Former Texas State math and computer science professor Dr. Grady Early stands on the property that will be his final resting place at Freeman Ranch, the location of the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State in San Marcos.

SAN MARCOS — Grady Early gave half his life to the students at Texas State University where he taught math and computer science for almost 30 years. In death he will give no less.

Nine years after he retired, the 64-year-old Early has made arrangements to return to the school, but this time as instrument, not instructor. Early is one of more than two dozen people who have donated their bodies to Texas State’s Forensic Anthropology Center, opting to spend their final repose in a fenced-off field to decompose under the watchful eyes of researchers and students.

In effect, they will become training tools for lawmen and forensic scientists who can study the effects of time and conditions on a human corpse. Their bodies could be placed in the sun or shade, buried or in water, perhaps even in the trunk of a car.

“Once you're dead, that's the end of the hunt,” Early said. “There's nothing I could possibly be worried about then. What happens to my shell after that is of no consequence to me.”

The Forensic Anthropology Center, known unofficially as the “body farm” or ranch, is the third facility of its kind in the nation and the only one west of the Mississippi. Located on the university-owned Freeman Ranch, about four miles from campus, the five-acre plot contains the remains of seven people. Another 25 to 30 living donors are signed up.
Six to seven body limit

Center Director Michelle Hamilton called the number of donations to the facility, which opened last September, a pleasant surprise. She said that while more donations are welcome, six to seven bodies is all the current staff can handle.

The information from these studies is used to aid law enforcement in identifying remains and determining time, cause and place of death. Hamilton said that almost all of what law enforcement knows about identifying human remains comes from the founding facility at the University of Tennessee, where she studied under renowned forensic anthropologist William Bass. The Texas State location will provide not only a drier climate in which to study decomposition, but perhaps a different demographic of donors as well. Hamilton said the majority of the remains at the Tennessee facility come from whites, leaving data on other races less documented.

The Texas State facility is protected by a security system and fence to keep out hungry scavengers and fraternity pledges alike.

“To some extent, we have changed the natural surroundings, since we have fenced it off,” Hamilton said. “So, we don’t actually see what we would expect to see in a real world situation. Some of the biggest modifiers of human remains that are found on the surface are canids — dogs, coyotes, etcetera.”

Hamilton, who also is signed up, said the research would not exist without the generosity of donors and their families.

Brigette Simec, who signed up to donate her body a month ago, says, “I’m giving back to science and the community. Hopefully, my remains can be used to bring someone justice.”

Simec, who lives in Fontana, Calif., feels so passionate about her decision, she already has made arrangements to ship her body. Hamilton, who drives to collect the bodies herself, only accepts donations from an approximate 100-mile radius.

“If you think about it, you have to pay for a cremation or burial service anyway,” said Simec, who at 37 is the youngest donor to date.

The self-admitted Forensic Files and Crime 360 junkie said friends have found her commitment intriguing, but some family members are not comfortable with the thought of her body being picked at by vultures or worse, graduate students.

“Believe it or not, I told my mother that the way she is going to go is gross,” Simec said with a laugh. “In an oven, with the heat cranked up. That to me is gross. The most natural thing is to let me go. I love animals anyway, so if they want to take a part of me, why not?”
The remains of Matt Smith, son of Dennis and Lynn Smith of Stockton, Calif., are among those currently inside the gates of the forensic center. The former police dispatcher took his life at 30 after struggling with chronic back pain.

“(Matt's donation) provided wonderful closure for us,” Dennis Smith said. “We visited there in February and we're planning another trip in the fall. It's been cathartic for us.”

Smith said he believes any unease people may have with the body farm stems from ignorance. His family is so comfortable with the idea that two of their other children are on the living donors list, and Dennis and Lynn are considering it, too.

“I bought my wife a Texas State Mom shirt,” Dennis Smith said. “Our son is now a permanent resident and student at Texas State. We're thrilled he's going to be there forever.”

The scientific value of the remains does not end upon removal from the body farm. Once remains have been cleaned and processed, they will be entered into Texas State's skeletal collection. The database will be used by law enforcement and anthropologists to cross-reference unidentified remains to identify stature, age and ethnicity.

“These people will go on to help law enforcement, medical examiners, the judicial system as well as forensic scientists for years and years and decades and centuries to come,” Hamilton said. “It's not an exaggeration to say centuries.”

Early has a head start.

“When I was discussing my body donation with Dr. Hamilton, I mentioned that I was kind of proud to still have all my teeth,” the Texas native said. “Four of them were at home in a box, but I still had them. And did she want them as part of the donation? ‘Yep,' she said. So, I am fractionally donated already.”

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