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What intrigues me about anthropology is how the study of all aspects of humans—their past, culture, language, and biology—helps solve complicated human problems. My professional work as a forensic anthropologist focuses on such a complex challenge: work with government agencies and professional organizations to develop and implement procedures for the effective and compassionate identification of disaster victims. The work is both rewarding and demanding, particularly when I’m assisting families and friends of the deceased. Anthropology helps me navigate within these disparate worlds--the bureaucratic, scientific, religious, cultural, and emotional.

Several methods are used to identify disaster victims: DNA, fingerprints, dental evidence, and unique biological or medical features, such as implants or healed fractures. By comparing this type of evidence from the remains (postmortem information) to the similar unique information revealed by before-death medical and dental records (antemortem data), forensic specialists confirm identifications. The forensic anthropologist’s knowledge of skeletal and gross anatomy helps in both the postmortem and antemortem analyses.

The importance of the recovery and identification of victims, for both the nation and the families of the deceased, became very evident after the events of 9/11. Forensic scientists were at the fore of the process, using science to create order from the chaos, while families grieved, created memorials, visited the sites, and tried to find lost loved ones. Politicians and the media learned that discussing and managing the disaster dead was no simple task. In all this, families asked only for accurate information provided with compassion about the fate of the deceased--information that only forensic science could provide.

VISIBLE PROOFS

FORENSIC VIEWS
OF THE BODY

Following 9/11, I managed an extraordinary team of forensic and mortuary professionals who took on the significant task of identifying the victims from the crash of Flight 93 in Pennsylvania. My responsibilities ranged from the forensic to the administrative to the political: establish the morgue operation, assess the forensic requirements, provide the team with the support to complete the job, protect the team from the intense media and political attention, and inform state and federal authorities about the identification efforts. For this event, the standard forensic identification protocol was augmented by some new procedures, including a formally-trained DNA team and the use of a triage section for remains, resulting in a more thorough morgue process. And the meaning of our work in identifying the passengers and crew from Flight 93, considered by many to be heroes, instilled each of us with a sense of honor for the dead and dedication for their families.



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