved ones—whether they are they still alive and will someday walk through their front door or instead will remain forever lost and nameless.

Forensic Anthropologists have the training to solve these cold cases. Since most of these cold cases are skeletal, an analysis of human bone is critical to resolving who these individuals are and discerning what happened to them. In 2009, Virginia received from the National Institute of Justice a grant to help solve these cold cases ("Solving Cold Cases with DNA") by reopening the cases, extracting DNA, and following new leads. The RU Forensic Science Institute (RUFISI) is assisting the Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (VOCME) with analyses of these cases. As an intern with the RUFISI this semester, I am fortunate to be a part of this process. Throughout the semester, I have examined unidentified human remains from the VOCME (under the supervision of Dr. Donna Boyd) in order to ascertain the individuals' biological profile (age-at-death, sex, ancestry, stature), investigate evidence for antemortem and perimortem trauma, and select and prepare samples for DNA analysis.

As a graduating senior looking back on my time at RU, I realize that I have gained a skill that not many people have – the training to analyze human remains. This expertise has come about from taking intensive hands-on laboratory classes like Osteology and Advanced Forensic Anthropology. It has also occurred through my involvement in several independent research projects with my professors in which I have learned to use specialized techniques (radiography, digital microscopy, and X-Ray Fluorescence) to identify a person from his/her skeletal remains.

Because of this advanced training at RU, I have been able to accompany Dr. Boyd to the Virginia Medical Examiner's office to work on current death investigations. Through these experiences, I have learned that Forensic Anthropology is not the glamorous occupation portrayed on television. In reality,

it is often gruesome, noxious, and extremely sad (i.e., child abuse cases). Virtually no one enjoys working with decomposing, traumatized, and fragmented corpses. Sometimes I feel that having training in Forensic Anthropology is a curse. But ultimately I believe that having these skills makes it my civic duty and obligation to my community and to the families of the missing to use them.

To me, a scholar-citizen is an individual who takes the initiative to use their skills and knowledge to confront and solve complex problems—in short, making the world a better place, regardless of the cost to themselves. As a forensic scientist, I am being trained to be the ultimate scholar-citizen by helping to identify the lost and nameless, bringing closure to their families, and allowing their bones to tell the story of their fate. I am honored to be a part of this healing process.