

The Moncton Times and Transcript
Saturday, December 3, 2005, p. D1/D3

Ellen Creighton (Times & Transcript Staff)

Anthropologists see life beyond bones

Scientists probe human nature and history, and scoff at TV shows that make it look easy

KATE WRIGHT So you want to be a . . .

Professor Moira McLaughlin may have stumbled into her career as an anthropologist as a young adult, but wouldn't change her experiences in the field for the world.

"It's been serendipity. I didn't know a thing about anthropology in high school; it wasn't something that was talked about at that time, especially in a rural school. A friend and I were traveling, hitchhiking through Europe when we met these two fellows at a youth hostel. They were going to be volunteering at an archeological dig in France and we didn't have any big plans, so we thought, 'OK!'"

"I just fell in love with it - you just know it in your heart."

McLaughlin developed an interest in physical anthropology, specializing in archeology and osteology. In doing so, she began dabbling in forensic anthropology, helping organizations like the RCMP identify found bones.

Anthropologists further hone and sharpen their powers of observation in archaeological digs and osteology (bone) labs.

They develop eyes like Sherlock Holmes, keen for telling details.

A barely visible mark on a shard of flint may show that the flake was used as a primitive tool. Or an ash layer tracing through a thin band of sediment, while invisible to the laymen, could be used to date stone artifacts buried beneath it. However, McLaughlin says it is impossible to specialize in just one category as an anthropologist.

In these times of narrow specialization, anthropological study is refreshingly broad. Topics range from politics in the mountains of New Guinea to studying how health care is provided to North America's urban poor.

As a result, anthropologists frequently adopt outlooks on life that are as broad as the discipline itself.

"There's really no such thing as a forensic anthropologist - it would be impossible to do full time. "I only get to do forensics when bones are found, and how often is that? First and foremost, I'm a physical anthropologist and within that, I do a variety of things."

When she does find bones, however, McLaughlin says there's more to the job than just piecing together recovered materials.

"I draw on a full set of skills - I bring that person back to life. I think of who they were, their communities. You're figuring out uncertainty."

A physical anthropologist, for example, may be asked to examine a body that is badly or completely decomposed or burned. It is the job of the anthropologist to identify whether or not the bones are human, and if they are human, to develop a biological profile, which will aid in the identification of the person.

A biological profile consists of the person's ancestry, gender, age at the time of death, and stature, as well as any trauma sustained to the skeleton that may aid in the identification of the individual, or give indications of cause or manner of death.

Being an anthropologist, according to McLaughlin, can be emotionally demanding and is not always the exciting job that is portrayed on crime-scene television shows.

"Luckily most of the bones that I identify turn out to be animal bones."

McLaughlin says many young people miss out on the values of become an anthropologist, since they aren't exposed to the career in their high school days.

"We don't use the word 'anthropologist' in high school. There's such pressure on young people to think career, but these type of things need to be happening at the high school level to introduce students to this field."

McLaughlin says popular television shows glamorizing her line of work are hindering, not helping, young people to gain interest in her field.

"CSI is horrible. It's crazy. We spend a lot of time on that. Some students watch it for fun, but you have to realize that this is a Hollywood version of what we do, and it's very different."

Anthropology, the study of who we are as human beings and how we came to be that way, is one of the few fields to combine fascinating coursework and practical career training in one academic package.

Anthropology can be divided into four main fields. Physical anthropologists look upon humans as biological organisms and studies the evolution of the human species and physical variations of the human species.

Archaeology uncovers and interprets past cultures. Linguistic anthropology studies the history of language and the relationship between language and culture. Socio-cultural anthropology studies human behavior in different cultural and social contexts.

An undergraduate major in anthropology not only provides a sound liberal arts education but also gives students a needed edge in today's fiercely competitive job market.

A B.A. in anthropology lays an excellent foundation for further work in teaching, government, business, medicine and law.

Although traditionally anthropology has been an academic field, anthropological knowledge is increasingly being applied to the solution of practical problems in areas such as public health, cultural resource management, Third World economic development, and many other government, private, and nonprofit programs.

"You can really use it in any job, no matter the title," says McLaughlin. "Thanks to your background, your ability to write and research gives you a different view of the world, rather than the North American centric view. You can take what you've learned and apply it to any job. Whether it's work for government agencies, international relations, NGO's, multinational corporations, the private sector.

"People too often get hung up on names and categories, but with anthropology, you can go after anything."

McLaughlin says graduates of anthropology programs often pursue careers in international relations, volunteering with organizations like CUSO, completing their PhD's or teaching English overseas.

"Most try to get out of North America and move to other areas to really see first hand what they've been learning about."

As a discipline, anthropology begins with a simple yet powerful idea: any detail of human behavior can be understood better when it is seen against the backdrop of the full range of human behavior.

This, the comparative method, attempts to explain similarities and differences among people holistically, in the context of humanity as a whole.

Anthropologists seek to uncover principles of behavior that apply to all human communities. To an anthropologist, diversity itself, seen in body shapes and sizes, customs, clothing, speech, religion, and worldview, provides a frame of reference for understanding any single aspect of life in any given community.

McLaughlin says there are certain personalities that are more suited to the profession than others.

"You have to be receptive and willing to be open to other cultures, other views. You don't have to agree with everything, but you have to be understanding."

Along the way, anthropologists have the opportunity to build lasting working relationships with the colleagues, a major plus, says McLaughlin.

"If you make a life of it, you'll meet some amazing people who are driven and very holistic. It's very exciting - you get to work outside the box."