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Dog handler Avery Schaffer of Linville Falls and her dog, Finch, receive instructions from Paul Martin during a field exercise.

A group of four-legged students possessing powerful senses of smell visited the Western Carolina University campus recently as 66 dog handlers from across the eastern United States brought their canine partners to Cullowhee to take [training in human remains detection](#).

The handlers and their dogs, commonly referred to as “cadaver dogs,” traveled to WCU from 25 states (and one team came from Canada) to take part in field exercises and listen to lectures given by WCU faculty members and outside speakers – all with the

intent of improving the skills of the dogs and handlers when they are called upon to assist in searches for human remains. Cadaver dogs are typically used during criminal investigations and search and recovery operations.

An intermediate-level training session for the dogs and their handlers was offered through WCU's [Office of Continuing Education](#) from Thursday, May 17, through Saturday, May 19. An advanced-level session was held Monday, May 21, through Wednesday, May 23.

The cadaver dog training at WCU was held in cooperation with the university's forensic anthropology program and was coordinated by Paul S. Martin, a graduate of that program who has specialized in human remains detection since 2000 and who has conducted searches or consulted on cases for local, state and national agencies.

The sessions at WCU are the brainchild of Martin and [Cheryl Johnston](#), a WCU associate professor of forensic anthropology who also leads research and education at the university's Forensic Osteology Research Station (FOREST.) Martin enrolled in the forensic anthropology program as a transfer student in fall 2010, and soon after he and Johnston began discussing the possibility of offering instruction in human remains detection for handlers and their dogs. The first session at WCU, offering intermediate-level training, was held in May 2011. Other intermediate-level sessions were held in November 2011 and in March of this year. The advanced session, for dogs and handlers who already had been through the intermediate session, was offered for the first time at the recent gathering.

The cadaver dog training has proven to be extremely popular, Martin said. With 30 slots available, the November 2011 session filled up through online registration in nine minutes. The results were the same for the March and most recent intermediate-level sessions. Martin said the training held at WCU, with a combination of field practice and classroom lectures, is something the dogs and handlers "can't get anywhere else." A big lure of the WCU sessions is that dogs and handlers have an opportunity to be exposed to full body decomposition at the FOREST, he said.

Mickey Januskiewize, a retired law enforcement officer now affiliated with the Charleston-based South Carolina Service Dogs, attended the recent advanced training session with her 8-year-old black lab Abby. She previously participated in the first session held at WCU in May 2011.

"The opportunity to work in the FOREST is typically something you don't get, and the fact that they bring in extra speakers is bringing everyone's level up in their training," Januskiewize said. "I enjoy getting input about what my dog is doing and what I'm doing and how we can continue to get better."

Martin said searching for human remains with a dog is much more involved than simply taking a dog to a location that might be hiding a body and telling the dog to find it. "In

court cases, more and more, we're seeing the science being questioned. The handlers are finding that they need better preparation for conducting searches," he said.

Usually, medium-to-large hunting or working breeds of dogs are chosen to be cadaver dogs. The initial phase of training involves teaching the dog a specific command that it can associate with finding human decomposition odor, Martin said. The dogs learn to have a certain response – such as sitting, lying down, barking or scratching – when they get as close as they can to the odor. The dogs must learn to detect human remains that can range from being fresh to completely skeletonized, and that can amount to just a few drops of blood or an entire body, he said.

Martin served as an instructor at the recent sessions, along with Lisa Higgins, a law enforcement veteran who founded the Louisiana Search and Rescue Dog Team. Higgins has been involved in more than 400 searches since 1990 and is now a member of the FBI's Victim Recovery Team. Assisting with the instruction were Deana Hudgins of Ohio Search and Recovery Canines, and Orval Banks and Becky Stropshire of Southern Pride Search Dogs of Clyde.

Classroom lectures were provided by Cheryl Johnston along with [Tom Johnson](#), WCU assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice, and [John A. Williams](#), director of WCU's forensic anthropology program, whose career experiences has included mortuary operations at the site of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks. Several guest speakers from off campus also gave presentations for the handlers, including Arpad Vass, a forensic anthropologist at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee who is an expert in decomposition odor analysis.

While he was a student at WCU, Martin collaborated with [Blair Tormey](#), a lecturer in WCU's geology program, to study how cadaver dogs can be paired with the use of ground penetrating radar to locate and map unmarked graves in old cemeteries. The dog handlers attending the recent training at WCU also witnessed demonstrations of both dogs and radar being used to locate human remains at the FOREST and at a historic cemetery in Tuckasegee.

Martin said plans are in the works to hold more cadaver dog training at WCU in the fall. More information about future sessions, contact WCU's Office of Continuing Education at 828-227-7397.

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