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West Chester University Professor Paul Stoller at an exhibit he inspired on West Africa.

West African culture featured in West Chester University Surrounded by the Spirits exhibit

The exhibit was inspired by the life work of WCU anthropologist Paul Stoller.

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WEST CHESTER » Museumgoers to West Chester University will have a chance to learn more about little-known West Africa through a new exhibit that opened Friday night, Sept. 29, at the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology.

The exhibition, *Surrounded by the Spirits: Paul Stoller and the Songhay Journey Towards Well-being*, honors the life work of WCU's renowned anthropologist, Paul Stoller, who will retire next year.

The exhibition is a collaboration between students in a classroom setting, school staff and professors.

Rare artifacts from Niger and Ghana, highlight West African healing practices — including spirit possession, witchcraft and divination, religious devotion, and traditional medicine.

"In addition to rare potions, amulets, musical instruments and sacred objects, a recreation of an authentic spirit hut used by the possession priest Adamu Jenitongo invites visitors to contemplate their own well-being in the world," reads the invitation to the museum opening. "A second retrospective gallery looks at the life of Stoller, who trained as a Songhay sorcerer's apprentice, is the author of 16 books, and the recipient of numerous awards including the Anders Retzius Medal given by the King of Sweden, the highest honor in anthropology."



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West Chester University Professor Michael Di Giovine shows off some of a West African exhibit at the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology in the Old Library.

Through the displays, Stoller, professors and the students want to make people more aware of indigenous wisdom, while applying it to some of America's and the world's problems such as climate change.

"The exhibit underscores the wisdom of West African elders and how their knowledge can make the world a sweeter place for all of us," Stoller said.

The exhibit also features music and instruments.

"Music is a communication between the earth and spirit worlds," Stoller said. "Without music, there is no

passion." Regularly, with the assistance of students, Professor of Anthropology Michael Di Giovine, creates a new exhibit at the Old Library.

He said the West African exhibit was designed to teach museum studies students the inner workings of a museum and how to present their work to a public audience. Fifteen WCU students met for class and were involved in honoring Stoller.

"He makes anthropology accessible to the public," DiGiovine said about Stoller.

DiGiovine talked about the exhibit.

"To show that despite the differences in appearance between our ways of healing in America and those in West Africa, at the root of it, we're seeking the same thing and approaching it in a similar

fashion," the professor said. "We are comparing traditional herbal medicine with western biomedicine."

Kevin Wilson is a fourth year Anthropology and Archeology student, with minors in Museum Studies and Chemistry.

"This was a good opportunity to learn some research skills," he said. "I dipped my hands into a lot of pots."

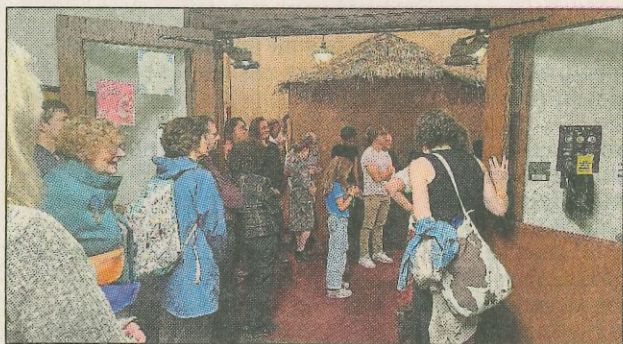
"This is a big collaborative effort, with all working together to discuss the main ideas and themes. I talked with a lot of people who are experts on their subjects to get an insight on how to present our specific niche."

Virginia Vintson is a master's candidate in History and is the Assistant Curator who wants to work in museums, possibly with the National Park Service.

"I hope that whoever visits our exhibit can take away a little bit of wisdom," she said.

The Museum of Anthropology and Archeology is located in the WCU Old Library at 775 S. Church St. Hours: Now through Dec. 1, 2024, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays when school is in session.

For more information, or to book a tour, go to wcupa.edu/museum. Admission is free. Tours are free but donations are welcome to support the student's learning.



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During opening night at a new West African exhibit at West Chester University, well-wishers surround a representation of an authentic spirit hut.



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West Chester University Professor of Anthropology Paul Stoller, right, addresses museumgoers at Friday's grand opening of an exhibition on West Africa.