

Transcript of Tanya Peckman, Forensic Anthropologist

The coolest part of my job is... I get to play in the dirt!

I'm a forensic anthropologist and I work at Saint Mary's University and I use my knowledge in biology and human anatomy to solve crimes related to unknown human remains.

As a professor I teach undergraduate students both in the classroom and in the lab. I also supervise master's students and their projects. I'm also involved—my current research is involved with collecting tissue depth data so the different depths of skin on your face. I'm working with Aboriginal communities, and we are collecting this data so that we are able to put a face back on missing Aboriginal children

My other job is that I am the forensic anthropology consultant for the Nova Scotia Medical Examiner Service and I'm able to use my knowledge of biology and human anatomy to create a biological profile of these unknown individuals.

When human remains are found in the province of Nova Scotia, I'm called in when they are skeletonized or when there's decomposed bodies. And it's my job to go to the scene, to work with police officers, to work with my team, to recover the body, to bring it back to the morgue in Halifax and then we also do the analysis at the morgue. Dirty, it's sometimes kind of gruesome, it takes a long time, it doesn't just take two days or 24 hours like they do in—or 60 minutes like they do in CSI; it takes us a long time. We have ants in our pants and we have dirt in every place you can imagine, and we smell and we don't have pretty hair, but we love what we do and it's really rewarding for us.

One of the toughest parts of the job is that we know that what we do could convict an innocent person or it could possibly let a guilty person go and we have to be able to balance that within our work; we have to know that when we are at the scene we have to be able to work up the scene in the way that when we're called to court we're able to justify everything that we've done.

One of the most rewarding things about my job is that I'm able to bring closure to families. So unfortunately when I'm called in the person is deceased, but my job allows me to be able to tell a family member that, "yes, this is your daughter," "this is your son," "this is your brother," "this is your mother," and at least they are able to then have the human remains back; have a burial, have a ceremony, and be able to go on with their lives and have closure and understand what happened to these individuals.

So if you have the personality to work in a team environment, you understand confidentiality, you're able to separate your career life from your personal life—which is really an important aspect of what you do—then forensic anthropology might be the career for you.

A wise man and woman once told me that you should always pick a career for love of the subject and not for fame or fortune. And I think that's where I've always, you know, been inspired, my parents told me this; it's something that I've always done throughout my life. I love what I do, I absolutely love forensic anthropology. I've job shadowed other careers in the past and I've found that through this job shadowing that I didn't really like what I thought I was going to, and I think this is the best thing I've ever been able to do.