

Of missing persons, unidentified remains and cold cases

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Melina Calmon Silva, a PhD candidate in physical anthropology at Tulane University, worked as a volunteer with Operation Identification, a forensic anthropology program that helps identify individuals who have died crossing the Mexican-U.S. border. (Photograph by Cheryl Gerber)

As a volunteer with Operation Identification, a forensic anthropology program that helps identify individuals who have died crossing the Mexican-U.S. border, Melina Calmon Silva assisted with such duties as the intake of bodies, photographing personal effects, bone cleaning and trauma analysis.

“Seeing all the effort these people put into identifying these individuals, and all the partnerships created to give their families closure deeply impacted me,” said Calmon, a native of Brazil and a PhD candidate in physical anthropology at Tulane University.

Calmon began researching migrant deaths at the border and eventually missing persons and unidentified remains in general. She has become an expert in the field, so much so that she was recently invited to present some of her research at the Brazilian Conference in Forensic Anthropology, presented by the Brazilian Association of Forensic Anthropology.

“Speaking at this conference was an honor and a recognition of the research I am doing,” Calmon said. “The increasing role of forensic anthropology in the investigation of missing persons, unidentified remains and cold cases.”

Calmon is attending Tulane through a Brazilian scholarship called Science without Borders. Sharing her knowledge is her way of giving back to Brazil, especially since Brazil does not offer forensic anthropology as a discipline in colleges and universities, nor does it have databases for investigating cases of missing or unidentified persons.

“Being invited to share my research gave me great satisfaction and the feeling that I am doing something meaningful and that can impact the field in Brazil,” Calmon said. “It is the start of giving back everything they invested in me.”

At Tulane, Calmon is working with anthropology professor John Verano, an expert in human skeletal anatomy, paleopathology and forensic anthropology. She hopes to get her PhD in May 2019 and is weighing various options for her future, from working in academia to consulting for agencies involved in missing persons. She already is helping Brazil develop a forensic anthropology training program in the country’s medical examiner offices.

“Right now, I am focusing on getting paperwork ready to apply for open positions as they appear, either here (in Louisiana) or in other states,” she said. “I do love teaching, so I will choose a professorship position over anything else if I can.”

“The numbers of missing persons are massive. The more I researched, the more I realized this is what I wanted to pursue.”

Melina Calmon Silva