Ribbon-cutting ceremony set April 30 for Coon Creek Science Center

The University of Tennessee at Martin and the UT Martin McNairy County Center/Selmer will host an invitation-only ribbon-cutting ceremony for the newly acquired UT Martin Coon Creek Science Center at 11 a.m., Friday, April 30. University of Tennessee and UT Martin officials, including President Randy Boyd and Chancellor Keith Carver, will attend the event. A public opening is planned this summer.

As one of the most important fossil sites in the U.S., the UT Martin Coon Creek Science Center is a 70-million-year-old exposed seafloor deposit that is home to almost 700 preserved marine species. The 240-acre property was acquired by lease in April 2020 by the university from the Pink Palace Family of Museums in Memphis after years of partnership for institutional field research, community outreach and instruction.

“The ribbon-cutting ceremony is the first official step to opening a new phase in the history of science at the site,” said Dr. Michael Gibson, science center director and UT Martin professor of geology. “From this point forward, UT Martin will oversee the application of newer methods of conservation and study, along with expanded education. We will cut the ribbon and officially unveil what we’ve been working on and that has been 72-million years in the making.”

The science center will host numerous educational programs year-round, including UT Martin faculty and student research opportunities, classes and internships, external geoscience professional and field training, educator training, summer camps and more. Visitors of all ages and professions can receive hands-on experience learning how to carefully find and extract fossils.

“Everything at the Coon Creek Science Center is hands-on. You don’t just talk about it, you experience it. Unlike most places, most of the fossils you dig up here, you get to keep, which includes one of the state symbols: the state fossil, the Pterotrigonia thoracica, or a pearly brooch clam, which was a UT Martin initiative,” Gibson said. “We want people to know that we are open and available, so come experience being a paleontologist for a day.”

Courses taught at the center include, but are not limited to paleontology, geology, forensic geology, oceanography, ecology, astronomy and climatology. The property is managed by the UT Martin McNairy County Center/Selmer. For more information about the event or the Coon Creek Science Center, contact the UT Martin McNairy County Center/Selmer at 731-646-1636.

UT Law Enforcement Innovation Center to train UT Martin Public Safety

Officers from the UT Martin Department of Public Safety will participate in training to help increase their cultural competency and reduce biased-based policing to better serve the main campus and surrounding area. The training will be held April 19-21 in the Boling University Center’s Smith Legislative Chamber.

This new, three-day certification program is offered by the UT Law Enforcement Innovation Center, an agency of the UT Institute for Public Service. All UT System law enforcement agencies will receive the training before it’s eventually launched nationwide.

“LEIC has created a national certification program for law enforcement agencies across Tennessee and nationwide,” said Rick Scarbrough, LEIC executive director. “This training will increase diversity in law enforcement and examine perceptions, stereotypes and cultural assumptions.”

Monte Belew, who is serving in his first year as UT Martin director of public safety, is finding ways to bring a community-oriented policing approach to the university. He sees this training as an important step toward further implementing his vision. “We’re here to show respect, to serve the students and faculty of UTM and make the campus an even better place than it already is,” he said. “This training will help us recognize effective ways to build greater trust with those we serve.”

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Dr. Bryan Foltz, associate professor of management information systems, and Dr. Laura Foltz, special assistant to the vice chancellor for finance and administration for strategic initiatives, were presented with an Exemplary Paper Award for the paper, “MUIPC and Intent to Change IoT Privacy Settings,” the pair submitted to the 2021 South Central conference.

Dr. Michael Gibson, professor of geology, presented a poster titled “The Tennessee GeoConclave: A Novel Opportunity for Program Self-Evaluation” at the Southeastern Section of the Geological Society of America virtual meeting hosted by Auburn University. Gibson also chaired the committee on Constitution and Bylaws and represented the 11 states of the southeastern region at the 45th biennial meeting of the Sigma Gamma Epsilon Earth Sciences Honor Society. He presented a report on SGE activities of the southeastern section during Covid-19 and was re-elected as the Southeastern Section Vice President for the 8th consecutive two-year term.

Monte Belew, UT Martin director of public safety, envisions a community-oriented policing approach for the university, and this training is an important step toward achieving his department's goals. Belew is pictured in March on the main campus with Morton, the department’s service dog, and UT Martin students (l to r) Carly Bartolo, of Chapel Hill; Darien Quinones, of Parsippany, New Jersey; Daniel Arellanes, of Brownsville; and Jeremy Martinez, of Jackson.

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LEIC is offering this training in partnership with the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles to meet the critical need of increasing diversity and cross-cultural competency and minimizing biased-based policing.

In December 2013, the UT Martin Department of Public Safety received full accreditation by the Tennessee Association of Chiefs of Police by meeting established standards of professionalism and accountability to the public they serve. Accreditation is a continuing process, and the department is committed to maintaining the progressive standards set by the association. The department received its second award in 2018.
Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Abigail Shelton

During her undergraduate years at Western Kentucky University, Dr. Abigail Shelton, associate professor of inorganic chemistry, weighed out the options of working in an industrial or instructional environment.

During her time at WKU, she took part in two chemistry Research Experiences for Undergraduates programs, one in the NASA Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, Ohio, and another in Paris, France. Starting in her sophomore year, she also taught anatomy and physiology labs. It was through those labs that Shelton realized she wanted to teach.

Although her interests in both research and teaching conflicted for a period of time, she has since been able to combine them through the student research projects that she facilitates through the Department of Chemistry and Physics and her work as an assistant director in the Office of Honors Programs. Today, Shelton helps students across disciplines become successful in fields they’re passionate about.

“I work with students after they’ve taken general chemistry, which means I can take them in as early as their sophomore year,” Shelton said. “What I hope is that any time I take on a research student, that it starts with a conversation about what they want out of the research project. It’s about helping students get onto their next step, so I have what feels like a lot of different, small projects because I often want to customize to what my students need or want to figure out.”

These student projects have included making silica aerogels, characterizing local honeys, and examining titanium dioxide.

Shelton’s work as assistant director of the Office of Honors programs includes teaching the history of scientific inquiry course for the University Scholars Program; this class looks at the schools of thought and ideas that governed scientific thinking throughout time. Students study concepts that are fundamental to chemistry classes today, such as the periodic table of elements and molecular modeling, as well as those that affected how modern chemistry is understood, such as the history of alchemy.

“I hope what students gain from the class is an appreciation of the process,” Shelton said. “It’s a recognition that the scientists 200 years ago and 800 years ago, even 1,000 years ago, weren’t by any means dumb. They were doing amazing stuff in a very different time.”

Through teaching the class, Shelton has gained not only a greater understanding of chemistry, but a stronger appreciation for the ways it has been shaped over time.

“I have an appreciation for the history of my science in a way that I didn’t really understand until I got to look at it through that type of lens,” Shelton said.

Another of Shelton’s responsibilities on campus is overseeing the Student Members of the American Chemical Society (SMACS) chapter. The chapter, which is nationally known for its green chemistry efforts, provides students with the opportunities to create connections with chemistry professionals and academics. Each year, students attend national chemistry meetings across the country, which are attended by thousands of scientists and industry professionals.

“I love taking students to national chemistry meetings and letting them experience the full meaning of the opportunities that they have as chemists,” Shelton said. “Letting students experience that, letting them go hear the people that are the leading voices in their fields right now, and listen to Nobel laureates, letting students feel what it’s like to be recruited by graduate schools and see 800 academic research posters being presented at the same time. Anybody out there doing anything related to chemistry, they’re all on display, and they all want you to come talk to them about their research or their program.”

Aside from her science, her students and her colleagues, Shelton’s favorite thing about UT Martin is the institution’s focus on teaching and preparing students for their future careers.

“I think what UT Martin does well is that it has a genuine interest in teaching and the wellbeing of the student who’s here,” Shelton said.

By working with students hands-on through research projects and student organizations, Shelton helps the new generation of scientists and scholars prepare for their next step.

Feature by Antonia Steele, newswriting intern for the Office of University Relations.

Thank you for your help in raising over $420,000 for the 2021 Captain’s Challenge!
**You Tell Me**

**Question** – How many people follow the official UT Martin social media accounts, and what is the university doing to increase those numbers?

**Answer** – These are the number of organic followers for each of UT Martin’s official social media accounts: Instagram (12,057), Facebook (33,465), Twitter (8,829), Snapchat (4,117). The university doesn’t pay for followers, so the numbers noted are “organic” followers or persons who choose to follow UT Martin social media. UT Martin seeks to grow new followers through undergraduate admissions events and includes social media information in recruiting materials and at utm.edu. The university recently hired Emma Bruner as UT Martin’s first social media coordinator in order to grow and enhance the university’s social media presence. Chancellor Keith Carver also has a strong social media following and helps the university through his combined current total of 21,188 organic followers for all of his official social media accounts.

Submit your questions anonymously to the Suggestion Box link at www.utm.edu/suggestionbox.