

Anna Doel:

Today is April 12th, 2023, and I'm Anna Doel talking with Leslie Aiello at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. Leslie, what's your current academic status?

Leslie Aiello:

Retired and happily so.

Anna Doel:

Are you an emerita?

Leslie Aiello:

Yes. in fact, I'm a double emerita. I'm the President Emerita the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and I'm also Professor Emerita from University College London in Biological Anthropology.

Anna Doel:

How would you define the discipline and the subfield that you work in?

Leslie Aiello:

With great difficulty. Anthropology is both an old and a very young field, and I think that everyone realizes that it has its root in colonialism and the study of strange and exotic people. Now, my own field is biological anthropology, and so that is basically the science of the study of the human body as opposed to cultural or social anthropology, which is the study of human populations, human communities and all. There is a very serious split in the field that I've always interpreted as a continuum, where the hyper biological people aren't really able to speak with the hyper social cultural people, but they can communicate all along the continuum.

Now, my own area in biological anthropology, my interests have been in human evolution, and I actually came into the field through archeology. I realized that I found bones or not bones, but stones rather boring, and I wanted to know about the people who made the archeological cultures. So that's more or less the path of my interests into this broader field of anthropology, but as I've said before, anthropology has a lot of leaky edges, and it's a field where you can justify almost anything as long as it relates to humans.

Anna Doel:

As you just mentioned, there seem to be certain tensions within anthropology, within the branches or between the branches. Have you witnessed those? What's your perspective on it? What's the problem?

Leslie Aiello:

Of course, I've witnessed those because I was head of department, head of the anthropology department at University College London for a long time. Where the difficulty comes from is that the two main branches of anthropology, the biological and the social cultural, and even you can tack on archeology because in most North American universities, archeology is considered a part of anthropology. They don't speak the same language, and they don't have the same questions, where in my area, in human evolution, our closest disciplines are probably paleontology, evolutionary ecology even. It's the biology in relation to the evolutionary process.

In archeology, of course, it's digging up strange and new things and understanding past societies, but social anthropology is lost away a bit because there's no longer strange and exotic people. What they've done is, as colonialism has thankfully drifted into the past, they have lost their subject area, and a lot of them don't really know what they're doing or why they're doing it any longer.

So you act different academic spheres in each of the three areas, and it takes a very unusual person to cross over. There are unfortunately fewer and fewer of them. This is why in recent history, a lot of anthropology departments are fragmented, where biology has gotten into one area, the biological anthropology, where social anthropology is moved towards the humanities more.

Anna Doel:

Do you have an example of a scholar who would be able to cross over and move between these two fields easily?

Leslie Aiello:

Certainly, there have been examples that I've been very impressed with in the past. One of them is a guy named Robin Dunbar, who's now at Oxford, who used to be a colleague of mine in London. He was very adept at crossing over between social anthropology and biological anthropology, particularly also primate behavior, and talking about the evolution of cognition and that type of thing.

Another one who is here in the US is Agustin Fuentes, who is at Princeton now, who has been very much of a public scholar in relation to racial issues, also evolution of cognition and topics that actually do cross fertilize, but there are relatively few people who do that. They tend to look at their own research as being pure, where even interdisciplinary within the field itself, is it really proper research? Then there's the whole question of being a public scholar, that is unfortunately in many cases not valued as much as being a purely academic scholar.

Anna Doel:

Where does linguistic anthropology stand in this field?

Leslie Aiello:

Very short. When I was a student in the '60s, it was truly four field, and linguistics was one of the four fields along with biological, social cultural, archeology, and linguistics, but with the linguistics now, there's just seems to be fewer and fewer people who are interested in

sociolinguistics. Linguistics is actually important in the context of humans. Well, what would you want to call us? I mean, to human adaptation.

So much of it are structural linguistics that veer off into questions that really don't relate to the social science of anthropology. There's just fewer and fewer people who are interested in that. It could be, again, because of the way the world is now so interconnected that the type of linguistics that used to be done in anthropology, which was documenting language isn't that relevant or popular any longer.

I mean, there certainly are niches in preservation of endangered languages, but again, as I say, the interest just isn't there and it's in a downward spiral, where when there are fewer and fewer practitioners, there are fewer and fewer students, and it tends to fade into the background.

Anna Doel:

Now, let's go back to your own story and start at the very beginning. I know you were born on May 26th, 1946. Where did you grow up?

Leslie Aiello:

I grew up in Southern California in Los Angeles. In fact, I'm a native of Los Angeles.

Anna Doel:

Could you tell me a little bit about your parents? Who were they?

Leslie Aiello:

My father was an aeronautical engineer. In fact, I was born in Los Angeles because he was a graduate student on the GI Bill at Caltech, and I was born while he was a student there. He and my mother were originally from Indiana and Pennsylvania. He was in the Pacific Theater during the Second World War and thought Southern California was magic, I mean, the climate and everything else. So after the Second World War, when he had the opportunity to go to Caltech, he jumped at it. Of course, at that time, the Aerospace Institute industry in Southern California was just blossoming. So after he got his master's degree, he worked in the aerospace industry for his entire career. My mom was a housewife.

Anna Doel:

Do you have any siblings?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, I had one brother. He passed away last year, but he was totally an academic. In fact, my parents were horrified when he became interested in drag cars in the late 1950s, early 1960s. He spent his career as an engineer for fruit sorting machines in packing houses in the Central Valley in California. Well, you would have hundreds of oranges coming out at 50 miles an hour being washed and sorted and all of that type of thing, and that's what he did.

Anna Doel:

What were your interests as a child? What did you enjoy doing?

Leslie Aiello:

My mother used to say I enjoyed playing dirty, and she wasn't at all surprised when I went into archeology.

Anna Doel:

So you liked being outside?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh, yeah, and digging around in the dirt and that type of thing, but I suppose my interests growing up as I grew up in the '50s was what any young kid at that time would do. I mean, I'm totally amusical. I didn't have any musical interests at all. I like to read. In fact, my mother kept telling me to go out and play and not read so much, but it was just a pretty normal childhood. I remember my father kept telling me I could be anything that I wanted to be, which at that time was probably pretty progressive.

He wanted two things for me. Being in the Pacific Theater during the Second World War, he loved Australia, and he wanted me to go to university in Australia. He also wanted me to go into aerospace because at that time he thought that space travel was the future of mankind. Of course, he had no knowledge of the computer revolution or anything like that or communications, but he thought space was where I should go.

Anna Doel:

Did your family have a house when you were growing up?

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah. We had a very modest house and it was a fairly new area of Los Angeles at the time, and there were a lot of young families. So there were always kids to play with on the street and all. The elementary school was within walking distance. So it was a very nice environment to grow up in.

Anna Doel:

Was it a little bit like the picket fence culture space, not so much?

Leslie Aiello:

I'm not sure entirely what you mean by picket fence, but it was very homogeneous. At that point, there was no aspiration towards diversity of any type. So from that standpoint, I really didn't meet kids from other backgrounds until they started busing them in Los Angeles. I think that happened when I was in junior high school or what's now called middle school.

Anna Doel:

What kind of memories do you have from grade school?

Leslie Aiello:

Not many.

Anna Doel:

Did you like going to school?

Leslie Aiello:

I used to love going to school because I was always very mathematical, and I think math was my favorite subject of anything. What are my memories? As I said, I absolutely have no music ear at all. I can remember way back, it must have been in first or second grade, the teacher asking me if I'd rather paint rather than going with the rest of the group to sing. Then one other time she told me that I probably should just mouth the words of the song because I can't carry a tune.

Anna Doel:

What kind of books did you like to read as a child? Do you remember?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh, I used to read anything. I mean, I went from one end of the young adult section of the library to the other end. One summer, I read the entire Arthur Conan Doyle series. It just was very eclectic. I think it was because my mother made an effort to go to the library every week and she would check out books, and heaven knows what she was reading. I mean, in later life, she liked romance novels and all, but I didn't know what she was reading, but it was normal to go and check out a few books every week, read those at home, and then bring them back the next and get your next stack of books. So that's probably where my love of reading comes from.

Anna Doel:

Did you go to the library every week as a family?

Leslie Aiello:

Just with my mother. I'm not aware of my father doing any recreational reading.

Anna Doel:

Do you remember how old you were when you started going to the library on your own?

Leslie Aiello:

I don't think I ever went on my own, and the reason was it was a little bit far and we had to go in the car. So it was always something my mother and I did together. This was particularly in the '50s when I was in elementary school and into junior school.

Anna Doel:

How did you fare in high school?

Leslie Aiello:

I actually did very well in high school. I think you could probably define me as being an overachiever. It meant a considerable amount to me to do well, whether that was insecurity that I wanted people to say that I was doing well or whatever, but I did well. I remember I got the

history prize in school when I graduated, which really astounded me because I didn't really like history, but I also got the biology prize, and that really made me feel good.

Anna Doel:

Did you have friends in school?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh, yeah. I mean, there was the groups of girls that would get together. They were all girlfriends though. There weren't boys that would hang out with us at all.

Anna Doel:

What did you and your friends do together?

Leslie Aiello:

What did we do together? We went shopping. We, of course, hung out at school together. Even though I'm so bad with music and sound, we had a ukulele band, and I followed along these. I so desperately wanted to be part of the group. One of the memories I have in high school, we had a very good choir in high school, and all the popular kids were members of the choir. I can remember the look on the face of the guy who I was auditioning with to be in choir who decided my strengths probably lay elsewhere.

Anna Doel:

What did your family do for vacations?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, when I was very small, we went to the national parks because being in Southern California, we would go to Sequoia, and Yosemite in the Sierra Nevadas. This was until my mother put her foot down that she told my father that she wanted a holiday also and not having to cook over a camp stove and all. So after that, we used to go and stay in motels. We went to Palm Springs, to Joshua Tree, just local little trips or vacations around the Southern California area. I hadn't been east of the Mississippi River until I was in my 20s. So I was very much the a West Coast girl.

Anna Doel:

Did you enjoy those vacations?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh, yeah. I mean, I remember one, and I must have been six years old. So we went to Yosemite and stayed in the dog camp because we would take our dog along with us. They had the fire fall then where they would have a huge bonfire on the top of one of the Yosemite cliffs and then push it over. Of course, they don't do that any longer, but as a kid, that was very spectacular.

Anna Doel:

How did you figure out your college plans? How did you navigate whether you wanted to go to college, which colleges to go to?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, there was no question of not going to college.

Anna Doel:

Was that an expectation in your family?

Leslie Aiello:

It was just... It was always strange for me because being in the first wave of the baby boomers, there were a lot of us kids, and one of the ways the school coped is to put us on a mid-year schedule. So I started kindergarten in January, and I graduated in January. So it was weird, and I think they were trying to space the kids out and somehow it was easier for them to accommodate us all.

So I was ready to go to college in January, and I remember my parents saying, "Oh, well, why don't you just go to UCLA?" which turned out to be a very good choice, but I actually wanted to go to Stanford, and they said, "Oh, well, just go to UCLA for the first semester." Then I ended up never transferring. I'm sure they breathed a huge sigh of relief because even at that point, Stanford would've been much more expensive.

I remember when I started at UCLA, it was \$75 a term. Of course, this was when the California public school system was growing to its heights, and it was actually a very good educational environment at that time.

Anna Doel:

Starting college, did you know what you wanted to major in?

Leslie Aiello:

Absolutely not. All I knew was that I liked the biology aspect of things, and I started out as a major in geology and zoology. I had some idea that maybe I might go into pre-med, but the advisor that I was sent to didn't have any interest, whatsoever, in freshman kids and didn't set me up for the proper courses to go into pre-med. One of the courses I had that first year was an introductory anthropology course.

I remember through that, I was made aware of a field school, an archeological field school in Cedar City, Utah, and I thought, "Gee, I can get eight units by going and digging at the field school," and I was hooked. I mean, I just thought it was magic, being able to find out about pre-history by excavating. I came back and changed my major to anthropology.

I remember sitting thinking that it really doesn't matter because I was going to get married and a man would support me and I would never have to support myself so I can indulge myself. Of course, that's all politically incorrect now, but I can remember consciously thinking that and that I could enjoy myself and become an archeologist.

Anna Doel:

What was your college life like?

Leslie Aiello:

As an undergraduate, I don't have that many memories of it, and there's a good reason for that. One was that I went on a junior year abroad program, and I spent a year in Germany in Göttingen. I remember much more about that experience than I do about actually being a undergraduate at UCLA. That was very formative for me. It was at a time where our program, the junior abroad programs then, they would give you an intensive language course. So I had two months of intensive German, and then they put you right into the German university. So there was no programs in English or it was just basically said, "Okay. We'll see you in a year's time." So it was very formative for me.

Anna Doel:

How fluent were you in German when you started your journey a year abroad?

Leslie Aiello:

They didn't think I was going to make it. I think, again, it comes down to my lack of facility with anything phonetic, but I passed all the courses. My pronunciation was never very good, but by the time I got back after the year, I was fluent in German and I could say anything I wanted, but maybe not with the nuance that I would really like to have done.

Anna Doel:

So you spent two semesters, an academic year at the University of Göttingen?

Leslie Aiello:

You're right.

Anna Doel:

It's one of the most well-known universities in Germany. How did it feel? What kind of education did you get there?

Leslie Aiello:

The education was very... well, I was going to say foreign. Of course, it was to me as a fairly naive kid. I was interested in archeology, and the only thing they had was classical archeology. I was pretty mystified by having to learn all about Greek statuary. I can remember also taking a psychology course and devising little experiments and all, but it was more of just living in an entirely different environment. I must have been 18, 19 years old. It was extremely formative to realize that there was life outside of Southern California.

Anna Doel:

What was different in Göttingen?

Leslie Aiello:



Well, it was just that there was so much that was different that it's really hard to put your finger on any one thing. Germany still hadn't recovered from the Second World War. So there was a lot of physical evidence of that that you would see. I can remember the food was horrible. Even in Southern California at that time, it wasn't as diverse as you have now, but it was just everything was different, but what I did take the opportunity was to travel a lot. The Germans at that point had subsidized travel programs for the students, and I was able to go to Egypt, I was able to go to Greece, I was able to go to Turkey. It just was a wonderful experience for me. I think it's what gave me the confidence to have my career outside the US.

Anna Doel:

Did you specifically choose those locations to travel to because they were great archeological sites, Turkey, Greece, Egypt?

Leslie Aiello:

Probably. At that stage I thought, "Why not? Here, there's these programs, there were groups of students going, and why don't I join in?" There was a two-month break I remember between classes, "So okay, let's go and see some of the world."

Anna Doel:

Did you travel on your own?

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah.

Anna Doel:

You were not concerned about that, were you?

Leslie Aiello:

At that point, the world was a safer place. Again, I was very naive. My parents were totally mystified, and they thought as long as I was going on a university program, it'd be fine.

Anna Doel:

How did you keep in touch with your parents from Germany?

Leslie Aiello:

Aerograms. If you remember the little tissue paper, blue air letters, and you'd write every week. It was a different time and a different place.

Anna Doel:

Was there any particular story from the history of archeology that you found fascinating?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh. At that time, let's think, when I was an undergraduate, it was a magic time in East Africa because this is when Louis and Mary Leakey were digging things out of Olduvai Gorge. When I was in middle school in 1959, I was 13 years old, and I remember my biology teacher bringing in a picture from the illustrated London news of Nutcracker Man, a Paranthropus, that they found this early beautiful skull of what we now know is on the side branch of human evolution, but Louis Leakey thought it was a straight line to modern humans, and then they began finding more. Then there were more excavations opened up further north in the Rift Valley and Kenya. There were just wonderful fossils coming out of these and so many interesting questions about what was going on in terms of not only who is who in the fossil record, but why they were evolving. That's ultimately why I made the decision to go to the UK to do my PhD, but that was a few years later.

Anna Doel:

When you came back from Germany and finished your senior year in college, did you move on straight from there to a master's program?

Leslie Aiello:

Yup, straight on. I was urged on because I, again, done quite well, and I got a nice scholarship fellowship to go on and do my PhD. So somebody told me that no one who'd ever gotten this chancellor's teaching fellowship that I got had ever got their PhD.

Anna Doel:

So you were a master's student at UCLA somewhere during the Vietnam War?

Leslie Aiello:

Of course, yes.

Anna Doel:

How did that feel?

Leslie Aiello:

It was a notch down from being in Berkeley, but in Southern California, we definitely had our demonstrations. I still blame the Vietnam War for my not being able to speak French because at that point in 1968, I knew that I was going to go on excavations in the south of France in the Dordogne, and I started taking French. I was very enthusiastic about it. The anti-war demonstrations closed down the university and my French class went poof, but it was a very exciting time, very empowering time.

I actually don't know what I would've done if I'd been a guy and been drafted because I had a friend who put a bullet through his foot so he wouldn't have to go. I had another friend who went to Canada because he'd actually gone to boot camp, and when he finished boot camp, he realized that everybody with a college degree was going to Vietnam and everybody without a college degree was going to Germany. That's when he left and went to Canada.

I knew another guy who went into the Navy because he thought he'd have a better chance of surviving than being a foot soldier. So there was a whole spectrum. Then I knew a guy who actually ended up going and just like Good Morning, Vietnam, he became a DJ, and so he had a very positive experience, but it was a very interesting time.

Anna Doel:

So when you finished your master's, you went on to teach for a few years. Is that correct?

Leslie Aiello:

What happened was that I had married one of my fellow graduate students, and we were living in the hills above Los Angeles in Malibu, and basically living the hippie life.

Anna Doel:

Oh. Could you tell me more?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, as I said, it was the 1960s. It was a different time. We had been very fortunate to find this little cabin in the Malibu hills. It was just a really magic place, and the oak trees and raised chickens, but we had to support ourselves. So we had master's degrees, and it was at a point where you could get teaching positions, particularly adjuncting with a master's degree. Both my then husband and I spent our time teaching in the junior colleges, in the state colleges, and that went on for about four years.

What it did was, I think, it gave me confidence in speaking because as a kid, I'd had a very serious speech impediment and it was actually very difficult for me to get up in front of a group of people. So this got me over it. It was economic imperative we had to support ourselves.

Anna Doel:

Was it helpful in overcoming your speech impediment to just keep on speaking to people because you have to, to talk to students?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, it's strange because I stuttered very badly. You can now tell it when I'm nervous, I'll still stutter or hesitate. I grew out of it, but it's strange to somebody who doesn't stutter. I never realized I did it. I mean, it just consciously wasn't a thing for me, but still now, I never will listen to any recording of my voice. When I was in the UK, I used to do a lot of work with the BBC, and I used to do the equivalent of public radio in the UK, but I never would do it until I met a BBC producer at a dinner and I was sitting next to her and she said, "Oh, well, why don't I call you up and I can interview you about human evolution?" and my response was, "Absolutely not. I just don't do that."

We talked about it and she said, "Well, come in and try it. We won't do it live and we can edit out any issues," and because I never listened to the recording, I have no idea how it actually came across, but they kept calling me. So that gave me more confidence that I could really speak in more of a public venue. In relation to teaching, at that point in California, you had to have a certificate to teach in junior colleges. They turned me down the first time because of my speech

impediment, and I appealed it. I have no idea what happened, but I got all dressed up and everything and went in for the interview, and the guy who interviewed me looked at me and said, "You don't have a speech impediment." So whatever happened, the speech fairies were on my side that time, and that's how I was able to start teaching, but it's something you'd just have to practice with.

Anna Doel:

What made you decide to go back to school for the PhD?

Leslie Aiello:

The short answer to that, and I use a term from the UK that's very apropos, is my husband found me redundant to requirements. Basically, I was dumped, and it hit me very hard. I mean, I had no notion of having to redirect my life. At that point, I was teaching at a state college in Southern California, Cal State Northridge, and there was a colleague there who had just returned from doing her PhD in the UK. She took a look at me and said that I was in the same shape she was because her husband had died of melanoma when she was in her mid-20s and left here with two small kids. She'd gone to the UK to reconstruct her life, and she said, "Why don't you go to the UK?"

It was fortuitous, one, because she helped me make all the arrangements, but at that time in the early 1970s, the UK was the center of human evolution research. To backtrack just a bit, after my husband left, I had gone back to the graduate school at UCLA because I thought, "Oh, I love anthropology and I can use this as a stepping stone to rebuild my life and all." Well, my supervisor left after about nine months or so. So I was left at UCLA with no supervisor.

So to make a long story short, on the 1st of January, 1975, I landed in the UK, and at that point doing a PhD in the UK, you started immediately on your faces. There was no taught coursework or anything. I was at a medical school because the professor of anatomy, Michael Day, was one of the leading comparative anatomists interpreting the material coming out of East Africa. I desperately wanted to do that and desperately wanted to go to East Africa to excavate and all.

So it worked out beautifully. I mean, the first year I was there was very, very difficult for me because I was coming to grips with the solo life, and this was another new environment, and there were no peers at the medical school because medicine in the UK is an undergraduate degree. I was already that much older, and it was difficult to find a community of students my age and all, but I got through it and ended up being hired at University College London, almost like I was in California, just on temporary contracts because they were at a time where they were seriously considering Indian biological anthropology in the anthropology department.

University College London was very unique in the UK of having biological anthropology and social anthropology in the same department. Their biological anthropology was generally a medical subject, and social anthropology was social science or whatever. University College London was considering splitting them off and actually doing away completely with biological anthropology. They just hired me to help cover the teaching. I woke up 30 years later and we're still there.

Anna Doel:

Is that the department that you came to head?

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah. I worked myself up from being on a temporary contract for the first four years where I had to interview for the job each year again and then worked up through the ranks and got my chair. When was it? It was the mid 1990s.

Anna Doel:

What was the state of the field when you began your career? What were the research questions that people were asking?

Leslie Aiello:

At that point, it actually depends when I started my career because the research questions changed as you come up through. When I started my PhD and started it or restarted it when I went to the UK in the mid-1970s, most people were studying skulls and teeth in these fossils, and there were some spectacular ones, but nobody was looking at the material from the neck down. So the big research question was, "What were they like? Were they walking like us? What were their feet like? Were they climbing trees?" this type of thing. So that's basically what my PhD focus was on was on the skeleton from the neck down.

As with everything, things changed. In the context of doing that, I was using a analytical technique called allometry, which is the change of shape in relation to the change of size. This happened to be an analytical technique that led me into the evolution of the brain. So from the late 1980s or so into the early '90s, my research was focused on brain and cognitive evolution in the Hominids. Can we stop for just a minute?

Anna Doel:

Yes, absolutely. Okay. I think we're back. Yeah, looks like. How shall I put that? Were there any ideas in the field that you wanted to challenge in the early stages of your career?

Leslie Aiello:

I think in the early stages of my career, I didn't have the confidence to challenge things. What I wanted to do was make an impact, but I didn't really know how to do that. It was more or less being carried on the high of what was happening at that time. It was all of the new discoveries. It was being in the center of where all of this was happening.

Anna Doel:

Could you tell me a bit more about those new discoveries?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, students, no matter when you are teaching human evolution, say, "Oh, how lucky they are doing it at this point because so much is happening." Of course, now, it's all the genetics and all, but at that point, it was fossils that we had no idea that existed. When I first started out in human evolution as an undergraduate in the 1960s, you could probably almost on one hand or two hands have the important fossils, and it was just a straight line going back almost 11 million years brought up to Homo sapiens.

Now, there's something 25 different species, and it's just really bushy and branches and all, but in the '60s, all of this was just being discovered. It was a piece where suddenly you were finding pieces to the puzzle that you had no idea existed. It was a very small field, and so we knew each other. So there was a lot of socializing and going back and forth, and there was just a lot of excitement in the air.

Now, when I was doing my PhD, I was carried along with this, and it was finding new information. It wasn't so much as taking on somebody else's ideas because everything was so new. Nobody really had any evidence-based ideas at the time. There were speculations and all, but we were the scientists, we had the material. Of course, in retrospect, that was crazy, but that was the feeling at the time.

Now, where I did come to challenge things was when I got into looking at the evolution of the brain because it was actually through being asked by a colleague to write an entry in an encyclopedia on primate energetics. This was something that was quite foreign to me, but at that point, the research on energy use in animals was primarily locomotor. So it tied in with my interest in the skeleton from the next down and movement and all of this. So I got into the energetic literature and realized there was a huge hole that no one could answer.

What that was is if you looked at your basal metabolic rate and you plotted that against body size, you get this nice straight line. It's the climber line. If you, against body size, plot brain size, you get another nice straight line, but humans pop way above it. So what the question was is, where does the energy come from to run this big expensive human brain? No one could answer that.

It was probably because I didn't know much about the field at that time that I thought, "Okay. It's some total thing that if you have expensive tissues, you need to have less expensive tissues somewhere else." I used my allometry, the analytical technique where you change shape and size, and discovered that what we gain in our brain, we lost in our digestive system. This idea has been called brains and guts in human evolution because the digestive system is energetically very costly just like the brain is.

There wasn't much difference in the liver or any of the other expensive tissues, but you had almost this perfect balance. If you compared a non-human primate of our body weight to a human, the non-human primate has a relatively smaller brain and much larger intestines. Humans are exactly the opposite. It just fit in almost too perfectly with what we knew about the fossil record at that time because as you come up through the fossil record, at between two and 1.5 million years ago, you have the appearance of what we now call *Homo erectus* or in Africa, they're sometimes referred to as *Homo ergaster*.

At that point in time, and this would've been the early 1990s, we thought that there was a major skeletal change between the earlier fossil on the human line and this *Homo erectus*, *Homo ergaster*, and they're the ones that look like us with long legs, narrow bodies, larger brains than the earlier Hominids, but not quite as large as modern humans, and it correlated with the appearance of higher quality diets in the archeological record, particularly mediating. It correlated with tool use and cutting. There were just a lot of things that fit in that our ancestors had made a transition to a high quality animal-based diet that allowed them to reduce their digestive system because the food would be easier to digest. Then you have that exterior energy that can be switched to supporting our large and expensive. So it just fit in very nicely.

What's happened, and this was totally astounding to me, is that this really started a whole new field of energetics and human evolution. Of course, this was 25 years ago now, and the fields moved beyond it, but there's been some very exciting research that's been done particularly in recent years that actually shows that this brain-gut tradeoff is only a smaller part of a sea change in metabolic adaptations that we see in humans that were reported during the course of human evolution.

It was this being in the right place at the right time, but coming back to the original question of challenging, I had one particular colleague who thought that my idea wasn't worth much, and he had another approach to why we had bigger brains, and it was really my first introduction to academic heated disagreement.

Anna Doel:

How heated did it get?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, it got quite heated along the way to the point where he was spreading a rumor that I'd stolen the data from a student. Then at one other point, I was editing the Journal of Human Evolution at the time, and he threatened to sue me because I was going to publish a paper of a young colleague, and he wanted one of his students to publish a similar paper, but it's this type of thing. It was just academic pettiness.

Anna Doel:

How did you take it?

Leslie Aiello:

It was a wakeup call. It made me realize you have to get as good as you can that if you believe something, if you have the evidence for something, you stand up for it.

Anna Doel:

Feel free to ignore this question, but would you be okay with saying the name of that colleague? Do you think it is relevant for the history of your field?

Leslie Aiello:

No, it's probably not relevant. I mean, I'd rather not that go on the record.

Anna Doel:

I understand.

Leslie Aiello:

There was also a similar thing that happened. It was more undercover, but before I'd gotten into the brain research, I got an idea that there was a real hole in the literature in the field, and that all this comparative anatomy was going on with all these wonderful fossils, but there was no way

for a student to learn the anatomy. There was nothing that compared the anatomy of chimpanzees or other primates to human anatomy, to the fossil anatomy.

So over one weekend, I wrote out a book proposal that I was going to do the Handbook of Evolutionary Anatomy, and I set this off on a weekend. On the Monday morning, I got a phone call from the publisher saying, "We're interested," and I thought, "Oh, my goodness. What have I done? Can I actually write this thing?" I got a colleague who was a specialist on dentition, and he wrote the anatomy from the neck up, and I wrote the anatomy from the neck down. There's a lot on the neck because of it, but this thing is still in print, and it was published in 1990. We had great fun with it. In fact, I'm actually forgetting why I brought the book up.

It was being unsupported by people in the field. When the publisher finally showed me anonymized reviews, but reviews that were asked for just on the book proposal rather than the book itself. There was enough in the letter. I realized it was my PhD advisor who told the publisher I wasn't capable of doing it. He always had a problem with me because I wasn't medically qualified. It was very interesting because about 10 year years ago, and he's unfortunately passed away now, but he apologized to me for not treating me very well as a student.

Anna Doel:

You were working on a PhD in anatomy, but you were not a medical doctor.

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah, exactly, and because if you go back in the UK, biological anthropology, human biology, they were medical fields and they were taught as medical graduate programs. So my supervisor was a medical doctor who had become a professor of anatomy. The student that immediately was before me, who's become very famous in the field, was a medical doctor who had ... Here, I come along without the medical background. It wasn't the fact that I was the only woman, it was because my advisor, in fact, had been in the first integrated cohort at a female medical school in the UK. So he was used to working with women, but it was the fact I wasn't medically qualified.

Anna Doel:

Well, in this light, who would you nominate to be your mentors, if anyone?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh, that's actually quite easy because what saved me that first year because here I was isolated in the medical school was the Natural History Museum in London. At that point, there were two guys who had arrived either the same year I did in London or a year before. One was Chris Stringer, who's become very famous in human origins research. He's Mr. Out of Africa. The other was a guy named Peter Andrews, who was a specialist in ape evolution. The three of us hung out together.

Particularly, Peter, the ape guy, kept encouraging me. He was really the mentor that said, "You can do it. You can do it. You can do it," because with my PhD advisor, my real one, I don't think I ever had an academic discussion with him. I tried it one time to do it, and he looked at me and he said, "Are you a depressive?"



Anna Doel:

That's rude.

Leslie Aiello:

I wasn't. Another story is when I was having the oral exam for my PhD, it was my advisor who was one of the examiners and another anatomist. The oral exam lasted less than a half an hour. I don't think either one of them had read it. In fact, my PhD advisor asked me before I submitted the PhD of whether there was anything there I hadn't already given in a talk. I said, "Well, I think maybe there might be bits and pieces." The other guy had come down to London from Bristol, and I think only read as much as the train journey allowed him to. In fact, he committed suicide shortly after my viva. It wasn't because of the viva.

Within the year, but I just felt totally almost cheated that I had spent years of my life working on the thesis, and they didn't have the respect to talk with me about the intellectual issues in it, but there were these guys at the museum who were so enthusiastic and really helped me along. Then by that time also, I'd had the full-time job at University College. So I was in an environment that was much more familiar to me.

Anna Doel:

Talking about museums, anthropology is probably the closest discipline to museums. What is your connection with museum culture?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, at that point, I mean, in the UK it was doing my research in museums because my PhD was primarily on comparative anatomy. I was using a lot of museum collections. I had friends in museums, but it wasn't my full-time job. For my entire academic career in the UK, I never had a lab. In fact, when I was head of department, I succeeded in getting us a new building. There's actually an Aiello Lab in the building now, but I'd left before it opened. I never had my own workspace in the UK.

I used to get bench space at the museum for my research. That's changed a bit now because within the last two or three years, I've been on the board of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, and that's opened up that world to me from the governance side, basically. So I feel it's almost a new career that I'm becoming more and more involved with the museum.

Anna Doel:

What is the place of field research the opposite of the museum in your professional life?

Leslie Aiello:

For me, I did quite a lot of archeological fieldwork before I went to the UK. After I'd arrived at the UK, the opportunities to work in East Africa in the field didn't materialize. I was always a museum worker and a theoretician, but what's interesting is a lot of field work, particularly paleontological field work and human evolution that fall into that, is a very macho field.

One of my colleagues who, like me, was mostly a museum worker and theoretician felt very threatened by the guys who were the field workers, who were saying they were the real

anthropologists because they did the field. When I was editing *Journal of Human Evolution*, I was the first female editor of the journal, and I instituted an editorial board dinner. It was very obvious to me that all the field guys ordered steak for dinner and everyone else ordered salmon or something. There is this tension, and I've actually seen it in social anthropology also.

In that case, rather than the field workers trying to establish their dominance as in my area in social anthropology, I've seen it reversed where the theoreticians minimize the significance of the people who actually do the field work and do the ethnographies. So I think it varies, and it varies by personality.

Anna Doel:

Looking at the entire span of your career, what can you say about gender dynamics and gender issues in your field? Has there been any change? What presence and visibility did women have when you started? What's the trajectory?

Leslie Aiello:

It's funny because I think younger women today think they've made so many strides. Now, I'm not entirely sure how correct that is, and there's a few reasons for this. I mean, I'll start with the UK versus the US. When I went to the UK, it was a much smaller group of people. I was the only woman at that time within my cohort of students and young professional colleagues, but we all appreciated that we had strengths and weaknesses, and most of us got along very well.

In the US at that point, particularly in human evolution, it was a bit different. Some of my female colleagues who went through their career in the US had considerable issues with male colleagues demeaning them and not siding them, everything you hear. I really only ran across it once where this technique of allometry, that's size and shape, it was a new technique at the time.

There was a guy here in the US who was working on similar issues to what I was, and he organized a big conference on the whole subject and didn't invite me. In later years, we both ... As I said, I've been an editor for *Journal of Human Evolution*, and he also was, and he told me, he said, "Oh, Leslie, you can't be upset about that. I realized you had the primary publication in the field, but I was up for tenure."

Anna Doel:

That's not a good excuse.

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah, but for me, I was secure in what I was doing in the UK. Now, the reason I was a bit hesitant with this, there's the UK/US comparison of experiences, but there's also the fact that anthropology in general has a long tradition of having women in it. I mean, if you go back to Mary Leakey, who was actually the field worker behind all of that, Meave Leakey who followed her, and in social anthropology you have all the female, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, I mean, and primatology also, everybody thought it's only women that have the patience to sit and watch these monkeys in those.

So in London, we'd sit around in what they would call the senior common room for coffee after lunch. You could always tell the anthropologists. One, we were dressed much less formally than a lot of them were, and we always had 40% to 50% women in the department. I was hired way

back in the '70s by a female head of department at that time. So anthropology is a bit different from STEM disciplines where women have had a real fight getting into the field.

Anna Doel:

How collaborative is your work?

Leslie Aiello:

It's more collaborative than social anthropology is. I mean, social anthropology has always had the ethos of the lone field worker going out and living with the group and all and immersing themselves and all. In archeology and spilling into field work in human evolution, it's a much more of a collaborative. You need a research team. Of course, these days with the genetic research that's so important, with many laboratory bases, that laboratory approaches to interpretation, it's also a team, it's a lab team. So there's much more of a collaborative basis for the research.

Now, in social anthropology when I was running the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the collaborations still were extremely hard to lubricate and all. It tended to be people getting together after they'd done their field work to do collaborative, interpretive research, but it's still pretty much of a solitary field.

Anna Doel:

I hope you don't think this question is completely dumb.

Leslie Aiello:

There's no dumb questions.

Anna Doel:

Oh, there are. Here comes one. The brain-gut trade off, has it ever been misinterpreted or has it given some pragmatic applications in the public realm that you know of?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, I think I'm probably the only anthropologist that has been cited in the California Cattleman Magazine. I've had some very interesting talks with vegetarians and vegans, but what I tried to say is that a vegetarian or vegan diet is a luxury of modern times. It's the fact that we are able to put together. There's a huge food chain that we rely on, and of course, we have cooking, and we're more aware of the nutrients that we need to survive, and we're able to either supplement or to provide ourselves with those. This wasn't a luxury our ancestors in the past had.

My husband who had been a social anthropologist for a while, I visited his village in Central Nigeria, in fact, on a number of occasions. They were vegetarians not by choice. We used to laugh that if a cow walked through the village, it wouldn't make it out the other end. We used to love to be invited by the chief for dinner because they would have chicken in the soup. It's hard for many of us living today to realize what it was like living in an early agricultural society, having a gathering society or whatever, where you were after the nutrients, you were after the fat, you were after the calories, basically.

I mean, basically, you need the 2,000 calories or whatever on average a day. It's how our ancestors got them. Right now, there's a wonderful idea because for a long time, cooking did it. Even though there's no evidence in the archeological record for habitual cooking of food until a half million years ago, your brain began to really expand two million years ago. The argument of the cooking people is the archeologist must be wrong, they would've had to have cooked.

There's an interesting idea going around now that we ate rotten food, rotten meat, and it sounds repulsive to us, but there's a strong ethnographic record that perhaps this was one of the ways of breaking down food that would make the nutrients available to us in a pre-cooking type of situation.

Anna Doel:

Isn't there evidence in ethnic cultures around the world of this practice, rotting food?

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah, and with our interest in the microbiome now, one of the arguments is our gut bacteria is helping to protect us against some of the adverse effects of eating rotten food, but it is one of those bits of lateral thinking that only within the last year or two was caught on. It could very well have filled the gap there of how we got some of the nutrition we needed and the energy we needed for the expansion of the brain.

Anna Doel:

Leslie, would you mind telling me a little bit about your husband?

Leslie Aiello:

My husband passed away in 2019, and it was pre-pandemic, of course, but it really brought home how rapidly your life could change because he left the house one afternoon and didn't come home. He had a massive heart attack.

Now, he was a very unusual person. He was British. I think the best way to start out is one of his work colleagues once approached me and asked me if there was anything I could do about Richard, and Richard wasn't the neatest type person, and this coworker of his was always very well-turned out. It was the one time in my life I came back with the proper statement and I said, "You should have seen what I started with."

Richard had come from a very alternative background. He had two siblings, a brother and a sister. His mother was a single mother. There were a number of men involved. She had, as it turned out, serious mental challenges, and he basically raised himself. It was because of the British system at the time where they had had an exam called the 11 Plus when you were 11 years old. He and a friend were the first two kids in memory of the school to pass the exam. The headmaster of the school gave the whole school a holiday the day that they ... So he went off on the college track, and ended up, because of the entirely free education in the UK at that time, doing a degree in economic and political theory from the LSE.

He'd graduated and went off to the Six-Day War in Israel and arrived on the seventh day, and ended up spending time in a Kibbutz, where he meant a French anthropologist. That's what got him on the anthropological track because he went out to Burkina Faso with her for a year. When

he came back, it wasn't so much he wanted to do a graduate degree in anthropology, but he wanted to get back to Africa.

He just loved it, and I think there were a lot of it, the experience that gave him the security he had had as a kid growing up. So he went to University College, which is where I taught, and he was put on an exchange program at that time where he was supposed to spend six months in Nigeria teaching, and then he'd had six months to do field work. Well, his advisor who had set this up basically forgot about the program, and he spent seven years out there and did his field work, but he's one of the only people I know who came back with more money in his grant than he started out with because he lived a very basic life in the village.

He never finished his PhD, but went into politics, and then became a trade union organizer and used to say that everything he learned about politics, he learned in the village in Nigeria. So he was very involved in left-wing politics in the UK, and he said a lot of it came from the fact that he wouldn't have survived without a free orange juice program when he was growing up because he'd come from such a strange background, and he had a tremendous social conscience.

Anna Doel:

Thank you, Leslie. I'm going to stop the recording now.

Anna Doel:

Today is April 28th, 2023, and we're back with Leslie Aiello for our follow-up session. And I think we're going to open with your role in the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

Leslie Aiello:

Probably, I should start out by giving a little bit of an introduction about the Wenner-Gren Foundation because this is a very quirky private foundation that was established with a \$2 million endowment by Axel Wenner-Gren in 1941. And he was the director of Electro-Lux. He realized every woman in the world would want a vacuum cleaner. And in the 1930s and into the early 40s, he was one of the wealthiest people in the world. He was basically a Warren Buffett of the time. And he ran into some trouble with the American IRS, the tax people. He was Swedish, and he'd sold a yacht in Florida, and the tax people got wind of this. And our foundation was set up overnight on Valentine's Day to shoulder his \$2 million. And he wasn't 100% happy about the fact he lost access to that money. But also at the time, the foundation that's become one of the prime funders in the field of anthropology was set up for more general educational good, research good. It wasn't focused on one particular discipline. And the then friend of Axel Wenner-Gren, a fellow named Paul Fejos convinced him that if he wasn't going to give his entire fortune to the foundation, and if he had, it would've been something like the Mellon Foundation or the Ford Foundation, that they had to focus the foundation on a small area because there just wasn't enough money to fund a very, very broad brief. And it was during and right after the Second World War. And this Paul Fejos, the director, thought that anthropology was a small discipline, underfunded, but had the potential to really reunite mankind.

And so that's how it became focused on anthropology. And that \$2 million now is worth about 250 or 60 million. And so my role at Wenner-Gren, and one of the things that attracted me to leave my job in London and come to New York to run the Wenner-Gren Foundation was all that I had to do was give away money. And we didn't fundraise, so there was no fundraising or development aspect. And my talents honestly wouldn't lie in that area. But I had an opportunity to help move the field forward, help young people's careers, and it was just seductive for me. And it was sort of, I described it with my husband as we were having a new adventure in life and that we were of the age that we had room for one new adventure and that this was going to be it.

Anna Doel:

Why did your husband agree to this move?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, he was a trade union organizer in the UK, and was on the Union of Communication Workers, which was the post office union. And he thought that maybe he'd done about all that he could do at the time and he wanted to take early retirement. And at the same time, I had my chair in anthropology at University College London. I'd been head of department, I'd been head of the graduate school, and I could have been continued to be happy in my career there until retirement.

But I think we were both looking for something exciting and something that was new. And so he was quite happy to move. And it was a situation where the increase in salary I was getting from the foundation more than compensated for the loss of his salary. So he basically retired and came. And he then became quite active in politics in New York, and that's how he kept himself busy and interested.

Anna Doel:

Taking this leadership position at the Wenner-Gren, did it mean leaving academia for you?

Leslie Aiello:

Yes and no. I mean, colleagues and friends used to say, "Well, what about your research? Why are you giving up this research career?" But I really wasn't, I was expanding it. And at the foundation at Wenner-Gren, it was the first time in my life I'd had a nine to five job. And I discovered there were things like evenings and weekends, and I actually had time to do what I wanted to do without being forced because of your professional or academic role to do things. So yes, I backed away a bit from original research, but at Wenner-Gren, I had two papers that were the most highly cited papers in the individual journals. One was in current anthropology? One was it, no, excuse me, the current anthropology had been written before, but one that was written during that time was in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. I also had a science paper during that time. So I was still able to keep my hands in research, but I also had time to explore other interests.

Anna Doel:

Speaking about the *Journal of Physical Anthropology* for a moment, could you tell me a little bit about this shift in terminology?

Leslie Aiello:

Because while I was president of the American Association of Physical Anthropology, which is now the American Association of Biological Anthropology, we had the name change. Now, the reason for this is physical anthropology carries a lot of racist baggage. And there was a lot of concern, particularly among our younger members, that they wanted a fresh start for the field. And they felt that if it was the American Association of Biological Anthropology, that it would emphasize more what the current interests of the field were, which includes everything from evolutionary biology, to human biology and genetics of course. But without the "racial science" in quotes background, that had been an issue with the field beforehand? Physical Anthropology in its history had been heavily associated with race and what they would call race science. And the individual who founded both the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* and the American Association of Physical Anthropology was Alex Hrdlicka, who was the curator of human evolution at the Smithsonian.

And he was noted for having racial proclivities. And his ethics in terms of gathering information didn't match the ethics of the modern world. So at the same time as we instituted the name change, we also de-emphasized his involvement with the association and basically we'd had a Hrdlicka leash prize that we retired and are giving prizes with other names and all. So it was basically a reckoning, which provided a platform for particularly our younger colleagues to

rethink what the discipline should be moving into the future. And of course, this involves parallel trends in diversifying the field and all of that.

Anna Doel:

How has Wenner-Gren contributed to these two trends?

Leslie Aiello:

With Wenner-Gren, I think well, during my tenure, and I was president of Wenner-Gren from 2005 up through 2017. So these interests in these areas were building up through my tenure. So in a way, I was one of the connections between the old foundation and the new foundation. And we went through a lot of discussion about how we could help to diversify the field. And it's a very difficult thing because we could only fund 15% of the applications we received. And a good percentage of our money went to doctoral students. And then a smaller slice went to professional colleagues and we had conferences and there were a variety of other smaller programs. And the question was is that once somebody reaches the doctoral level, how much extra help do they need? Because we aren't employing people, we're actually funding the research proposal, we're funding the quality of the research.

And what one of our attitudes was by the time somebody got to the point where they would be eligible to apply to us, they were in a situation where we were interested in their science. Now, it might sound a bit harsh, but there are many other programs in the field of bringing diverse students, whether they're students of color, whether they're indigenous students, up through to the point where they get to the doctoral level. And so we were involved at the doctoral level. But where our initiatives were, were engagement.

And one of the things I introduced was an engaged anthropology grant, where we would give money to our grantees to go back to their research area and engage with their research participants and disseminate results because in many cases, western anthropologists would zip in into areas, get together their data, and the people they were working with there never saw them again. So we developed a program to encourage a continued interaction. And this particular grant program by the person who followed me as president of Wenner-Gren, has been greatly expanded. So it's more or less on the ethical side of things rather than particularly the diversity side of things.

Anna Doel:

Could you tell me a bit more about engaged anthropology?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, engaged anthropology as the foundation defines it. And I think as many people in the field of anthropology define it now, is engaging with the people who are your research informants. And normally it could be called research participants, to help you develop the research, help you engage in carrying out the research and have some benefit from the results of that research. So rather than studying "Subjects" you're working with the community you're involved with to further the research. And this can happen, for example, my own field is human evolution. And if you go to some of the major fossil rich places like South Africa, or East Africa or now a lot of research is being done in Eastern Asia. It's providing the resources to involve the local communities actually in the research.



And one of my favorite examples of this is in Kenya, and we had funded one of the individuals working with the Kenya National Museum to excavated some of the very fossil, rich sites up around Lake Turkana. And the local Turkana pastoralists actually felt that he was making money out of these fossils. And that this was a urbanized trained Kenyan anthropologist, we're working with Kenyan pastoralists. And so he was awarded about the grant to go back and really talk to the Kenyan pastoralists about what these fossils were, the fact that they weren't worth anything monetarily, but they were worth a tremendous amount to science and actually to get them more involved in the research. And it's turned out to be quite successful.

In fact, I should backtrack a bit, because we also had a very successful program of bringing promising Kenyan students to Western universities and also to South African universities to train them in anthropology. We had people all over the world, we would fund people at any university that would give them an international level of doctoral training. And we've had some tremendous successes with that. People who've gone on to be quite successful in the field.

Anna Doel:

Is this a Wenner-Gren project? Is it continuing still?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh, yes, still continuing. It's now called the Wadsworth International Fellowships, and it's named after a guy named Frank Wadsworth, who was the chair of our board for a long time and did a tremendous amount to forward the mission of the Wenner-Gren Foundation. So there's a group of these fellowships that are devoted to funding African students, and we prefer that they go to South African universities because we want them to stay in Africa and help to develop it. But many of them have also gone to universities throughout Europe and also the US. And then we have a Wadsworth International Fellowship where we'll fund students from countries where they can't get the academic training in anthropology to again, go anywhere in the world that's appropriate for their interest where they can get the international level of training.

Anna Doel:

Could you say a bit more about navigating the Wenner-Gren? I'm sure it's a complex body and decisions have to be made on several levels, and there's also communication and diplomacy and getting along with people and getting your ideas through and supporting others or maybe not supporting others.

Leslie Aiello:

That's a very broad question. I mean, one of the advantages of the Wenner-Gren Foundation is that there's no living descendants of Axel Wenner-Gren. And so there's no family involvement with it. So the only people you're responsible to is the president of the foundation, our board of trustees. And so any discussion about changing programs or shifting the allocation of funds, the board of trustees approves. You come to them with ideas and they'll say, "Yes, that sounds great. Let's do it." And I think the biggest change I had with them was we were very worried about anthropology not having a positive public perception. And this certainly in my own field of human evolution, I mean, people always used to ask me, "Oh, you're an anthropologist, do you know The Leakeys that the discovery of human fossils had. It was quite interesting, exciting to people. The same thing is true really with our archeology.

That's not a hard discipline to sell, but social anthropologists have a very difficult time communicating. And we were very worried that social anthropology didn't have the profile that it should in the public sphere. And so we decided to divert funds to launch an online magazine called Sapiens. And the mission of Sapiens is to make anthropology available to the interested lay person. And it was a huge learning curve for all of us. But it now gets, I think, 10 million views a year.

And this is not down to me, it's that we had a very creative editor who just really took this and ran with this. And we also wanted it to be very professional. So we had science writers who would help work with the anthropologists who were providing the content of the stories to make them accessible and attractive to a general audience. So we're training also anthropologists to be public scientists. And that this has been totally exciting, but it was a major change in the foundation from funding research to funding the dissemination of research. And so this was a huge change. And my chair of the board at that time said, "Leslie said, don't worry about it." He said, "If you don't gamble, you don't succeed." And of course, he was a hedge fund manager because half the board were financial professionals who managed our endowment. But it was extremely good advice.

Anna Doel:

Could you give an example of the kind of story that would be in Sapiens?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, as I said, Sapiens isn't my baby, but it's sort of making people aware of the humanity of individuals that aren't from your own culture. Let me see if I can think of one good one. It is so hard to come up with one example, but they're human interest things. I mean, whether it's excavation of toilets in the Roman Empire or what the tradition of kissing across cultures are. I mean, it's things that deal with human diversity and human lifestyle that are innately interesting to all of us. And it's making people aware that yes, anthropology is the field that we study all of this. And it has a very broad brief to it. And we rely on students, colleagues, professional journalists to make pitches to us about stories and then where the talent of the editor is picking these out to know the ones that are really compelling to people who might be surfing around the web and look looking for interesting things to read.

Anna Doel:

Has Wenner-Gren ever been interested in creating teaching tools? I'm sure Sapiens is being used as a teaching tool?

Leslie Aiello:

There are so many good accessible articles now because it's been going for, well almost 10 years, not quite that long. So there's a body of material there. They certainly want to move into this area of having teaching plans and that type of thing. Since I'm no longer directly involved with it, I don't know how far they've gotten with that yet. But the foundation itself, it's just not part of our mission. Yeah, I mean, our mission is still to fund the research. And under the new management, they've changed the mission statement a bit to also emphasize the diversity in the field.

We've always had a very strong focus on internationalization and any of the meetings we fund, we always insist not only on the standard gender diversity, but on international diversity. Scientists or anthropologists, we don't want them talking to themselves and becoming a silo. So we insist on our week long workshops we fund, or the international conferences we fund that we have representations from appropriate people around the world. And in fact, our conference funding. We emphasize the fact that the money goes to offsetting registration fees and travel fees for individuals who would not otherwise be able to attend the meeting. And this would be international colleagues as well as students. And it is actually been terribly successful for networking purposes.

Anna Doel:

Could you say a bit more about bigger meeting programs and smaller meeting programs at Wenner-Gren?

Leslie Aiello:

Well, we have a very successful conference and workshop program, and we also have a separate symposium program. Now the symposium program is our own baby. We used to own a castle in Austria called Burg Warthenstein, that from the late 1950s through the 1970s was the intellectual center for anthropology. And the foundation, the administrator and staff would decant to Austria each year, it was right outside of Vienna, and play hostess to waves of anthropologists that would come through for week long conferences, sometimes two week long conferences. And they were treated very well. And out of this came a series of landmark volumes that during that time really helped to move the field forward. And we still run those conferences, although we no longer own the castle, castles are very expensive things though. But we run two of these on average a year that are still week long in format. And we now publish these as special issues of our journal, Current Anthropology. So these are conferences. The foundation has a very active role in deciding the topics and helping to determine who the attendees are, and of course ensuring an output.

Now, our regular program that you could apply to, we fund either conferences or workshops. Now, the conferences we fund are basically conferences run by international anthropological associations. And as I said earlier, the money is primarily designed to make sure you have a very diverse group of people who can attend those conferences. So the money normally goes, as I said, to funding students or funding international colleagues. And then the second category is our workshop category. And these are small workshops that are basically workshops designed to bring maybe 20 colleagues together, where they spend enough time sitting around a table, not just giving papers, but really discussing issues. And what's interesting about these is the majority of applications come from outside the US, that this type of format of a workshop seems to be much more popular, particularly in Europe than it is in the US context. But those conferences have also been very successful.

Anna Doel:

Why do you think they work?

Leslie Aiello:

They work because they give a group of people an opportunity to escape their everyday lives and to focus entirely on the academic issue that they're talking about. And normally both our symposium program and also the workshops we fund that are organized outside the foundation, people tend to have to write their paper beforehand. They circulate the papers beforehand. And so you're there as a discussion meeting. And in fact, at our own symposia, we ban any form of laptop from the table. We don't want you sitting around a table typing and looking at your screen. We want you engaging with the people around the table and actually discussing what the particular topics are.

Anna Doel:

Is there a requirement for a workshop's output?

Leslie Aiello:

I think the way it's worded now is that an output is highly desirable. And certainly, because the funding of these things is very competitive, if you don't engage on how you're going to disseminate the information, then you have a much less likely chance of being funded. And because very frankly, unless what you're doing is available to colleagues, why is it worth doing it?

Anna Doel:

Is this one of the reasons why you dedicated quite a bit of your time to editorial boards? Dissemination of knowledge among colleagues?

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah, the editorial boards came earlier. I mean, it's not just actually sort of being an associate editor or something, my first sort of flutter with that was the Journal of Human Evolution edited during the mid and late 1990s. And I'm not sure actually why I did that. I may have been totally crazy, but what I enjoy, I was the first female editor of the journal. And what surprised me is as soon as it became known that I was going to be the editor, I began to get messages, and this was largely before the days of email, from female colleagues saying now they felt confident that they could send papers to the JHE because they felt that the males in the field were actually discriminating against them.

And at that point, I had a male co-editor, and when I mentioned this to him, he was totally astounded. I mean, he had no idea whatsoever that there was that impression in the field. And he himself came from a very high testosterone department. And it shocked me a bit because having my career in London, I didn't really experience as much of the discrimination, the sexual discrimination that some of my contemporaries in the US did. But I really got a kick out of knowing what the cutting edge research was in the field and also having a reason to be in contact with my colleagues. But I also sort of had the vision of it as a dripping faucet. And if I missed a few drips, I drowned. I mean it was, of course, being an editor is largely unpaid.

And in my particular case, my male co-editor, I found out after a while, got considerably more financial support. This was academic press at the time than I did. And when I queried this with our managing editor and academic press, he said, "Well, the male guy needs it more than you do." And that they were giving him enough to hire a full-time research assistant or something.

But we were able to reconcile that a bit over the years. But the person I took over the editorship from told me to get rid of it after five years. And that's just about right, because you're on a high, you're involved in this, it's very stimulating and then it begins to become drudgery because you lose the novelty of it in a way.

Anna Doel:

Is there a sense of burnout as well?

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah, very much because it's not an easy thing. And now the publishing world has changed so much. At the time I was doing it nothing was online yet, so it was all through the mail. But also on the plus side, they had very good copy editors of the publishers. So I didn't have to do any of the copy edited myself. Now it's totally changed. I mean, I'm still on the editorial board for *Journal of Human Evolution*, and it's now an Elsevier publication. It's been sold on a number of times and there's no copy editing that the publishers do. If the editors want to copyedit things and change things they have to do with themselves. And so there's the whole job, it's not only guiding good science, it's not become... Well, there's more work involved from the academic side that's unpaid to ensure that the quality of the journalists maintain.

Anna Doel:

How easy or difficult is the communication with authors? Is it what people call herding cats?

Leslie Aiello:

Not so much. I mean, the feedback is always a very sensitive thing. And this is probably even more true with the grantees. Because if you're criticizing somebody, it's an ego attack. And there are some people who crumble under it and there's some people who come back fighting. And I mean, more recently, of course I've done it with all of the grantees. And I was very adamant when I went to the foundation that every person who submitted an application got feedback. And in fact, it was my husband who edited the feedback to make sure nothing inappropriate went out. Because certain times some of the reviewers would get frustrated and would say, "Oh, well this person has no business meaning in the field." Or "They're idiots." Or something like that. And that type of feedback is it useful? But what I also used to do would be write a personal note to each one of the decline grantees and just basically say, "You may not agree with the feedback, but we want you to know what the basis of our decision was."

And also to give them the confidence to reapply and continue. And I used to urge re-application, you had to be very careful because you couldn't promise somebody if they reapplied, they'd be funded. But to say that if you address these issues, you will have a much bit better chance of being funded in the next row. And it was funny, I used to get thank you notes from declined applicants.

Anna Doel:

I bet you did.

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah. And when we went online with our decisions, we were scared to death that we were going to get this barrage of angry grantees and all. And we used to sit around when we push the button where the decisions went out, looking at our watch to see when the first reply would come back. And each season I would get maybe one or two very upset people. And no, normally these came in within a half an hour when we pushed the button. And I used to take particular care with those people because they obviously were very hurt. And it's a knee-jerk reaction. And I used to review the feedback and then write back and say, "Your project isn't that bad, but here are the issues." and it was more or less the personal contact that they were looking for and wanted some type of reassurance. And in a way, that's the same with editing. There was one time I had a colleague from the Indian subcontinent, and he had a very exciting archeological side, but he was working totally outside the context of interpreting the material. And I sat down... Well, there were two things that happened. One of the reviewers actually gave him the comparative data to interpret this fossil. And then I sat down with a blank word processor screen and wrote the outline of his paper for him. And it wasn't being he hegemonic at all, but it was just helping him. And we worked together on it and he was able to then get it published in our you relatively high profile journal. And so there there's been various examples like that and it gives you a special opportunity to help people. Yeah.

Anna Doel:

During your tenure at Wenner-Gren, was there something you wanted to happen or to create that didn't get to happen?

Leslie Aiello:

Not really.

Anna Doel:

That's wonderful.

Leslie Aiello:

Well, it's a hard question to answer. Because one, if something isn't broken, you don't want to fix it. The one thing that worried me a lot was the prospect of employment of the young people we funded at the doctoral level, because each funding cycle, about two thirds to 70% or so of our money went to fund doctoral research. And the state of employment opportunities for PhD anthropologists now isn't great. And there was the problem of are we doing harm by putting so much money into training young people when the prospect of them becoming professional anthropologists may not be as good as it has been in the past?

And so that was an issue that I never really solved. And what one of our problems was that the field had become so dependent on us because we funded probably more students than the National Science Foundation. I mean, we were very well known in the field of anthropology. And I would've had every graduate department in the country again complaining to me if I cut back the funding significantly. But yeah, I mean, the shift to Sapiens was a huge change that happened. And it's funny, I mean, of course I'm no longer directly involved with it, but the pandemics had a huge effect.

Because you know, can't fund people to do overseas field work during a pandemic. And this was a huge issue. I was very happy I didn't have to deal with personally. But it's given the foundation an opportunity to recharge and change its trajectory a bit. And the current president, as I said, has been expanding much more the engaged side of the program. She's expanding much more to diversity initiatives. For example, they've partnered with the School of Advanced Research in Santa Fe for Native American fellowships. And so it's given much more opportunity to rethink the direction of the funding because we put into the field probably \$6 million a year. And so that's not an insignificant amount of money.

Anna Doel:

What are other funding sources for anthropology?

Leslie Aiello:

Very few. I mean, the problem with anthropology is so diverse. Everything from social anthropology, cultural anthropology, all the way through to primate behavior. And the only other major source of funding in the US is the National Science Foundation. And of course, here in Europe you have the European Research Council. In the UK there's various equivalents to the National Science Foundation. So each country has its own way of funding, or not funding anthropology, but in the context of the US, it's either the Wenner-Gren Foundation or the National Science Foundation. And some people are funded through the National Institutes of Health, but only in very restricted areas. And I missed out an important one, The Leakey Foundation, funds research and human evolution. But they have a much smaller endowment, although they've made huge impression on the field. But it is a very much more restricted mission than we have.

Anna Doel:

Thinking about the pandemic, how did it change the field? I know at the beginning of the pandemic, there was a statement released by the anthropological community titled Patchwork Anthropology. But that's the extent of my knowledge.

Leslie Aiello:

I actually really don't know because I've retired by this time, and all I know is through the context of my foundation. But the huge problem, it was, was for particularly the students who were wanting to do their doctoral degrees and they involved fieldwork and you could no longer travel. And what Wenner-Gren did, they tried to work with each grantee. And at any one point we had about 250 grantees to either allow them to, well, first to evacuate them. I mean, we always would, any amount of money we would put in to getting our grantees out of a dangerous situation, whether it was a war zone or in the case of the pandemic or what. But it was how do you help people who've had their career interrupted like this? And so for about two years, the applicants had to have a plan B. So if you can't go into the field, can you still carry out your research?

If you can do it online or from a distance or whatever it might be, that's appropriate, give us your plan B. And so that was actually quite successful for a few rounds. But I have a feeling that it's really resulted in a hiccup in the field, and it's only now that people are getting back into the field, getting back to the research and all. I certainly know I work quite closely with Science

Magazine. I'm on the board of reviewing the editors. And one of the things that I noticed, particularly in the first year or so of the pandemic, we were getting many more review payers, which is logical.

Anna Doel:

Do I understand correctly that the Wenner-Gren Foundation has an emergency fund?

Leslie Aiello:

There's an emergency fund and a discretionary fund. And the emergency fund isn't really a fund, but we have sufficient cash liquidity that if there is something that really needs to be engaged, we'll do it. But you have to convince me that it really is an emergency. And that's anywhere from, well, for example, when the Brazilian museum burnt down, the foundation jumped in with some funds to help. And we also had one with the migrant crisis in Greece, particularly Lesbos. We gave money to help some of the anthropologists there who were working with the migrants. And there's a variety of things like this we'll do, but we don't advertise it. And it's something that when we feel there's something important and there's something necessary, the foundation will do it.

Anna Doel:

I know you stepped down as president by then, but are you aware of any measures that the Wenner-Gren Foundation took to address the situation in Ukraine? Should be on the same level.

Leslie Aiello:

I have to say, I honestly don't know. I mean, as far as I know, we didn't have any active associations with Ukrainian in institutions at that time. I mean, during my tenure we did have an institutional development grant where we helped anthropology departments in areas where a little bit of cash injection would help. And we supported these institutions for a period of five years. And as far as I know, we didn't have anything similar going in Ukraine at that time.

Anna Doel:

While you were president of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, I understand you continued your research. How did the decision to leave academia come about?

Leslie Aiello:

It's funny. I felt at that time that I had probably done everything I could in London. The funding situation in London was abysmal at that time. This was before the European research grants. And because of historical reasons, my own field of human evolution fell through the cracks of what was funded by the equivalent of the National Science Foundation there. And social anthropology had funding, but they only funded living people, research on living people. Archeology was funded because it was bones and stones and there was nothing for human evolution, comparative anatomy, that type of thing. And we'd been funded for the prior decade by the Wellcome Trust, which was great. There was a program in human evolution at the Wellcome Trust, but we knew it was a short-term program, it was only a decade. And I was on the awarding committee for that at the end.



And I remember at the last meeting sitting around, and we all looked at each other and asking ourselves, would any of these proposals have been funded through their normal procedures? And our answer was no. And then also at that time, the Leverhulme Trust, the soap people, also had quite a lot of money in the UK, but they put it into developing an institute at Cambridge University. And I was in London and I realized that funding for my own research was drying up.

And that happened about the same time that I became aware of the Wenner-Gren opportunity. So it was looking for something new and being given the opportunity to relieve the funding strains of colleagues, which was great for me. Because I'd been through this desert of funding really. And in fact, it's sad now with Brexit in the UK, because leading up to Brexit, so many of the exciting advances have come through European research funding. And since that is becoming a serious issue in the UK now, it's just really sad to see that the money for particularly young people to set up research groups and have postdocs and students and all, may or may not be there any longer.

Anna Doel:

Did it feel rewarding at the Wenner-Gren to remedy the financial situation for your colleagues?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh, of course. Well, for 15% of my colleagues. I used to feel that I was very popular among 15% and I was the wicked witch for the other 85%. But it is just the nature of what things were that we had a lot of money, but we didn't have money to fund everybody.

Anna Doel:

I have a sense that you are just as busy now as you were at Wenner-Gren. What takes up your time? What keeps you busy?

Leslie Aiello:

What keeps me off the streets... No seriously, I keep my hand in academia. As I mentioned, I'm on the board of reviewing editors for science, and that's really fun. I mean, there's some weird and wonderful papers that come through and you sort of feel you have your thumb on the pulse of what's happening in the field. I'm also on the board for the National Museum of Natural History. And I've been doing that for the last three years. And it's a tenure appointment, so basically, you'll see me out. But it introduced me to the museum world at the highest level. And what's very interesting, there are the ethical issues right now around their human skeletons. And the Smithsonian has 34,000 human skeletons. And many of these were gathered in ways that wouldn't be considered ethical now. And so I've become much more involved with repatriation and all of the ethical issues surrounding anthropological research as well as broader issues in the museum world and public outreach and how you can continue to engage lay people and particularly young people in a world that's rapidly changing. And of course, the Smithsonian doesn't have a brand image and there's enough resources there to really reach for the sky with it. And I feel very excited for being involved with that. And so I enjoy that completely. And of course, I enjoy the APS here and I've become more involved with the APS.

Anna Doel:

What's your current role?

Leslie Aiello:

I'm chair of the nominations committee for class 2, which is a very broad class that goes all the way from me medicine to paleontology, passing through ecology and biodiversity and immunology. And so it is a very broad class. And also, I've been on the library committee for a while and it's particularly during the amalgamation of the library with the museums. And in fact, they've just made me curator for art and material culture, and I'm not yet quite sure what that means. And I'm on the council here. And I've just rotated off the program committee. I've been quite involved with the APS, but then in my spare time I'm doing botanical art.

The advice somebody gave me when I retired was "Challenge yourself with something new." And I've always liked art, but I've never really made art. And through a variety of serendipitous things, I became aware of a certificate program at the New York Botanic Garden.

Anna Doel:

So you're taking it really seriously?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh yeah. I'm getting my certificate and I've completed all the required units now and I'm in the process of doing a portfolio for my final degree. And in fact, it's great. It's something that you sort of stretch yourself a bit. And when you retire, you have the time to do that, and it's just finding what you really want to do.

Anna Doel:

It sounds like a lot of fun.

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah, well, that's what it's supposed to be.

Anna Doel:

And do you create paintings? Do you work with watercolors?

Leslie Aiello:

Yeah. I mean the certificate program, but traditionally botanic art has been primarily watercolor. And it's because of the translucency, you can really get the subtleties of the color. But it goes everywhere from just graphite or pencil all the way through pen and ink to colored pencils, which are great fun. And because you don't have to wait for the paper to dry and what watercolors. And then some people actually break with tradition and go into acrylics or something like that. But I tend to stick with graphite, pen and ink, watercolor.

Anna Doel:

Have you done drawing and painting before?

Leslie Aiello:

No. When I was in school, I used to enjoy it. And I think the last time I did any art was when I was an undergraduate. And then you get caught up in other areas and life takes over and you

don't have enough time. And perhaps you could make time, but your will is somehow disappeared. But being retired allows you to go back and rethink what would really make you happy. Yeah.

Anna Doel:

For your own research, have you ever kept field journals?

Leslie Aiello:

No, and it is just in my career after my PhD, when I was a master's student, particularly before I went to the UK to complete my PhD, I did quite a bit of archeological field work, but as a crew member on other people's sites and things. And there were two wonderful summer long seasons in the Dordogne in France where I was excavating that were really quite formative periods in my development. But when I went to the UK to do my PhD, the intention was to excavate in the area around Lake Turkana in Kenya. And by the time I got there, my PhD advisor, things had broken down with the field side of it. So I did a comparative anatomy thesis and I've got notes for papers I've written and all, they're all packed up in my basement at the moment, but nothing like ongoing journals at all. But I actually have started journals with the botanic art, which is given me... Whenever I take a holiday or travel now, I normally keep a daily journal with drawings and I don't know,

Anna Doel:

Have you been to, or are you planning to go to Kew Gardens for this botanical art project?

Leslie Aiello:

Oh, Kew. I mean, since I've lived in London for 30 years, I mean, Kew, I'm no stranger to Kew, but yes, they have a gallery of a work of a woman who I believe name is Marion North, who was a 19th century, very prolific botanic artist. And I'm, I'm going to be in London in two weeks and I'm going to try to make time and go out and see her work because I've just become aware of it. But I live around the corner from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Anna Doel:

I was going to ask about that.

Leslie Aiello:

And it takes me an hour, a little bit plus on the train to get to the New York Botanic Garden, but there's no shortage of high-quality things to stimulate you.

Anna Doel:

Thank you so much, Leslie.