

Joshua A. Bell '85

Cultural Anthropologist

For Joshua A. Bell '85, a typical day may include writing, being in collections engaging with objects, teaching, and/or being out with community members. As a cultural anthropologist—someone who studies humans, social relationships, and how people interact with their environment—he is constantly going through the process of asking questions to find out why people do what they do, what actions and motivations are behind human behaviors, and how culture impacts the activities humans engage in.

Josh's interest in anthropology actually stems from his time at Benchmark. "I was always interested in archaeology and history, which started during my time at Benchmark where I always wrote book reports on historical subjects," he said. Although he loved that archeology was all about solving puzzles of the past, he also enjoyed talking to people, which is how his interest in anthropology was born. "Anthropology is all about putting yourself in awkward situations," Josh said. "And having dyslexia and being perceived as different, I became very observant of human behavior and social situations."

Although his dyslexia is what first brought Josh to Benchmark School in 1981, he said he was happy to finally be in a place where he did not feel like an outsider. "Going to a school where

everyone was similar to me was really helpful," he said. "Being in that supportive community made me feel like finally I'm not just that one kid who isn't getting it." Through the individualized teacher attention and support he received at Benchmark, Josh said that the school helped to unlock his love of reading and increase his self-confidence. "I found that if I put my mind to something, I could do anything," he said.


After four years at Benchmark, Josh moved on to Germantown Academy in 1985. Following high school, he attended Brown University and then the University of Oxford, where he earned a Master of Philosophy in Ethnology and Museum Anthropology and a Doctor of Philosophy in Social and Cultural Anthropology.

Today, he is the Curator of Globalization at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., working in the Department of Anthropology. By combining ethnographic fieldwork with research in museums and archives, his work "broadly examines the shifting local and global network of relationships between persons, artifacts, and the environment." He has conducted fieldwork in the Purari Delta of Papua New Guinea documenting aspects of the local communities' heritages and traditions, has created a number of collections-based projects, and



has helped initiate and run a project called *Recovering Voices*, which is concerned with documenting and helping to sustain the 7,000+ languages around the world. He is also excited about a current project surrounding cell phone use and how it is and is not changing our world via technology. "Working at the Smithsonian is great because it's such an incredible public platform to reach a wider audience and share research with people from all over the world," Josh said.

In addition to his role at the Smithsonian, Josh is an adjunct professorial lecturer in anthropology at George Washington University and has published two co-edited books, *Recreating First Contact: Expeditions, Anthropology and Popular Culture* (2013) and *The Anthropology of Expeditions Travel, Visualities, Afterlives* (2015), along with numerous professional articles. Although he believes his greatest accomplishment is raising his family along with his wife, which includes two sons and infant daughter, he is also quite proud of earning his D.Phil., despite having dyslexia. "Benchmark has played a profound role in my life," Josh said. "I have to credit my parents for finding it. Now I'm a proud Benchmark alum and okay with talking about being dyslexic; I'm not ashamed of it anymore."

His advice to Benchmark students is: "Be fearless, inquisitive, and realize that anything is possible. Be proud of who you are and don't let your learning style be how people define you." 

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