

Transcript for Conversations @ KAFM : CMUnow: Sep 2019

Katlin Birdsall: Remarkable accomplishments are happening everyday on the Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College campuses. From faculty instruction and research, to student projects and community involvement. CMUnow is a new monthly segment on the KAFM community affairs hour, where we will interview faculty, athletic coaches, and students to keep you up to date on all things CMU and WCCC. I'm your host Katlin Birdsall along with my co-host David Ludlam, and we'll have two guests on the show today. And our first guest is Dr. Melissa Connor, Professor of Forensic Anthropology and Director of the Forensic Investigation Research Station. Welcome to the show!

Dr. Melissa Connor: Thank you!

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to come down and chat with us and to the KAFM listeners.

David Ludlam: Yeah, thank you!

Dr. Melissa Connor: I'm glad to be here.

Katlin Birdsall: So why don't we kind of first start off with, I think maybe some of our listeners have heard before about the Forensic Investigation Research Station, also known as FIRS, but some may not. So can you kind of talk through a little bit about what that facility is and the type of work that you and students do there?

Dr. Melissa Connor: Our major work is to look at the composition of human remains. I'll use the phrase "body farm" once, where what's considered a body farm. We have a human donation program. We take in deceased individuals, place them outside, watch how they decay, and do scientific studies of that decay and the time interval to look at post mortem interval sense stat. I named it the Forensic Investigation rather than taphonomy or forensic anthropology to try to broaden that to other fields of forensic science as well. So we work with biologists, we work with chemists, we work with entomologists, we work with criminal justice students.

Katlin Birdsall: And I believe if I'm not mistaken that we are one of nine in the world of one of these types of research facilities. Is that correct?

Dr. Melissa Connor: As of today I believe you're right. There is one planned in Virginia currently, and one planned in Quebec that does not have bodies on the ground yet.

Katlin Birdsall: Okay.

David Ludlam: So Dr. Connor, I'm a huge fan of yours, I think you know that. I love the way, you just talked about sort of this interdisciplinary approach, I admire the way you kind of fearlessly go after that. Working across the aisle, looking over the fence at other disciplines. And I also

admire the way that you work with students. I can tell that you first and foremost care about where they land and the future of the discipline. One area where I've seen you spend a lot of time working interdisciplinary would be sort of externally with law enforcement. Can you talk a little bit about you know, your role in working with law enforcement, how your discipline interplays in with public health, maybe even how your discipline helps us understand history and culture and anthropology, those sorts of things?

Dr. Melissa Connor: Ooh, those are big questions.

David Ludlam: Big questions, big questions.

Dr. Melissa Connor: Big questions! Let's start a little bit smaller in working with local law enforcement, coroner's offices. We have to be called in, we have to be requested. And the questions that they often have are, are they looking at skeletal elements that are human or not human? Can we assist in a search to help them find skeletal elements of a missing individual and help within that determine if it's human or non-human? Can we sometimes help them excavate or disinter somebody that they've already found? So these are skills that I have had and brought to CMU and basically if somebody gets me to help them they are going to get my students to help them too. And these guys, we train our students quite well. We have a crime scene investigation course, we have other courses, and they are doing well at that case work.

David Ludlam: And before you go on to maybe the big questions, you just mentioned that the students are always involved. Is this kind of a unique opportunity for undergraduate students? I mean, how often do they get opportunities at the undergraduate level to do the kind of work that you do?

Dr. Melissa Connor: I would say it's rare for undergraduates, perhaps not unique, one of a kind. But of the facilities, of the extant facilities, the ones that work solely with undergraduates, there's only about three of us right now. The FROST facility in Michigan, Western Carolina, and then us. All the other facilities have very big graduate programs. Think, University of Tennessee at Knoxville which has one of the most active PHD programs. So if you're an undergraduate there, you're kind of pushing up against the master and PHD students to get some of this experience.

Katlin Birdsall: That's amazing. Well, you are listening to CMU now on KAFM community affairs. And our first guest today is Dr. Connor, Professor of Forensic Anthropology and the Director of FIRS. So, kind of building off of that a little bit, you obviously work with quite a few outside agencies. Are there any cases that come to mind that you can talk about to show examples of what you and your students are able to do whether you're working with the Federal Bureau of Investigations, the Colorado Bureau of Investigations, or the local law enforcement, are there any specific cases you could maybe talk to?

Dr. Melissa Connor: Well I think one that a lot of the public already knows about and it's aside from the case work, was working with some of the victims of Sunset Mesa. And I'm going to

assume that “victims” is the right word although the case has not been to trial yet. But individuals were told that it was possible that the cremains they got back were either not their loved one or in fact not cremains at all. So we worked with the social workers here, we worked with outside agencies and we worked with the families to offer to test those cremains. Bill Hood in Geology provided the chemistry expertise and the fancy machine, the XRF for the chemical analysis. Our students did microscopic analysis, in other words, visually looking at the material, identifying inclusions. And then we worked with the CMU social work program when we gave those cremains back to families so that we could talk to them about the science, that’s what my students did. And the social work students were there to suggest support mechanisms for some of the grief counseling issues.

David Ludlam: Well, Dr. Connor, maybe shifting gears into something that I think is difficult but something that all human beings go through and that’s this idea of death and dying. And I think in our culture for reasons you’d know that I don’t, we often avoid that topic. Maybe sometimes we joke about it. But it’s a huge part of your day-to-day work environment and you have to introduce students to the concept of death and dying in their daily work. Could you talk a little bit about how you introduce students to the concept and how you get them comfortable being able to do what it is that you do to strengthen law enforcement in our community?

Dr. Melissa Connor: Well, generally our students, my students, are self-selected, they step forward. And that’s a huge part because anybody who is really averse to the topic isn’t going to step forward and say “I want to work with you using human cadavers”.

David Ludlam: Okay.

Dr. Melissa Connor: So that self-selection is a huge initial part. And then we just, I mean, I’ve worked with human remains recovery since the early 1990’s so it’s just part of what I do. And that’s how I treat it with the students, it’s just part of our day-to-day learning experience.

Katlin Birdsall: Mhmm.

Dr. Melissa Connor: If they’ve got questions we answer them honestly as we can.

Katlin Birdsall: Mhmm. That’s great! Well, you are listening to CMU now on KAFM community affairs. And our first guest today is Dr. Connor, Professor of Forensic Anthropology and the Director of FIRS. So the first facility that you manage, like you were saying earlier, is a fairly rare facility, especially for undergraduate students. And I think that you know, with your expertise in being a leader here in our community, we’ve heard that there might be rumors that you’re holding a conference on campus for others who operate facilities similar to FIRS. And so I was wondering if you could tell us how CMU was selected to host this conference to have all of these individuals come to Grand Junction? And maybe the benefit that your students will receive from this type of conference?

Dr. Melissa Connor: Well, we got together, we’ve always had an email group as directors that I call a support group. Mr. Ludlam is trying to call it a conference.

Katlin Birdsall: Support group... conference...

Dr. Melissa Connor: I mean, there is a small group of us with a rather unusual job description. And so if I have questions or face a challenge that I'm not sure how to handle I can shoot off emails to these other folks. And we got together in Florida last year to see a new facility that's out in Tampa. And basically, how did we get selected, I missed that because I went out for coffee and when I came back we had been selected.

Katlin Birdsall: Okay.

Dr. Melissa Connor: So, that's how we got selected. But I think also because we are not in the eastern woodlands we have one of the different decompositional trajectories than all of the groups that are in Tennessee, Western Carolina, Florida, we are a totally different environment and I think they folks wanted to see that. Our students are going to get exposed to the directors of these programs that have graduate programs, they're going to see what's going on at these other facilities and what different decomposition trajectories there are.

Katlin Birdsall: And because with our facility is it unique being in an arid, dry, desert climate compared to these other facilities is that correct?

Dr. Melissa Connor: Absolutely! When you talk Tampa, you're talking a little bit more humid!

Katlin Birdsall: Just a little bit... Just a little bit!

Dr. Melissa Connor: There's another facility that's relatively new up in the UP in Michigan, they call it FROST, and we are a little warmer. Different compositional trajectory.

Katlin Birdsall: Okay.

David Ludlam: So Dr. Connor, going back to you know, this concept of culture and community again, we live in a relatively small community, so I assume that a large number of donors I presume, that are probably from the area, how do you interface with the community when it comes to donors who really take what you're doing seriously when it comes to science and want to be a part of that? But it's also a small community and again you know the death and dying concept and how does that all fit together? How do you interface with the community?

Dr. Melissa Connor: Well, I appreciate the community support because like you said, a good portion of our donations come locally. And when people ask me "does the local community support having an institution like FIRS" it's like, how else would we...

Katlin Birdsall: Be able to operate and do the work that you're doing?

Dr. Melissa Connor: Yeah, be able to operate and do this, mhmm. And in response what we've tried to do is be as respectful as we know how. And what I talk to the students about is to just pretend that each one of these, treat each of our donations as if they were one of their family

members. And if it was their family member that they were working with. People seem to grasp that and it seems to resonate with folks.

Katlin Birdsall: Well good, well we are kind of already getting to the end of our time with you today but I know I did want to ask at least one more question. So we've talked a lot about the facility and the work that you and your students are doing there but, what do you do when you're not at FIRS and when you're not in the classroom teaching students and you're not studying decomposition? You know, what else are you involved with in doing?

Dr. Melissa Connor: I like to think I'm a fairly social person so, I'm golfing, out having beers with people, trying all the hot springs...

Katlin Birdsall: Mhmm.

Dr. Melissa Connor: Doing traveling, eating a little way too much as anybody looking at me can tell!

David Ludlam: That's definitely not true! But you know, I do have to before you go, defend myself about calling your gathering a conference. When two or more are gathered in the name of a discipline, when you're in PR it's called a conference. So, I look forward to seeing and being a part of your conference, and listening in.

Dr. Melissa Connor: Thank you!

Katlin Birdsall: Great, well we want to thank you so much again for coming on the show today, thank you so much Dr. Connor!

Dr. Melissa Connor: Thank you for having me!

Katlin Birdsall: Alright, and don't go anywhere, we are going to take a short break and we will be right back with the Head of the Music Department, Dr. Darin Kamstra.

SEGMENT BREAK

Katlin Birdsall: Welcome back to CMUnow, a monthly show where we talk about the remarkable things happening at Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College. We would like to welcome our second guest today, Dr. Darin Kamstra, the Head of the Music Department and the Director of Jazz Studies and Percussion.

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Glad to be here!

David Ludlam: Yeah thanks for being here today. Dr. Kamstra I was curious, I know, you've been involved with the department for quite some time, but you've recently stepped into the role of Department Head. And for our listeners that may not be familiar with academia, what does it mean to lead a department. And then for you personally, what plans do you have in terms of shaping the department? Maybe going in a new direction or maintaining the status quo?

Dr. Darin Kamstra: You know, David that's a great question and I'm learning more everyday about what my duties are. But, an overview of it is you know, directing the resources of the department financially. And from a faculty perspective, to produce an excellent product with the resources that we have available. And directing, you know one of the favorite things that I've had in this position is the ability to see all the passion of the students and the faculty for teaching and performing, and trying to figure out the most effective ways to direct that passion so we have a great product for the entire department.

Katlin Birdsall: That's great. And so, our fall semester just kicked off not too long ago, it's crazy to me to think that we are already in September. But I know that the music department does have a lot of events coming up this semester and next semester including the faculty gala that's happening on September 18th. We have our first guest artist recital happening on September 25th. So, I was hoping maybe you could tell our listeners a little bit about what they can expect as far as events for this upcoming semester? And I'm really interested in the guest artist series, you know, how you choose who to bring in, where they're coming from? Because I just think that's a really amazing part of what the music department is doing is bringing in these guest artists to perform at CMU.

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Yeah the faculty gala, that's always a great way to get the year started and feature all of our faculty performing from voice to piano to jazz. You'll get a flavor of the full range of talents in the music department. Guest artists are requested by faculty and often times they tie into events that outreach into the community. For instance we have a percussion festival on November 9th that I oversee and part of that is to help educate students out in the community and inspire them by bringing in these world-class guest artists. But also to hopefully turn them on to CMU as a place that they can come whether they want to major in music, or just continue to be involved by performing and then major in another area. So for that event, we will have the Balkan percussion duo coming in which is Ksenija... I'm not even going to pronounce her last name right now because I'm going to not do it well. But she's from Serbia. And Dimitrii Nilov from Belarus. So they'll be in, that will be exciting. The upcoming event with Evan Mazunik and Conrad Kehn will be interesting because they do a lot with improvisation not necessarily in a jazz perspective. They'll have electronic instruments, Conrad is a vocalist. And so, I'm actually not quite sure what to expect, it's going to be potentially experimental and genre-crossing in terms of that performance. And that kind of ties in with our goal in the department to keep our curriculum moving forward and offering contemporary styles. We now are offering instruction to students on contemporary commercial music instruments such as guitar, bass, and drum set, and hope to expand those offerings in the future.

Katlin Birdsall: Mhmm. Well that's why listeners need to come down and check out these events so they can see it for themselves and hear it in person.

David Ludlam: Absolutely. And I mean speaking about coming down and checking out these events, you know, on campus there's all kinds of departments, business or the STEM fields that have an externally facing orientation for the students. They interact with the community a lot.

Could you describe that a little, about the music department? How do the music students interact with the community? What would you say the type of students you get have in common? What kind of common ground do music students have?

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Well, one interesting thing to note about the music department is that we offer 44 concerts over the course of this performing arts season. And like I say, they're going to be the full range from traditional classical music to jazz, to commercial music. There's also a good tie between not only our incoming students but our alumni. 18 of the School District 51 music teachers are alumni at CMU and we are very proud of what they do out in the community. And it comes full circle, and when their students come in as music majors and then learn how to educate the future generations. And so, yeah, that's always kind of a fun tie in, to see the alumni and how they feed into the incoming students.

Katlin Birdsall: Well you are listening to CMU now on KAFM community affairs, and our second guest today is Head of the Music Department, Dr. Darin Kamstra. So along with your role as Department Head and as a faculty member you are also the Director of Jazz Studies and Percussion. So I was just curious maybe what drew you to the jazz genre maybe over other genres or kind of how that role developed?

Dr. Darin Kamstra: You know, I probably learned about jazz like most young students. And that was through jazz band in high school. I didn't know anything about jazz until then and that really peaked my interest. And I think that's gone a long way throughout the nation and really the world now, since jazz has become a world-wide art form, to introduce students to that art form. But, I don't place jazz above any other genres in my mind, and I'm always trying to learn more. I just took a course last spring on composing and producing electronic music where we studied electronic dance music styles, and composed those, and those are things I'm hoping to bring into the curriculum in my Advanced Music Technology class in the future.

Katlin Birdsall: Nice!

David Ludlam: Well, you know I was looking at the fact that you are a percussionist, in fact I think you are the Principle Percussionist for the Grand Junction symphony?

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Right.

David Ludlam: And I'm guessing for baby boomers, when they think about percussion they think of the drummer for The Who, if you're Gen X or maybe it's the drummer for Def Leppard. If you don't know what percussion is, it's a lot more than you know, drumming. So tell us about, what does it mean to be a percussionist?

Dr. Darin Kamstra: You know, the great thing that I like so much about percussion is that it's not just one instrument, and it's not just one genre or style of music. And that's something that I try to convey and teach to my students that, you know they may come in with a style or a particular instrument that they are drawn to, but to really be marketable in the future, they are going to have to have a diverse set of skill sets. Whether it's playing timpani in the orchestra

like I do, or any of the other percussion instruments in the percussion section orchestrally. Or playing solo marimba where we have a five octave range and we can play melodies and harmonies, just like a piano as a soloist. Or drum set, where you just have this multitude of styles. All of which, you know, go back to a universal technique. But, having a particular oral picture of what those styles are supposed to sound like and what are the patterns? And that's what makes it exciting for me is that diverse skill set, and it keeps things interesting and fresh.

Katlin Birdsall: Mhmm. You are listening to CMU now on KAFM community affairs and our second guest today is Dr. Darin Kamstra who is the Head of the Music Department. So, you know, one thing I think I've found really interesting as I've worked at the university for longer and longer is when you're on the outside you know, you see all of our faculty members and you think their primary role is teaching and they're in the classroom. Which, luckily for CMU, our focus is on having teachers in the classroom working with our students one on one. But our faculty does so much else outside of the classroom. You know you were talking about that you played both in the Grand Junction Symphony Orchestra, I believe that you also perform with Rockestra, and then on top of that you are also an active composer. I was hoping maybe you could talk a little bit about your process for that and maybe some of your published works that some of our listeners could hear.

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Yeah, I love composing when I have the time. And so, the thing that really gets me going compositionally is to have a specific end product or somebody who commissions me to write something that they have in mind. That gives me a lot of inspiration. Or an upcoming music performance that I have an idea of a type of piece that would work well. Most of my published music is in the percussion realm, some percussion solos. Probably my favorite one is called "Bateria". Bateria is Portuguese for battery, which means percussion instruments that you would find in Escola de Samba, which is a large collection of percussion instruments marching down the street in Rio de Janeiro, or any other Brazilian city you can imagine around carnival. And so, it's inspired by those styles and instruments but then applied to a western classical instrument which is the timpani. So it's kind of an interesting cross-cultural exploration there.

Katlin Birdsall: Mhmm.

David Ludlam: Dr. Kamstra I've got a two part question for you. You mentioned that within the world of percussion there's many many instruments. And if you had to pick one, what is your favorite instrument? And then the second part of the question is, for those listeners who are into classic rock, does the cowbell have a future in the future of rock?

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Oh yeah, the cowbell is indispensable absolutely.

David Ludlam: That's good, that's good.

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Boy, that's a tough question. That's like asking who your favorite child is.

Katlin Birdsall: We all know that parents have one!

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Yeah, right. You know, it's changed over the years. First I would say it was timpani early on, and I still love playing timpani. And then it was probably marimba because of that ability to perform as a soloist harmonically and melodically on par with other instruments like guitar, piano. I guess now I would say it is drum set, and jazz vibraphone, kind of half-half. I did a sabbatical project two years ago where I focused on jazz vibraphone and studied with a master performer up in Seattle, Tom Collier. And was able to really develop my skill set there so, I love performing those as well.

Katlin Birdsall: Nice. Well before we let you go for today, I believe that you recently held a workshop here at the KAFM studio. So I was hoping you could maybe talk to us a little bit about that partnership or how that event worked out?

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Yeah, we have every summer the Jazztopia Jazz Workshop which is another outreach for high school and middle school students throughout the Grand Valley and beyond. And it's a four day workshop that we hold on the campus at CMU. And one of the cool events we had this year was we brought all the student combos down to the KAFM radio room downstairs. And it turned out to be a great performance venue, felt very much like a jazz club in a big city. And so, I think that was really the highlight of the week for both the faculty and the students.

Katlin Birdsall: Great! Well thank you so much again for taking the time out of your busy schedule to come down and chat with us and let the KAFM listeners know a little bit more about what's going on in the music department.

Dr. Darin Kamstra: Yeah my pleasure!

David Ludlam: Thank you!

Katlin Birdsall: Great, well this segment airs on the second Tuesday of each month on KAFM community radio. You can also listen to podcasts of today's show at KAFMradio.org. I'm your host Katlin Birdsall along with my co-host David Ludlam, and we'll be back next month for another edition of CMUnow on the community affairs hour.

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