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The evidence of success: UWO graduating senior pursuing forensic anthropology career

Written by Grace Lim, University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh News Bureau

Hannah Vang can’t conceal her excitement when she talks about investigating blood spatter patterns or searching for human remains in a dense forested area.

“I love every aspect of it,” Vang says. “The scientific methods, the investigation, and the profile you build—it’s like solving a complex puzzle. And knowing that your work can bring closure to families is really rewarding.”

Majoring in anthropology and minoring in forensic investigation, Vang will be among the more than 800 Titans crossing the stage at the 60th midyear commencement of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Dec. 14 at Kolf Sports Center.

She is graduating a semester early and plans to work, ideally, in a medical examiner’s office before going to graduate school to earn a doctorate in forensic anthropology.

For Vang, the path to forensic anthropology was anything but straightforward. Growing up in Appleton, she began her academic journey without a clear direction, unsure of what she wanted to pursue after high school.

The daughter of Hmong immigrants, Vang knew her parents, who both have technical degrees, wanted her to go to a traditional four-year college.

“They wanted us to have better opportunities,” she said. “They knew that getting a good education would open doors for us.”

As a child, Vang had been fascinated by animals and dreamed of becoming a veterinarian. However, by the time she reached the point where college decisions needed to be made, her interests had shifted.

“I no longer wanted to become a vet,” she said. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I followed my parents’ advice and enrolled in college anyway.”

Vang chose the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh for its ideal distance from home and because her older sister was also attending at the time. What started as a way to check off general education requirements soon led Vang to an unexpected passion: anthropology.

Two classes drew her into the field—a cultural anthropology class with Heidi Nicholls and a biological anthropology course with Kevin Garstki.

However, it was her human osteology course with Jordan Karsten that really sparked her interest in forensic anthropology.

“Dr. Karsten’s passion for forensic anthropology was infectious,” she said, “and I quickly realized this was something I wanted to pursue.”

The course, which deals with the study of human bones, opened the door for Vang to gain professional experience in the field. Karsten, who regularly consults with local and federal law enforcement agencies, often brings his students to do field work on real cases. Vang has assisted in a handful of field searches for human remains in missing persons’ cases.

“If you give them a lecture about a forensic process or the way that we would approach a case, they might think that sounds interesting,” Karsten said. “But when they experience it first-hand, it allows them to just take what they learned in the lecture and actually solidify it in a way that they’ll be able to remember forever, hopefully.”

The moment when Vang truly began to feel confident in her decision was when she got involved in fieldwork under Karsten’s mentorship. Forensic anthropology, which involves using human remains to solve crimes or identify unknown victims, is much more than what’s portrayed in TV shows like CSI, Vang said, adding, “It’s not like CSI at all.”

Vang quickly learned that forensic investigations require patience, persistence and attention to detail.

“One of my first field searches was in October last year,” she said. “We were looking for remains in a forest, and we searched for eight to 10 hours without finding anything. I was told it’s common not to find anything, but that didn’t make it any less disappointing.”

Despite the setback, Vang’s resolve only grew stronger.

“Every time Dr. Karsten offers a search, I try to make time to go. It’s an amazing learning opportunity,” she said. Eventually, the hard work paid off. “We went on another search, and we found remains. It was so rewarding because it felt like all that effort finally meant something.”

Over summer, Vang and UWO senior Jack Leggett, a senior double-majoring in anthropology and Spanish, worked on a research grant under the direction of Karsten. They conducted anthropological analyses on a variety of Wisconsin cold cases for the purposes of cataloging and creating a biological profile for the remains. They also accompanied Karsten on searches for human remains.

Vang’s journey was not without its challenges. Coming into college without a major or a clear path left her feeling uncertain during her first year and a half. “I felt lost at the beginning,” she said. “It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do.” But that uncertainty, she said, has made her academic journey all the more rewarding.

One of the most significant lessons Vang learned from her time at UWO was the importance of developing study habits. As a first-year student, Vang struggled with time management and study routines. “I didn’t have any study habits when I first came to college,” she said. “But after a tough exam grade, I realized I needed to change. I began developing a study routine, and my academic performance improved dramatically.”

“Looking back, I feel so proud of how far I’ve come. I didn’t know what I was doing at first, but now I’ve found my passion,” she said. “It feels like everything has fallen into place.”