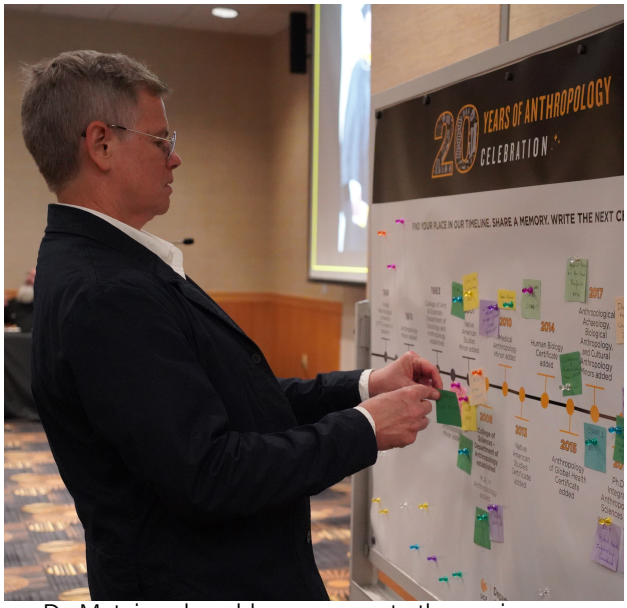
ANTHROKNIGHT NEWS

Issue No 4
Fall 2026



Dr. Matejowsky adds a memory to the anniversary timeline at our 20th anniversary event .

FROM THE CHAIR'S DESK

Can you believe that issue four of Anthroknight News is now here? I sure can't!

UCF Anthropology continues to demonstrate how imagination and collaboration can help address the challenges of the 21st century.

Our faculty, staff, and students remain as committed as ever to advancing understandings of human variability across time, culture, and geography through innovative research, rigorous scholarship, and generative local-to-global engagements and partnerships that connect UCF Anthropology with communities across Central Florida and around the world.

Read about these efforts in the pages that follow. This year, we also celebrate 20 years as an independent department. Not too shabby!

Go Knights! Charge On!

Dr. Ty Matejowsky

FACULTY PROFILE: DR. LAURA CIRILLO

Dr. Laura Cirillo is an Assistant Professor in the UCF Department of Anthropology, specializing in biological anthropology, dental anthropology, and forensic anthropology.

Her research focuses on improving dental age-estimation methods across the human lifespan using advanced imaging technologies, including radiographs and CT scans. By examining dental development across diverse populations and international datasets, she aims to develop more accurate and reliable techniques for forensic identification.

Beyond her research, Dr. Cirillo brings extensive experience in forensic casework, including efforts to identify missing U.S. service members through the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA). Her professional background also includes osteological consultation, collaboration with tribal communities, and work involving repatriation and compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).



Dr. Cirillo earned her Ph.D. in Biological Anthropology from the University of Nevada, Reno, and her M.A. in Physical Anthropology from California State University, Chico. She is also a board-certified analyst of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA). Her additional interests include human growth and development, 3D modeling, and the forensic identification of subadults and transgender individuals.

Learn more about Dr. Cirillo and her work:

- https://sciences.ucf.edu/anthropology/person/laura-cirillo/
- https://www.lauracirillo.com/

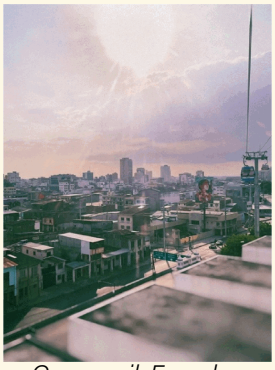


GRADUATE STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: RIVER COELLO

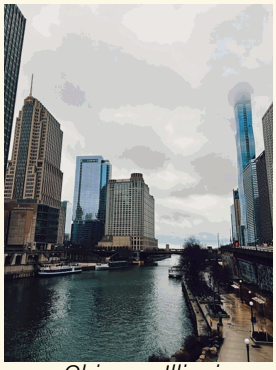
Exploring Heritage, Identity, and Healing Through Art and Anthropology

UCF Anthropology graduate student **River Coello** brings together art, personal storytelling, and anthropological research to explore the connections between cultural heritage, identity, and healing.

In July 2026, Coello published H*ealing Heritage: Reflections from an Artist-Scholar at Various Intersections* in the *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage*. This autoethnographic photo essay examines heritage as a living experience shaped by migration, identity, and personal transformation. Drawing on Andean principles of yanantin (complementary dualism) and ayni (reciprocity), Coello explores how artistic expression and community knowledge can contribute to more inclusive approaches to anthropology.



Guayaquil, Ecuador, where I was born.



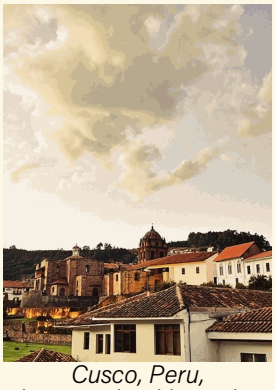
Chicago, Illinois, where I transitioned through gender(s).



Athens, Ohio, where I trained in performance studies.



Quito, Ecuador, where I finally felt fully queer in my own country.



Cusco, Peru, where I trained in Andean traditional medicine and Quechua.

Coello, R. (2026). Healing heritage: reflections from an artist-scholar at various intersections. Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/20518196.2026.2691561

Central to the publication is *HAMPI*, a multimedia and autobiographical project whose name means "medicine" in Quechua. Inspired by Coello's journey of reconnecting with Andean ancestral traditions, the project combines photography, poetry, textiles, illustrations, and audio storytelling.

From August 6 through September 3, 2026, HAMPI was featured in a gallery exhibition at The Center Orlando. The exhibition showcased photographs and artifacts collected during Coello's travels through Ecuador and Peru, alongside collaborative artwork. Its opening reception included a performance by Raymi Dance School, a poetry reading, and a discussion with the artist.





Through HAMPI and their scholarly work, Coello demonstrates how creative expression can expand conversations about cultural heritage, community engagement, and the relationship between personal experiences and anthropological research.

Explore River Coello's work at: https://rivercoello.com/

NOTES FROM THE FIELD: DR. JOHN WALKER

UCF Archaeologists Excavate Beneath Amazonian Town

In the Bolivian Amazon, residents of Santa Ana del Yacuma celebrated their town's 318th anniversary this summer. Meanwhile, UCF archaeologists were busy uncovering and documenting evidence of an even longer history. Working with the Museo Yacuma, and supported by the College of Sciences at UCF, **Dr. John Walker** and his Bolivian counterpart **Dr. Juan Carlos Chavez**, led a team from four universities in two countries. It turns out that Santa Ana was built on top of "forest islands" and "raised fields," two kinds of landscape features that Walker has studied for 35 years. Forest islands are dry forested areas that sit higher than the annual floodwaters. They appear to be natural forests, but 4 out of every 5 have broken pottery on the surface, or earthworks within them. Raised fields are earthen platforms that represent evidence of widespread, intensive agriculture. Previous research shows that some forest islands were inhabited for 300, 500, or even 1000 years, but this is the first time that excavations took place within Santa Ana, a town sitting in the center of a savanna covering an area more than half the size of Florida.

UCF PhD students contributed to the research as they pursued their own dissertation projects. **Julia Sponholtz** was part of the excavation team, taking soil samples and residue samples from ceramics. She will work with **Dr. Neil Duncan** to understand how microscopic plant remains relate to past agricultural practices. **Ethan Tam** compared satellite images from 1967 and 2024 to confirm that this particular location was once a forest island next to two areas of raised fields. This information confirms what local residents of the "Fatima" neighborhood already knew, that broken pottery can be found on the surface, and that this area has been used for gardening and farming for several generations. The excavations now show that it was inhabited for much longer than that. Walker's team continues to analyze their results, and they hope to have more news about "Isla Fatima" in the months to come.



UCF archaeologist Julia Sponholtz (right) working with Andrea Cruz (left) and Sarah Paterno (center).

CELEBRATING THE KENT FAMILY SPEAKER SERIES



Since 2018, the **Kent Family Speaker Series** has brought distinguished anthropologists to UCF to share their research and connect with our students, faculty, and wider community. Made possible by a generous donation from **William Scott Kent** and **Julie Kent, PhD**, the series hosts two talks each year, creating opportunities to explore anthropology's many contributions to understanding our world.

An anthropologist himself, William Scott Kent earned his bachelor's degree from UCF in 2013 and retired from working at the university in June 2026. His continued support, alongside Julie's, reflects a lasting commitment to anthropology and the UCF community.

Thank you, Scott and Julie, for all you do for our department and the wider community!

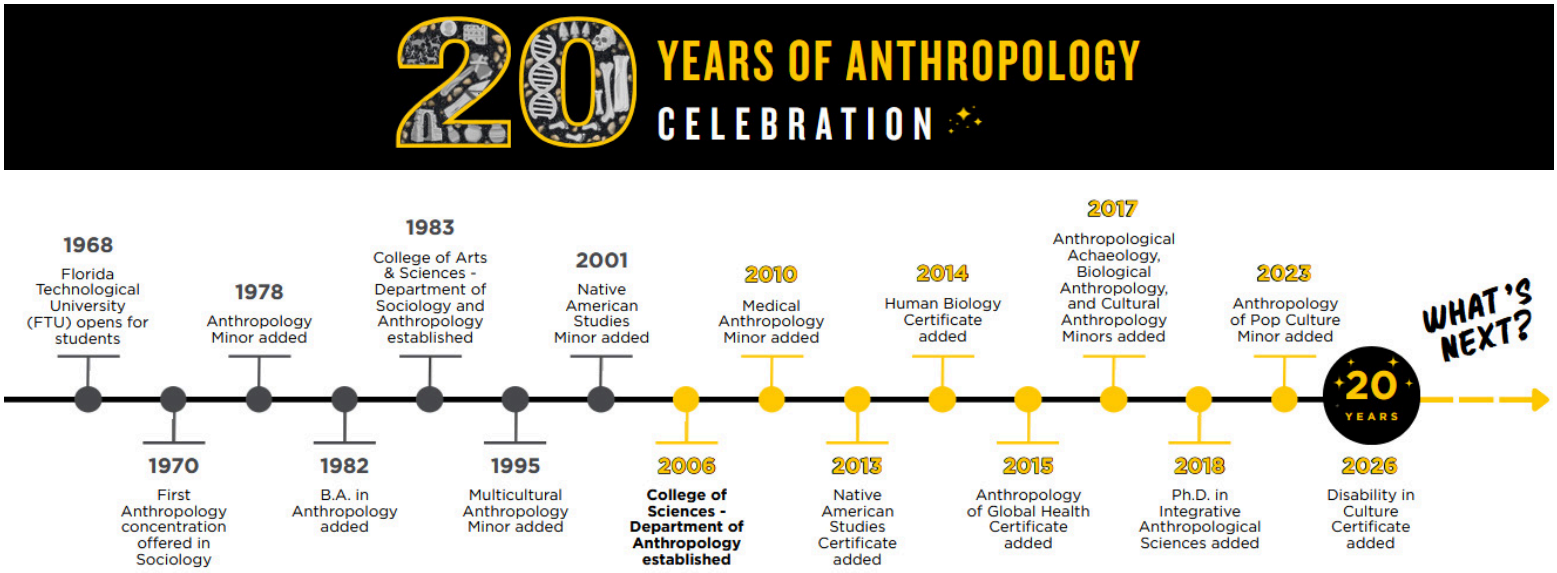
Join us for the next Kent Family Speaker Series event featuring Dr. Amanda D. Concha-Holmes on Thursday, November 12, 2026 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. More information is available at: go.ucf.edu/3W6uma1

UCF ANTHROPOLOGY STUDENTS ASSIST IN SEARCH FOR 1976 TIME CAPSULE



UCF Anthropology students and faculty contributed their expertise to the search for the university's 1976 bicentennial time capsule in preparation for its scheduled opening on December 1, 2026.

On September 18, anthropology students, working under the supervision of bioarchaeology faculty, conducted a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey around Millican Hall to help locate the capsule. The project provided hands-on training with technology used in archaeological and bioarchaeological research while supporting an effort to recover a piece of UCF history.





On October 16, 2026, the UCF Department of Anthropology celebrated 20 years as an independent department. The occasion offered an opportunity to reflect on our history and recognize the people who have helped shape the department over the past two decades.

There's more to the story!

In our spring edition, we'll take a closer look at the celebration and share reflections and memorable moments from the evening.

PREPARE FOR THE SPRING SEMESTER

- Jan. 10 – Registration closes
- Jan. 11 – First day of classes
- Jan. 15 – Add/Drop deadline

View the complete calendar at:
calendar.ucf.edu/2027/spring

IF YOU'D LIKE TO SUPPORT OUR DEPARTMENT AND CONNECT WITH US ONLINE, SCAN THE QR CODE!