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Press release: 2013:10:31: Lecture to probe complexities of Rosewood Massacre

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Edward Gonzalez-Tennant was a Ph.D. student in anthropology at the University of Florida in 2008 when he began studying the history of Rosewood, a tiny, mostly black community near Cedar Key that was destroyed by racial violence in 1923.

“I realized there had not been an academic study of Rosewood in years,” he said. “I was shocked.” He would spend the next three years immersed in research that eventually led to a half-dozen studies published in scholarly journals and an interactive website called the Rosewood Heritage Project. The site includes a virtual reality reconstruction of the community as it was the year before it was destroyed.

Gonzalez-Tennant, now an anthropology professor at Monmouth University in New Jersey and director of its Geographic Information System (GIS) Program, will discuss his findings during a special presentation at USF St. Petersburg at 3:30 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 7 in the University Student Center Ballroom, 200 6th Ave. S. See campus map and directions.
The presentation, “Violence, Memory and New Heritage: Social Justice in Rosewood, Florida,” is free and open to the public and presented by the USFSP Anthropology Club, the Honors Program and the Florida Studies Program.

“We are proud that Dr. Gonzalez-Tenant is returning to Florida for this important and thought-provoking presentation,” said Frank Biafora, Ph.D., Dean of the USFSP College of Arts and Sciences. “His background in Anthropology and GIS is a perfect example of the tremendous power of interdisciplinary training and research that we seek to cultivate here at USF St. Petersburg.”

Eight people died in what has come to be known as the Rosewood Massacre. While Rosewood has been the subject of a popular book and Hollywood movie, little is known of its early development and racial landscape, Gonzalez-Tenant says.

Gonzalez-Tenant combines documentary evidence, archaeology, GIS mapping and oral history, along with new media, to better understand the evolution of Rosewood and the roots of the violence that destroyed it.

Rosewood turns out to be a much more complex place than first assumed, Gonzalez-Tenant says. It had a core of white-owned property owners surrounded by black-owned property owners and ranged over a wide area, he says.

“This was a community where African-Americans had full access to every economic aspect, every type of job, where African-Americans owned homes and businesses,” Gonzalez-Tenant says. “That racial landscape is at the heart of my scholarship.”

On New Year’s Day 1923, a white woman in nearby Sumner claimed a black man from Rosewood attacked her, prompting a white mob to lynch an innocent man and then days later to burn down all the homes of black residents.

Reconstructing Rosewood in a virtual environment helps create a better understanding of the violence, Gonzalez-Tenant says. “The historical Rosewood would have stretched over two miles, making the violence more frightening when you realize how deliberate it had to be,” he says.

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