

Obituary: In Memory of William H. Kimbel (1954–2022)

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OBITUARY



Bill Kimbel at Hadar, Ethiopia, in 2009 (photograph by Benjamin Reed).

On April 17, 2022, two days after his 68th birthday, Dr. William H. Kimbel (“Bill” to his family, friends, and colleagues) lost his life to cancer. Bill was a much-admired and internationally renowned scholar of paleoanthropology. Just as important, Bill was a beloved colleague, mentor, and friend.

Bill was born in Philadelphia, PA, on April 15, 1954. His passion for paleoanthropology was long, spanning more than 40 years. He received his Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology from Case Western University in 1976, the same year he began working as an assistant with the International Afar Research Expedition. He served as Associate Curator and Head of Physical Anthropology at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History from 1981 to 1985. In 1986, one year after joining the Institute of Human Origins (IHO), Bill

was awarded his Ph.D. in Biological Sciences from Kent State University. The IHO moved from the University of California–Berkeley to Arizona State University in 1996. At that time, Bill was the Science Director of the IHO. He became the IHO’s Director in 2008 and served in that position until he retired in 2021.

Bill was best known for his field work in Hadar, Ethiopia, and his contributions to understanding the origin, evolution, and anatomy of *Australopithecus afarensis* and early *Homo*. Together with co-authors—often students—Bill published and presented hundreds of articles and conference papers during the course of his career; his publications have been cited more than 9,000 times (according to Google Scholar). Through these published works, including the seminal contributions *The Skull of Australopithecus*

afarensis (with Donald Johanson and Yoel Rak) and *Species, Species Concepts and Primate Evolution* (with Lawrence Martin), Bill shaped how paleoanthropologists interpret the fossil record.

With his regular work in the National Museum of Ethiopia and at Hadar, Bill also supported the community of students, scholars, and colleagues in Ethiopia. His ties to the country and scientific community there were deeply important to him, and he was committed to sharing his love and respect for the field and country with undergraduate students on the Hadar Field School. His voice, laughter, and presence in the museum will be missed by many.

Bill's success in grant writing and fund raising had a significant impact on generations of scholars. As PI and Co-PI, he was awarded more than \$1.2 million to fund paleoanthropological work at Hadar. As Director of the IHO he was primarily responsible for the single largest research grant ever awarded for human origins research—\$4.9 million from the Templeton Foundation. These grants funded the training of hundreds of students, supported decades worth of Ethiopian team members, and resulted in, literally, thousands of publications involving Hadar materials. Because of Bill's work, the field has a much deeper understanding of the evolutionary history of our ancestors.

While prolific in his publications and productive in his grant procurement, Bill's extensive service to the field of anthropology helped spread his influence far beyond his own area of specialization. Bill served two-terms as Associate Editor, then joint-Editor, and eventually became a permanent member of the editorial board for the *Journal of Human Evolution*, paleoanthropology's leading journal. Bill was recognized for his myriad contributions to the field in 2002 with a named professorship—Virginia M. Ullman

Professor of Natural History and the Environment—and again in 2005, when he was elected a Fellow to the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable things about Bill Kimbel was his ability to be so successful at so many things. In addition to his impressive research career, at Arizona State University he mentored a multitude of undergraduate and graduate students and was nominated for several teaching awards. He was dedicated to public outreach, helping to increase understanding of human origins with the development of the Webby-winning becominghuman.org. His love of music was accompanied by a vast knowledge of jazz, Bach, and Baroque. He played cello and softball and had a great appreciation for fine wine and food.

Bill's love of science and his active discovery of the fossil remains of our extinct relatives have influenced hundreds of students and careers, and his attention to detail and ability to tell the evidence-based story of our ancestors made the field of anthropology better. Through his research, public outreach, and student training, Bill's scientific rigor has been a benchmark against which all paleoanthropological work is measured.

The hundreds of colleagues, friends, and family members who turned out for the 2023 American Association of Biological Anthropologists session in Bill's honor are a testament to the degree to which he was respected and loved. Maya Angelou once wrote: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Bill had a way of making everyone around him feel special. His is a legacy to envy and he is deeply missed by all who were lucky enough to know him.