

A VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS:

MSU FACULTY ELEVATES FIELDWORK WITH UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO PRESERVATION

By Joseph Newell

Persistent, progressive and preservative—these are a few words that describe Jesse Goliath, an assistant professor in Mississippi State's Department of Anthropology and Middle Eastern Cultures, as well as his colleagues.

Through his transformative research, Goliath is committed to community-based projects that combat the erosive effects of time—safeguarding public sites as well as people, all of which could have otherwise been lost to history.

Goliath's dedication and innovation can be illustrated through his numerous endeavors utilizing anthropology as a model to provide a voice for those who are marginalized. Recently appointed as the American Anthropological Association's liaison to the Register of Professional Archaeologists and promoted to Fellow at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, Goliath continues to make significant contributions in addressing systemic issues in Mississippi.

Goliath said a majority of missing people in the United States are minorities, such as women of color, Native Americans, members of the LGTBQ+ community, and others.

In an attempt to bridge this gap, Goliath has created the Mississippi Repository for Missing and Unidentified Persons. His goal for the repository is to have the capability to locate a missing person before they are murdered and lessen the need for forensic anthropologists to work on such cases.

The growing Mississippi Repository for Missing and Unidentified Persons is housed on MSU servers at www.missinginms.msstate.edu. It is searchable by the general public, while law enforcement agencies have access to more in-depth data.

"The Mississippi Repository for Missing and Unidentified Persons was developed to help identify, resolve and archive Mississippi's cases of missing and unidentified persons. It is a statewide database and collaborative tool that seeks to increase public access to missing persons' information, partner with neighboring states to facilitate data sharing of missing and unidentified persons' information, and visualize socioeconomic and medicolegal disparities affecting missing persons using geospatial analysis," said Goliath, a forensic anthropologist.

"I usually mention the TV show 'Bones' when people ask what I do. Even though it is a fictional version, it helps give people a context for what a forensic anthropologist does. Forensic anthropology is the identification of human remains for law enforcement. It is an applied aspect of biological anthropology," he said.

"Using our knowledge of the human skeleton and anatomy, forensic anthropologists create a biological profile—sex estimate, age range estimate, stature/height approximation, trauma assessment, an estimate of time since death—to assist law enforcement in identifying an individual. We also use our training in archaeology and cultural anthropology when necessary to provide additional evidence that could be used for a case."

Goliath first began using his skills for the U.S. Department of Defense as a contractor working with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency helping identify missing service members from past war conflicts—WWII, Korean War, Vietnam War—on Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii.

"I enjoyed this rewarding work but wanted to get back into research and teaching and I felt that the applied anthropology program in the Department of Anthropology and Middle Eastern Cultures would allow me the opportunity to both use my previous professional forensic experience and teach future forensic scientists," said Goliath, who joined MSU's faculty in 2021.

Goliath said there is a large demand for forensic scientists and investigators in Mississippi and his job at MSU assists with that need.



"We are working with local and state agencies to build our forensic programs and professional forensic networks to get our students employed in the many positions available."

Goliath also is part of a current grant focusing on preserving sites of Black history. Supported by a National Endowment Grant for Humanities, the $347,959 grant funds recruitment of university students, and the preservation of the Starkville's Brush Arbor/Starkville Colored Cemetery.

The location is described as "a microcosm of the broader heartwarming, awe-inspiring and difficult stories of Mississippi."

The historic cemetery, located at 517 University Drive, served as a final resting place for many prominent members of the Black community from the late 1800s to the mid-1950s. With the oldest marker dating back to 1882, Goliath and the team are committed to educating the community on the cemetery's significance by documenting and preserving its legacy for future generations, ensuring the history and contributions of the local Black community are not forgotten.

"Located at Brush Arbor Cemetery in Starkville, MS, our field school will train advanced-undergraduate and graduate students interested in archival, archaeological, historical and anthropological work to preserve African American sites through a community-based decolonial model. We train future practitioners in the critical skills necessary to equitably work with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) populations. Community-based anthropology is a growing field that aims to link traditional anthropological methods with the perspectives and voices of local communities," Goliath said.

"My colleague, Dr. Jordan Lynton Cox, began this initiative last year and now I'm stepping in to see it through. I look forward to continuing her work on this important project in Starkville," said Goliath, whose experience as a forensic anthropologist, as well as working with MIA/POW communities, places him in the unique position of explaining science to laypeople and helping families deal with the trauma of death, especially those who still have missing family members or unresolved cases.

"The stories of the people buried in this cemetery deserve to be told, and their resting place should be preserved and protected. These truths are the basis of our field school: to preserve the stories of those whose stories were often overlooked," said Jordan Lynton Cox, a former AMEC faculty member and original initiator of the grant. "Our goals are to use anthropological and archival methods to research the cemetery and document it through a digital site, while working with descendants and community members to create a shared vision of how to protect this space in the future."

"The first time I walked into the cemetery, I was amazed at both the history that was clearly there as well as the increasing loss of that history due to foot traffic, vandalism and poor maintenance," Lynton Cox said. "I knew something needed to be done that could protect this site long into the future, but I also knew our site was unfortunately not uncommon. There are many African American cemeteries throughout the country similarly at risk of erasure. Because of this, I knew training needed to be a central part of this process. We are not only working to save our cemetery, but also train students in how to do this work in their own hometowns."

For the first year on the project, the MSU team spent time in state archives and the local chancery clerk's office and visited genealogy websites including Ancestry.com to piece together the cemetery's history.

"The students were able to connect with several descendants

of individuals buried in the cemetery, which provided us with more background information we could not find in the archives. We also did some archaeological surveys to gather more data on the site and determine if there were any surface-level artifacts that could give us more information about the cemetery. Finally, we hosted multiple community events to get the word out about this project and the importance of this site," Lynton Cox said.

"I tell our students on their first day that this is not our site; we are here to use our resources and skills to honor the wishes of this community," she said. "It is our job to gain their trust and honor the trust they give us."

Goliath said, "People of color broadly are in danger of the violence of being missing, unidentified, and unremembered. Black cemeteries throughout the country are also in danger. Despite the sacrifice of black communities throughout the United States to cultivate spaces of remembrance, these cemeteries, and the stories of the individuals who are buried there, are in constant threat of demolition through neglect," he said.

"Anthropologists and archaeologists in MSU's AMEC department have the unique opportunity to teach students how to do research that honor the voices of communities of color and preserve a historic cemetery in our city," said Goliath. "Specifically, my work as a forensic anthropologist allows me to assist law enforcement to resolve cases of missing Mississippians and bring closure to the families missing their loved ones." ●





ABOUT DR. JESSE GOLIATH

A native of West Virginia, Jesse Goliath—a forensic anthropologist—is the university's first Fellow in the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the premiere organization for professional forensic scientists in the country. He received his bachelor's degree in honors anthropology from the University of Notre Dame in 2007 and his master's and Ph.D. in anthropology from Ohio State University in 2010 and 2017.

His research interests are skeletal biology, especially its applications to forensic anthropology, microscopy, functional morphology, bioarchaeology, skeletal development and bone biomechanics.

As a broadly trained skeletal biologist, his research employs the principles of bone functional adaptation theory to address the link between developmental changes in bone architecture and the mechanical loads experienced during life, including age- and sex-related changes in bone quantity and quality.

He excavated burials both domestically and abroad with forensic and archaeological field recovery experiences in North America, Europe and Southeast Asia and served as a consulting forensic anthropologist for city, state and government agencies. He developed histological age-estimation techniques and regression equation models for use in forensic pathology and anthropology casework.

Goliath joined MSU's faculty in 2021 and recently was appointed the American Anthropological Association's liaison to the Register of Professional Archaeologists.