**Facing the challenge**

**Davidson student recreates dead man’s face using skull, her talent**

**By Hilary Trenda****htrenda@charlotteobserver.com**

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Caitlin Hickey is having a hard time not envisioning the bones in your face.

For the past semester, the David-son College junior has been immersed in human faces and their elemental makeup, thanks to her pioneering independent study in forensic art and anthropology.

Hickey, 21, has been working to reconstruct the face of the plaster skull provided by her associate professor of anthropology, Helen Cho. With the help of Davidson Police Officer David Houk, an FBI-trained forensic artist, Hickey has been able to combine her love of art and her fascination with physical anthropology to piece together what the man looked like in life.

“Now it’s hard to look at people without trying to figure out what the bones look like under their face,” she said with a laugh.

Hickey came to Davidson from Coral Gables, Fla., with the intent of studying pre-med or interdisciplinary studies. But after several courses with Cho, Hickey said, she switched to a double major in anthropology and Spanish.

Cho said Hickey approached her with the possibility of the unique independent study and noted that tailoring an independent study to a student’s interests isn’t unusual.

“As long as the students are aware such opportunities exist, the fact they can design their own course – and they happen to know a professor who closely matches that academic interest – the sky’s the limit.”

In a culture that’s morbidly fascinated by the inevitable end to human life, Cho said, it’s not surprising that

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shows such as “Bones” and “CSI” are not only wildly popular, but also reflect true science.

“(Death) is a fact of life and we are all facing our own mortalities. Because of that inevitable nature of life, we are all curious,” Cho said.

“With forensic anthropology or other kinds of forensic sciences, they’re really captivating to general audiences because it combines detective work – that kind of excitement we imagine goes into investigation – and actually makes science look interesting and applicable, we understand why science is necessary.”

Cho said the plaster skull Hickey worked with came from a casting company that makes plaster models from natural bone. Other than a photo of what the man looked like when he was alive, Cho said, the casting company had little information to provide about the skull.

Hickey was challenged to identify 19 anthropological points to blindly recreate the face, as well as a 2D drawing. It was only after the project was complete that she got to see the photo.

Hickey spent the beginning of the semester determining the skull’s age, gender and ancestry. After determining he was a white male, likely in his 50s, she adhered pieces of pencil erasers in varying thicknesses – some just millimeters deep – to the skull as tissue-depth indicators.

Though she’s always been interested in art, Hickey said she had no experience with sculpting.

“It was basically a learning process. It was difficult not to throw in artistic bias to make it ‘pretty’ rather than what the bones say,” she said.

Hickey said accounting for facial fat content and eye color – details impossible to ascertain just by bones – were the most challenging.

Houk, who met every other week with Hickey, said he encouraged her to draw. Whether it was faces or whatever was in front of her in class, he said practice is essential. “The hardest part is trying to capture the likeness with just your hands and relying solely on your own observation and skills to communicate what you see.”

During the hours Hickey spent sculpting and drawing the face, she named the project Phineas Gage, for the American railroad foreman who survived an accident in the 1800s that sent an iron rod completely through his skull.

Hickey was nervous about the photo-reveal once her re-creation was complete but overall was pleased with how she did, especially for her first try.

“Looking at his skull for such a long time made me want to know what he looks like, “ she said. “I’m pretty happy with the results.”

In May, Hickey will pack her bags for Knoxville, Tenn., to intern at the internationally-known Body Farm. Though she’s not sure how she’ll fare with decomposing human cadavers, Hickey said she hopes to help graduate students with their work and stay on through the end of the summer.

After graduation, Hickey said, she’d love to work with French artist Elisabeth Daynes, an expert in hyper-realistic reconstruction that combines sculpture and paleoanthropology.

Hickey isn’t certain her future lies in law enforcement-related anthropology, but feels confident she’ll remain involved in forensic art.

“It’s not as glamorous as on TV, but I’m not sure if I could deal with the blood and guts every day.”

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