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Anthropologist hunts crime-solving clues in bones and bodies

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NEWS RELEASE

This release is available electronically on INN (News Net.)

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Note: A photograph of Garry Kerr in his UM lab -- with skulls -- is available upon request. Call (406) 243-2522.

Contact: Garry Kerr, Social Sciences, (406) 243-4414.

ANTHROPOLOGIST HUNTS CRIME-SOLVING CLUES IN BONES AND BODIES

By Patia Stephens
University Communications

MISSOULA--

Skulls, skeletons and corpses are something most people only want to confront on Halloween. But Garry Kerr faces them on a regular basis, and what's more, he enjoys it.

Kerr doesn't look like a man obsessed with the macabre. He doesn't act like a guy who spent this morning performing an autopsy. His demeanor is more that of an enthusiastic, overgrown boy-next-door than that of an anthropologist who specializes in forensic assessment and reconstruction of human remains. But Kerr's life resembles something out of a best-selling crime novel.

An instructor at The University of Montana, Kerr spends his classroom time teaching anthropology, casting and facial reconstruction. Outside the classroom, he is often found working with Montana law enforcement on forensic cases or assisting the state medical examiner on autopsies. Teaching and learning are central to everything he does.

"Teaching has been my goal since the day I first had conscious thought," Kerr said.

"There's something about it, watching it spark an idea. You get such a rush from teaching

-more-

students who want to learn.”

In his facial reconstruction classes, Kerr teaches students how to rebuild a face from the bone up. Starting with a plaster cast of a skull, the class assesses the skull for age, gender and race. Markers are then placed on the skull to signify flesh thickness, based on statistical norms collected by anthropologists during wartime. Art and science combine in the next step, when the business of building facial expression begins. Based on what is known about the age, health and lifestyle of the person once inhabited by the skull, facial characteristics such as wrinkles and scars are added.

The result is an object that looks eerily human and often evokes emotional responses from students working on them.

“It’s kind of spooky watching them communicate with these people,” Kerr said. “One student working on a 3-year-old girl killed by her father started talking to her. She said ‘Oh, I’m so sorry this happened to you. You must have been so beautiful.’”

Facial reconstruction is often able to give crime victims back their identity, which means cases can be closed and families can get answers.

The same motive underlies Kerr’s interest in unidentified skeletal remains. Even a small bone fragment can provide clues that will help law enforcement get to the bottom of a crime.

In one prominent Missoula case, Kerr found himself at the bottom of an outhouse looking for clues. It was February 1994, and a 15-year-old girl had confessed to shooting her father and, with her mother’s and brother’s help, burning his body and dumping it in the outhouse. Kerr, at the time a graduate student in anthropology, was called to the site to help officials positively identify the remains.

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While he and two other students excavated the outhouse and law enforcement looked on with relief that they weren't the ones down in the muck, Kerr found a chunk of bone marred by a small, callous-like bump. When the bump was removed, it revealed a brass screw that perfectly matched an X-ray taken by the murder victim's surgeon. The positive ID saved law enforcement from having to put the remains through extensive, and expensive, DNA testing.

Kerr is currently involved with the investigation of a body found recently in Gallatin County. His role includes transporting the body from the crime lab to the university and, likely, working on the investigative team alongside UM anthropology Associate Professor Randall Skelton. Once the body is assessed for basics such as gender, age, race, height and trauma, the team will turn that information over to the coroner's office and the crime lab.

Searching for clues is a big part of Kerr's work with the state medical examiner. When someone dies without a witness, an autopsy is performed to try to ascertain whether the death was by natural causes, suicide, homicide or an accident.

"Most of the time we can find out how the person died," he said. "And you find out as much about how they lived as how they died."

Kerr sees his work as a community service and, often, a chance to right a wrong.

"When it's a young child who's been abused or a woman who's been violated, you really want to find out what happened so that whoever did it can be held accountable," he said.

But what keeps him coming back is the vast knowledge that can be gained by performing an autopsy. Although he said he never loses sight of the human being he is working on, the body's internal workings fascinate him.

"I've learned more by assisting the ME than I would have in 10 years of med school," he said.

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Kerr's enthusiasm is contagious; his fascination with the dead hard to resist. No doubt he's inspired more than a few students to pursue a career in forensics. And it's a field open to all, he stressed.

"You don't have to be an old, white male to be in forensics," he said. "There are more women than men, and more under 40 than over 40."

At only 38 years old, Kerr has a reputation for being an excellent teacher. In an "Uncensored Course Guide," in which students give their no-holds-barred opinions on instructors and classes, Kerr received straight As. He pointed to his rich life experiences and love of learning to explain students' rave reviews.

"Having had a full life is great when you're a teacher," he said. "The more things I do, the better I am."

The worst crime, according to Kerr, is boredom. By getting up close and personal with death, his zest for life is renewed.

"Life fascinates me," he said. "As we say in the crime lab, it's better than the alternative."

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