Greetings from Gulu, Uganda!

I write these words from Acholiland, northern Uganda, where I am conducting fieldwork with graduate students Hugh Tuller and Wilfred Komakech, University of Tennessee, Disasters, Displacement, and Human Rights program alumna Jaymelee Kim, and UNC Gillings School of Public Health student Christopher Moore. With the support of a Wenner-Gren Foundation fieldwork grant and the NIH-funded Minority Health International Research and Training (MHIRT) program managed by our own Julia Hanebrink (PhD candidate), we are collaborating with research staff of the Refugee Law Project and survivors of the Lord’s Resistance Army civil war to examine the spiritual, political, and legal significance of improper burials and the unidentified dead in Uganda’s transitional justice process. The work is rewarding, but difficult; intense yet worthwhile; and the problems we are addressing are both long-standing and urgent. Integrating approaches from the anthropology of human rights and transitional justice, forensic anthropology, and public health, we seek to understand how survivors cope with the multiple manifestations of this ongoing source of trauma. We are also exploring whether future forensic excavations and identifications are possible as a mode of reconciliation among living and dead. The work will continue next summer when Dawnie Steadman, director of the Forensic Anthropology Center, will join us on the ground. Our approach, the composition of our team, and our commitment to working closely with local colleagues and communities, as well as supporting each other at different phases of our careers, exemplifies elements of the Disasters, Displacement, and Human Rights approach at the University of Tennessee. I am proud to say: WE ARE DDHR!

What a year it has been for the DDHR program. Stepping back and taking stock, it is often hard to believe we are only three years old. We have managed to do so much in a short time and are extremely excited about what 2017 will bring. From another successful international conference and the solidification of research partnerships abroad to our new digs in Strong Hall, the recruitment of new faculty and students, and the achievements of those already with us, we are delighted to share with you the updates from this past year and our goals for the year ahead.

-TRICIA HEPNER
Associate Professor of Anthropology
Director of the Disasters, Displacement, and Human Rights program

Back row: Joshua Oballim, Tricia R. Hepner, and Jaymelee Kim;
Front row: Wilfred Komakech, Hugh Tuller
What motivated you to pursue anthropology as a vocation?

O’Connell: In my senior year of college, I took a class on Human-Environment Relations: Notes from the Field and Beyond. The Q&A with Caela O’Connell, new assistant professor of Anthropology

O’Connell: In my senior year of college, I took a class on Food and Society in the sociology department. I spent the previous summer doing comparative research with farmers in Cuba and Ohio for my senior thesis, and in that class we read some work written by anthropologists. It was like discovering a family I didn’t know I had! Many of the ideas and approaches the anthropologists wrote about resonated with the complexity and messiness I observed in my fieldwork. I was immediately hooked.

Because I had never taken a course in anthropology, I decided to seek out more time with anthropologists after college and learn more about the discipline in practice. I worked for about a year as a research assistant on projects dealing with farmers in New Zealand and Argentina. This was enough to convince me I had found my niche. I decided to pursue formal training and began my doctoral studies at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with Arturo Escobar and Karla Slocum.

What is your vision of DDHR anthropology?

O’Connell: As a cultural anthropologist, I’m really excited about the depth and interdisciplinary aspect of the DDHR program, which is what first attracted me to applying for a position at UT. My vision for DDHR is to contribute to ongoing faculty and student efforts to develop research and educational approaches on topics that deal with disaster, displacement, and human rights as issues inextricably linked and some of the most pressing for humanity. This kind of transformative program is essential for training students to tackle the challenges we face in the United States and around the world in their everyday choices and professional pursuits. One way I hope to contribute to the DDHR program is through capacity building. Drawing on my background as a grant writer and coordinator, I will focus on securing the sustained sources of funding necessary to further develop the DDHR training and outreach in order to take the curriculum, conferences, and publications to the next level over the coming years.

How would you describe the kind of work you do today? (Just what sort of anthropology do you do?)

O’Connell: Broadly speaking, I study how agricultural communities are coping with and responding to twenty-first century challenges such as climate change, food insecurity, and globalization. Over the last twelve years I have worked on projects with farmers in the Caribbean, Latin America, the United States, and New Zealand. I describe myself as an engaged anthropologist, meaning I pursue research with some very applied outcomes, but fundamentally grounded in cultural theory. My goal in all of the work I do is to advance our understanding of human-environment relations in a way that has real world implications for environmental sustainability, human rights, and food security. To do this, I rely heavily on using mixed-methods (drawing on methods from ecology, soil science, geography, and history, in addition to cultural anthropology) to understand cultural and ecological systems as integrated, fostering collaborative research across the disciplines, and involving community organizations and practitioners to strengthen data collection and get the results out the door and into practice.

What do the next five years look like for you in your research and teaching?

O’Connell: It’s going to be a busy and exciting time! I will be launching the Environmental Anthropology Lab, establishing my local research project with Tennessee farmers, and continuing my research with banana farmers fighting climate change and agricultural disease in the Caribbean and expanding it to East Africa. In terms of research, these two projects will offer opportunities for collaboration with faculty across the university, as well as student involvement. From a teaching perspective, I look forward to teaching mixed-research methods for graduate students; developing a food security focused course for the DDHR curriculum; and offering my course on food, culture, and agriculture that focuses on contemporary issues in food systems and agricultural production around the world.

Finally, over the years, I will work to cultivate partnerships with community organizations in the greater Knoxville area through service learning and research collaborations.

This summer, Alex Lopez conducted the first phase of her dissertation fieldwork in Colombia, a country where for more than five decades approximately 26,000 people have become victims of forced disappearance. Her project examines the process of Transitional Justice (TJ) implemented in 2005; particularly the contribution of confessions by former combatants to the location and identification of victims of forced disappearance. In addition to examining confessions, Lopez will evaluate the work conducted by different agencies in charge of the forensic investigation of cases of forced disappearance. Finally, she will examine the ways in which families of the disappeared perceive and evaluate the process of TJ. In the fall, she will accompany exhumation activities and interview different stakeholders involved with the process of TJ.

In her dissertation research Billingsley examines transitional justice in Nepal. In 2006, the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists and the Nepali government signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ending a decade-long internal armed conflict and calling for the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms in Nepal. Since Krista began her fieldwork and nine years after the signing of the CPA, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons have initiated processes of “accepting complaints” and “conducting preliminary investigations.” Through her research, Billingsley investigates how social distinctions shape the ability of conflict victims to access mechanisms of transitional justice and examines the perspectives of Nepalis affected by conflict as children on the Nepal government, justice, reconciliation, and the ongoing peace process. With the aid of both a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship and a Wenner-Gren Foundation Dissertation Fieldwork Grant, she is conducting research in Kathmandu and Bardiya from January 2016 until January 2017.

Follow her progress on academia.edu or through her LinkedIn profile.
JOSHUA BROWN

A rising third-year student in the College Scholars Program, Brown works with Tricia Hepner, associate professor of anthropology, on a self-designed program centering on Middle Eastern studies and forced migration studies.

“The DDHR courses offered with the UT Department of Anthropology have helped my areas of study grow exponentially; both in conceptual understandings and applied practices in a variety of contexts,” says Brown.

In December 2015, he joined a UT delegation of professors and alumni in Kassel, Germany, to begin conducting preliminary inquiries into the current situation for forced migrants within the German state. After returning from this experience, Brown developed his research further. Hepner and the courses within the DDHR program provided the support and foundation for his ongoing project. Over the summer of 2015, Brown went to Berlin, Germany, as an Exploration Scholar through UT’s Office of National Scholarships and Fellowships. His research focused on the legal system and the actors within the system for the hundreds of thousands of forced migrants that now call Germany home.

“I just completed my seven weeks in Berlin and am confident I have a solid foundation, which was only achievable through careful instruction and stewardship with the DDHR program and Professor Hepner,” says Brown. “As I reflect on my time in Berlin, I feel confident this solid foundation will be the same one upon which my own work will grow as a student, a researcher, and scholar.”

Brown is spending the academic year in Amman, Jordan, to begin a comparative study centering on receiving states (Germany) and transitory states (Jordan). His comparison will focus on how the global refugee regime is constructed in these two contexts and where betterments may be made within our own US system for refugees and asylum seekers.

ISSAK

It never occurred to Issak to become an anthropologist. After completing her degree in journalism, she went abroad to work as a web content manager for a media firm in Dubai. While there, Issak observed the vast class inequalities and human rights violations committed against migrant laborers and domestic workers.

“The catalyst for my move back to the States to study human rights came when a young domestic worker I lived next to was raped by her employer and eventually died from the stillborn she was forced to carry due to UAE laws prohibiting medical treatment to unwed mothers,” says Issak. “After a year of living in Dubai and watching how non-western migrant workers were treated, I knew I wanted to take a more active role in helping to put some power back in these individuals’ hands, not as a journalist, but as a lawyer.”

Issak knew she had a lot of studying and research to do before pursuing a degree in human rights law with a concentration in global labor standards and worker’s rights, but considers herself lucky to discover a human rights program in Tennessee that centered on issues of migrants and displacement.

“The DDHR faculty at UT is diverse, extremely knowledgeable, active in their area of study, and truly care about the issues occurring in our world, which was something that was really important for me to know about my instructors,” says Issak. “I think the classes offered are extremely relevant to the issues facing the world today. The DDHR program has given me a firm foundation on the issue of human rights for my future legal education.”

Issak will continue on to law school and eventually return to the Gulf region and help to establish an NGO to monitor the labor conditions and assist migrant workers in securing and protecting their human and worker rights.

“I made a promise to that young girl at her funeral,” says Issak. “I would like to one day visit her at her resting place in Ethiopia and tell her that we made progress.”

Issak’s plans for the future include completing a doctorate in anthropology and practicing public service law on issues pertaining to human rights, worker’s rights, and socio-economic rights.
Creating a Collaborative Space

The second DDHR conference took place September 25 – 27, 2015, at the College of Law on the campus of University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Over 200 people attended, and presenters representing more than thirteen countries and twenty-one disciplines convened to address the theme Minding the Collaborative Gap.

“Collaboration between scholars, practitioners, professionals, and advocates is critical for DDHR-related work,” says Eliza Echevery, student conference chair. “For this conference, we wanted to create a space for those relationships to be explored, and I think we succeeded!”

The 2015 conference expanded considerably on the foundations of the 2013 DDHR symposium, both in size and scope. In cooperation with the College of Law, the 2015 conference offered Continuing Legal Education (CLE) credit for practicing attorneys. Several generous sponsors provided five travel scholarships to professional and student presenters from around the world.

Keynote speakers included Stephen Oola, director of the Refugee Law Project’s Conflict, Transitional Justice, and Governance Programme at the Makerere University School of Law in Uganda, and Eric Stover, director of the Human Rights Center at UC Berkeley College of Law. The conference schedule included panels and roundtable discussions, an exclusive film screening, UT campus tours, and several networking events.

Our next DDHR conference is planned for fall 2017. Stay tuned for more information.

New Partnerships and Research Opportunities Open Doors for DDHR Faculty and Students

Although housed within the Department of Anthropology at UT, an important goal of our program is the development of partnerships within the university and beyond. Most recently, we entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Felsberg Institute for Education and Academic Research based in central Germany. The purpose of the Felsberg Institute is to sponsor and facilitate international research collaborations on a range of topics within the broader areas of Peace and Conflict Studies and Migration and Integration. The director of the Felsberg Institute, Hartmut Quehl, PhD, also coordinates the International Consortium for Research on Violence (ICRoV), a network of collaborating institutions in Germany, Colombia, Iraq/Kurdistan, the Horn of Africa, and Nicaragua. We are proud to join ICRoV and engage with the Felsberg Institute more broadly in its major research foci. In the months leading up to the establishment of a formal partnership, DDHR director Tricia Hepner participated in an ICRoV workshop in Hamburg, Germany, that addressed disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants from a comparative and international perspective. In December 2015, individuals at the Felsberg Institute invited a small team of DDHR faculty and students to observe aspects of the German administrative and humanitarian response to the massive influx of refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, and other countries. This summer, Joshua Brown, a rising third-year student, conducted research on the German asylum system in Berlin under the auspices of the Felsberg Institute.

We look forward to exploring the ways this partnership can enhance research and training not only for UT students and faculty, but also for our colleagues in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa.

Diversity Matters

Diversity and inclusion have been among the most significant issues at UT in the 2015-2016 academic year. Students, faculty, staff, and administration have struggled to defend past gains and advance ongoing efforts to make UT a welcoming and open environment for all people regardless of race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and (dis)ability status. Because a concern for diversity and inclusion, as well as human dignity and rights, are at the heart of the discipline of anthropology, we are committed to standing in solidarity with the UT Diversity Matters Coalition and continue to believe, along with many others at our institution and in the state of Tennessee, that we can only achieve our goal of becoming Top 25 public research university if diversity and inclusion are genuine realities on our campus.

Safe Zone Certified

As an expression of our collective commitment to diversity and inclusion, approximately twenty faculty and students in the Department of Anthropology completed the Pride Center’s Safe Zone Training in April 2016. Many offices in 250 South Stadium Hall and in the William H. Bass Forensic Anthropology Building are now registered Safe Zones where LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff know they will be welcomed and embraced.

Join in the Conversation

A large number of scholars and practitioners from around the world gathered during our 2015 conference. Given the rapid growth of interest in the program, we see the need to develop communication resources to improve our public visibility and increase opportunities for conversation. To achieve our communication goals, we have set up a listserv open to all faculty, students, staff, and friends of the DDHR program at UT. If you would like to join our mailing list, please send an email to rswamy1@utk.edu with SUBSCRIBE in the subject line. Stay tuned for more information.

Open Access Journal and Working Papers Series

In addition to our upcoming listserv, we plan to develop an open-access journal, which will initially serve as a platform for our working paper series and enable advanced graduate students and faculty to share and present ongoing research. We anticipate the platform will eventually host special collections of papers presented at our conference. The launch of the DDHR Working Papers Series is planned for this fall. The first call for paper submissions, highlighting interdisciplinary and sub-disciplinary research and practice on topics and contexts related to disasters, displacement, and human rights, will coincide with the launch. This new series complements our dedication to strengthening partnerships and collaborations. Anyone is eligible to have their papers considered for inclusion in the series, including undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and practitioners. The series will be copy-edited and peer-reviewed by scholars from several anthropological sub-disciplines and across disciplinary boundaries. Hugh Tuller and Tiffany Saul are co-editors and Amy Mundoff is the faculty editor. Keep your eyes open for a formal announcement of the launch.
PhD Spotlight

Amanda J. Reinke (’16)

Completed her PhD and Certificate in Disasters, Displacement, and Human Rights in May 2016.

In August she began a new tenure-track position as assistant professor of anthropology in the Department of Government and Sociology at Georgia State University and College.

“...I want to quickly plug a benefit of the DDHR program,” writes Reinke in a note to her former advisor, Tricia Hepner. “It prepared me well to argue the value of anthropology and to bridge disciplines quickly, which has already resulted in getting funding for a guest lecturer, cross listing courses, and getting into a study abroad program.

Supporting Student Travel and Research

Did you know you can designate DDHR in the annual Big Orange Family Campaign? Starting in 2017, one student research and travel award of $500 will be available through donations to DDHR via Big Orange Family. Stay tuned for more ways to donate to our program and please think about DDHR when it comes time to schedule your annual giving!

Extra, Extra!

Click here for more news about student and faculty achievements.