LET'S DRAG THIS SKELETON OUT OF UCONN'S CLOSET

What's the biggest skeleton in UConn's closet?

It's New England's finest and oldest specimen of the American mastodon. In August 1913, a nearly complete skeleton of Mammut americanum was discovered on a magnificent country estate in Farmington, now called the Hill-Stead Museum. This was the home of Theodate Pope Riddle, Connecticut's first licensed female architect. She ensured that the mastodon's bones, teeth and tusk were properly collected and archived. Over the years, the bones ended up at UConn.

UConn Nation is defined by its cultural icons. There's Gampel Pavilion, the geodesic epicenter of athletic pride. There's the Dairy Bar, where tourists indulge their ice cream fantasies. There's the Wilbur Cross Building, whose gilded cupola presides over central campus. The mascot for all this is a husky dog named Jonathan. His bronze statue is a favorite place for student selfies.

I belong to a sub-tribe of UConn Nation that cares more about earthly matters. My campus icons are landscapes, notably Horsebarn Hill, Mirror Lake, the Great Lawn, stone walls and the arboretum. My private mascot for all this is the unnamed skeleton in the closet.

It's time to give her a name. I suggest a female name because mastodons lived in matriarchal herds, and because the formal name literally translates as "breast tooth." Given that she was found in the Nutmeg State, my wife, Kristine, recommended Meggie, a diminutive of Megan, which means "mighty and strong" in Greek. At a coed university like UConn, it's time for a female mascot named Meggie to help balance the patriarchy of Jonathans.

During the end of the last ice age in New England, mastodons were much more common than their slightly larger cousins, the mammoths. Mastodons also more closely resembled living elephants, were brown instead of gray, and had long, shaggy fur that would have made great yarn. They were so fascinating that President Thomas Jefferson asked Lewis and Clark to find living specimens during their famous western expedition of 1804 to 1806. Obviously, they didn't know mastodons were extinct.

For most of her history, Meggie has been stored in crates, with pieces loaned out here and there. In 2005, she showed a little leg when her thigh bone (femur) was displayed in a climate change exhibit at the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History in Storrs. This was in the old apple sales building on Hillside Road next to the former UConn Co-op. In 2016, the physical museum disappeared and the femur was crated and put back into storage. This was particularly disappointing to me because I've been involved in museum work my whole career. As one of the original board members of the museum, I worked to help procure a building and later helped design its entrance exhibits. Unfortunately, those exhibits were disassembled last summer and the museum staff scattered to make room for nonmuseum administrative office space.

Those of us with an abiding interest in natural history are pleased that Meggie's skeleton remains in good hands. The problem is that she's hidden away. This is a missed opportunity of elephantine proportions for the university and the state. The paleo-elephant that I excavated from the permafrost for the University of Alaska in 1982 wasn't hidden in a campus closet. It was featured as the entrance exhibit for the state's new natural history museum at the university. Instantly, it became wildly popular with tourists.

The same could happen at UConn. Let's liberate Meggie from her closet. Let our accountants fund a plan to piece her back together. Let our museum staff exhibit her in some entrance hall in one of our
new buildings. Or, better yet, let our architects build a rotunda in a new museum building that would put the natural history back into UConn history.

Let our image-makers create Meggie as a new environmental mascot. Let dining services celebrate her vegan lifestyle. Let the theater and puppetry programs write plays about global extinctions. Let the robotics group design a cyborg mascot to help Jonathan with half-time shows.

Just last weekend we had out-of-state visitors. High on their list was to see the natural history museum. We had to tell them, "You can't. It's gone."