



Photos: Robert Moodie

## Reconstructing a Human Life: Sheridan Anthropology Research Success Story

**When Cassandra Olguin held a human skull from the 16th century, she was understandably rattled. It's not every day one holds the human remains of a person from hundreds of years ago.**

"This was once a living human being just like you and I," said the 21-year-old from Oakville, Ont. who just graduated from Sheridan's General Arts and Science program. "Working with skeletal remains was difficult and almost strange for me to wrap my head around, so I approached touching and feeling these bones with much caution during the first few weeks."

But that nervousness soon passed, and led to interest and intrigue that became the starting

point of a career. Cassandra was one of two students who volunteered to work with these remains as a research assistant under the guidance of Dr. Jaime Ginter, a Professor of Biological Anthropology at Sheridan College. The research project was part of Sheridan's Co-Curricular Record program, which encourages students to explore learning activities in their desired field outside the classroom.

Dr. Ginter was able to secure a collection of human remains on loan from a respected museum in Munich, Germany. The collection consists of seven complete skeletons, as well as an assortment of bones of Europeans (from what is now Austria) from the 16th to 18th centuries.

The collection, along with an interactive application featuring 3D models of the remains currently being developed by Song Ho Ahn, a visualization researcher working in Digital Learning and Innovation at Sheridan's Centre for Teaching and Learning, will be used in a forensic anthropology course taught by Dr. Ginter. "Having human remains at a college for the students to study and learn from is very rare," explained Dr. Ginter.

For anthropologists and students, this collection is a gold mine to study our ancestors and learn about how we have evolved.

However, the collection arrived from its long overseas journey needing to be organized and cleaned so that the pieces could be used in teaching. So Cassandra rolled up her sleeves and helped identify the pieces, cleaned them, labelled them and when needed, reconstructed them.

"It was so hands-on. It was such a great learning experience," she said. Amid this hands-on work, she learned about how remains can paint the picture of a population. By studying bones, it is possible to determine age, gender, height, body mass, diet, the general state of health and other characteristics of human remains.

As her supervisor, Dr. Ginter watched Cassandra's knowledge of skeletons and skeletal remains skyrocket, as well as her comfort level and ability to take initiative. "Cassandra was also learning about organizing a collection, curating a collection and what information should be gathered," said Dr. Ginter who added,

**"I grew to feel much more confident in myself and in my abilities as a research assistant ... the knowledge I've gained from working with Dr. Ginter will stay with me and benefit me greatly." - Cassandra Olguin, Student Research Assistant**

"it definitely expanded her knowledge base in anthropology."

That knowledge base will soon be expanding even further. Cassandra found this research so engaging, she stayed on to help Dr. Ginter straight through the summer and has been accepted to the University of Guelph to study Anthropology this fall.

She's convinced her work with Dr. Ginter and this collection helped her application stand out in this competitive program. She would like to focus on nutritional anthropology, exploring how food and nutrition affect our evolution.

"I grew to feel much more confident in myself and in my abilities as a research assistant," said Cassandra. "I'm really looking forward to my next few years at Guelph. I know the knowledge I've gained from working with Dr. Ginter will stay with me and benefit me greatly."

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