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WKU archaeologist awarded for public service

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Gwynn Henderson (sitting, middle) has been given the 2023 Distinguished Achievement in Public Archaeology Award by the Society for American Archaeology.

Courtesy of Gwynn Henderson

Western Kentucky University's Gwynn Henderson, education director for the Kentucky Archaeological Survey, has been given a national award recognizing her contributions to the field.

The Society for American Archaeology has recognized Henderson's work in public engagement by giving her the 2023 Distinguished Achievement in Public Archaeology

Award.

“I’m not usually at a loss for words for stuff like this,” Henderson said. “I see myself as one of many committed people to bring archeology to school teachers, to interested lay people and citizens.”



Henderson said when she set out to be an archaeologist, she felt guilty she wasn’t doing enough to give her research, time and efforts back to her community.

“My parents always said you’re supposed to give back to your community,” she said. “... I felt like there was something I needed to do, more than just the research, that fed more than just my intellectual need.”

This feeling led her to the discipline of public archaeology, which engages and educates the public in the field. She has written articles for kids magazines, hosted lectures and led youth dig sites to share her passion.

“If the archaeology community doesn’t give back to the citizens of this country,” she said, “then what are we doing all of this research for?”

Henderson said it is important to make the field as accessible as it can be – otherwise, “if archaeologists are just talking to themselves with terminology and so forth, it puts up an unnecessary wall.”

Her current work deals with the preservation of artifacts and documentation of indigenous peoples in the Ohio Valley, specifically the Shawnee Tribe diaspora. She is collaborating with the Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma to ID pottery in the Ohio Valley style found far outside of its expected region.

“It connects you with the people who lived long ago,” Henderson said. “You see yourself in the long chain of historical events in a place.”

Henderson said she is humbled to have been recognized.

“I’m so very honored, so many of us have labored for so many years, doing this because we felt really strongly about it but we never expected any serious recognition,” she said.