

Anthropology professor looks at life, death

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At Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, faculty in the Department of Anthropology within the College of Arts and Sciences emphasize the development of knowledge and respect for cultural diversity of humankind.

For Corey Ragsdale, PhD, assistant professor of anthropology, looking into the lives of people from the past provides an introspective look into how modern populations have become the way they are today.

On this week's episode of Segue, the weekly radio program that explores the lives and work of the people at SIUE, Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, has an in-depth conversation with Ragsdale about his work as a bioarchaeologist, his research interests and ongoing work within the community.

This episode of Segue airs at 9 a.m. on Sunday, March 18, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

Before receiving his doctorate from the University of New Mexico and entering the field of biological archaeology, Ragsdale served in the United States Army. His experiences overseas fostered a deep curiosity in human populations around the world.

His initial work focused on the native populations in the American Southwest and in Mexico, including the Aztecs.

"In terms of Native American culture, their history is absolutely fantastic," Budzban says. "A lot of your work investigates some aspects of their culture. Can you explain that?"

"The Aztecs were one of the most power empires in the world, with impressive cities, social structures and monuments," Ragsdale says. "When the Spanish arrived, they were blown away by what they found.

"When we think about the Aztecs or other populations like the Maya, we focus on their violent histories. We tend to overlook the other important parts of Aztec society. They had quite complex migration patterns and social structures. Everything was an intimate, interwoven network of political, economic and religious structures."

Other archaeologists in Ragsdale's field primarily look at the materials that have been left behind over the course of history. As a bioarchaeologist, he looks at these materials, and relates them to the biology of the people left behind, including patterns found in their genes, changes in their

body caused by health issues, and how various changes in society affected peoples' lives and health.

"You mentioned a biological component. What type of things can you use to measure a biological distance between certain populations?" Budzban inquires.

"We can find biological distance through collecting and analyzing the actual genetic material, but we tend to avoid this when remains or findings are poorly preserved or contaminated. We also try our best not to destroy any remains in the process.

"I'm specifically trained on targeting and pinpointing genetic features on bones and teeth. Tooth enamel is particularly hard, and there are over 100 different genetic markers on just one person's teeth. Using about 50 or 60 readings from individuals in one population, and comparing them to 800 others from different groups, we can quantify or measure how similar or different populations are from one another."

While teaching courses in forensic anthropology, archaeology of death and dental anthropology, Ragsdale offered his students a unique opportunity to get out of the classroom and practice aspects of mortuary archaeology in the Edwardsville community. As part of a field school experience, he and his students worked at Valley View Cemetery to analyze, restore and preserve the sacred grounds.

"If grave markers were buried, or sites had been forgotten or neglected, it was up to us to find them, restore them, and obtain information about those buried in the cemetery.

"It's an opportunity not just for our students to learn about things in mortuary archaeology, but it gives us a chance to interact outside the classroom and University with people in the community, the community who are buried in the cemetery, and the families in the community who visit their loved ones," Ragsdale says.

"It seems like there are many of these cemeteries that have gone into disrepair, but you have created an opportunity that helps both students and the community at large," Budzban says. "It's the perfect win-win scenario."

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing and Communications