



Anthropology - 2017

A71 Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: The Evolving Legacy of Walter H. Birkby, PhD

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After attending the presentation, attendees will better understand the importance of strong mentoring and reflecting backward as they progress forward.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by elucidating the evolving role of forensic anthropology in medicolegal death investigations and the importance of relying on and providing strong mentoring.

Everyone stands on the shoulders of those who came before them: parents, grandparents, iconic and admired predecessors. Mentors wittingly and unwittingly shape the individuals they impact and, in doing so, drive the evolution of the professional discipline related to their mentorship. Forensic anthropology has evolved in just such a manner; mentors influencing students and students becoming mentors, all the while putting their particular stamp on the discipline.

Walt was a student of William Bass and his initial loves were skeletal biology and archaeology. As he moved into his own career at the University of Arizona, he was slowly drawn into the medicolegal community. He forged strong ties with the local medical examiner and personnel from local and regional law enforcement. Students gravitated toward him as knowledge of forensic science trickled out into the collegiate community. Eventually Walt became one of the founding members of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA) and the Physical Anthropology (now Anthropology) section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS). He served as an officer for both entities and encouraged his students to be active participants in both.

Over time, Walt's interests shifted from skeletal biology to assessing traumas in bone. He became a recognized expert both in Arizona and nationally, and was known for his down-to-earth sensibility. As Walt honed his skill, Forensic Anthropology also began to expand nationally and internationally. Developing the biological profile for unidentified skeletons as a side line to an academic career morphed into full-time employment in medical examiners' offices and active engagement in human rights movements globally. Anthropologists have always been able to adapt their skill set as necessary and forensic anthropologists were no exception. The career path burgeoned and during the 1980s and early 1990s, Walt's student population exploded to more than 20. Many of those individuals left and turned their careers to different aspects of anthropology; indeed, many of them are presenting in this symposium.

Forensic anthropology has evolved from the weird old aunt that is at every family reunion to a respected mainstream science. Walt's students have emerged from the shadows to become leaders in the field, positioned around the country and even the world as engaged scientists who care passionately about their work and their contributions to the discipline. Those contributions include mentoring the next generation who, in turn, will put their own mark on forensic anthropology.

The 2009 National Academy of Sciences Report has changed forever the way forensic sciences will be viewed in the United States. Where before academicians like Walt could dabble in the medicolegal world, practitioners will now be required to earn a PhD in Anthropology and board certification will become the norm. Standards that have never before been applied universally will be developed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Scientific Area Committee (SAC) and forensic anthropologists will have to adhere to a more uniform code. Medical examiner and coroner offices will move toward accreditation and the anthropologists and odontologists will move with them. The forensic anthropologist will become part of a standard death investigation. Many of

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these changes are already being implemented internationally. The discipline is growing up and good mentorship will create the practitioners who will thrive in this new world. This presentation will discuss the changing roles of forensic anthropology domestically and internationally; using Walt as a focus to reflect back will project out to the future of the science in the next 20 years.

Walter H. Birkby, PhD, Legacy, Forensic Anthropology