

Anthropology PhD grad turns passion into public outreach

By Mara Busch, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

In his Introduction to Archaeology course at Stony Brook University, John Murray watched his first flintknapping demonstration — and was immediately hooked.

Flintknapping is the term used to describe the process of making stone tools. Murray attributes this demonstration as one of the primary reasons he changed his major to anthropology at the time.

“I was a struggling undergrad who was kicked out of university for a semester due to a low GPA. After taking a couple of credits at my community college, I came back in search of a new major and [John Shea](#)'s demonstration made me instantly say ‘that’s what I want to study.’ I would not be where I am today if I had not experienced that,” shared Murray.

Murray, originally from Medford, New York, is now graduating this May with his PhD in anthropology, specializing in archaeology, from Arizona State University's [School of Human Evolution and Social Change](#). He is also an affiliated graduate student with the [Institute of Human Origins](#).

Murray shared how flintknapping, which served as a catalyst for his future academic journey, can also provide us insight into ancient history and says that learning the skill is more difficult than most people think.

“It is often thought of as a ‘primitive’ or simple skill, but without guidance, most students really struggle to do it properly, and it takes thousands of hours of individual practice to get better at it,” said Murray. “It is humbling to know that a creature with nearly half of our brain size figured out how to do this and many people struggle with it today.”

As a practiced flintknapper now himself, Murray leads demonstrations and teaches the skill to students and the public. He said realizing how much flintknapping has impacted him and his pathway in life made him want to start teaching it to others.

“If I could help a student find something that they love or make someone realize it's absolutely not something they're interested in, I feel like that is a major part of what it means to be an educator or mentor,” said Murray.

For his postgrad plans, Murray accepted a postdoctoral position at Purdue University where he will work with ASU alum Ben Schoville. He will be continuing his work in experiential archaeology and the analysis of stone tools from the Middle and Later Stone Age of South Africa.

In the below Q&A, Murray talks about his experience at ASU and valuable lessons learned.

Note: This conversation has been edited lightly for length and/or clarity.

Question: How did your introduction to flintknapping influence your research?

Answer: The introduction to flintknapping made me want to include experimental archaeology into my research. I did this during my master's at the University of Victoria where I replicated hand axes with the help of a master flintknapper and now with my dissertation. I think that since we can't go back in time to witness hominin behavior in the past, experimental archaeology provides one of the main glimpses into these technologies.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: I chose ASU for two reasons: the interdisciplinary nature of the department and faculty, and also due to my advisor's — Foundation Professor [Curtis Marean](#) — broad research interests. I have always been interested in the origins and evolution of our species in Africa and our dispersal across the world. Professor Marean is a leading expert in this and has helped me hone my research skills to better address questions related to this area of research.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?

A: This is a tough one because I've learned so many lessons over my time here, but I'd have to say Professor Marean. Although there are many things he has taught me, the one that stands out the most is back up your data — and do it in five different ways and places.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?

A: This is tough. I think there are two main things that I like to tell students:

1. Don't be discouraged by a bad grade or two — it will not prevent you from succeeding in the future — which I can attest to.
2. If you are interested in graduate school, I always encourage students to get involved in research in any way that you can and in various sub-disciplines. You may find out that you like the thought of something but don't like doing it. Alternatively, you may find out that you love something that you never expected to.

Q: What was your favorite spot on campus, whether for studying, meeting friends or just thinking about life?

A: My favorite spot is probably the sitting area on the north side of the School of Human Evolution and Social Change. I spent a lot of time there flintknapping and sitting to think while taking a break from work.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Text image(s)



John Murray (middle, seated) leading a flintknapping demonstration. Photo courtesy of the Arizona Museum of Natural History