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AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY TO AWARD  
HONORARY DEGREES TO NOBEL LAUREATE SVANTE PÄÄBO AND  
VISIONARY PHILANTHROPISTS ALLISON AND ROBERTO MIGNONE  
AS PART OF RICHARD GILDER GRADUATE SCHOOL  
COMMENCEMENT

Graduates Include Doctoral Graduates in Comparative Biology and  
New Earth Science Teachers for High-Needs Public Schools

**NEW YORK, NY, September 27**– Today, September 27, the American Museum of Natural History will hold the 10th commencement of its [Richard Gilder Graduate School](#) and confer an honorary Doctor of Science degree to Svante Pääbo, a pioneering paleogeneticist who was awarded the 2022 Nobel Prize for an array of extraordinary achievements including the sequencing of ancient Neanderthal DNA, and honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degrees to philanthropists Allison and Roberto Mignone in a ceremony under the iconic blue whale in the Milstein Hall of Ocean Life.

“The past decade, since the first group of Ph.D. graduates received their degrees from the Richard Gilder Graduate School, has brought astonishing scientific and technological advancements as well as accelerating crises in climate, the environment, human health, and science education,” said Museum President Sean M. Decatur. “In this time of great challenge and opportunity, we salute our graduating scientists and science teachers for choosing a life in science and education—a life in service to the critical issues we face and in anticipation of the inspiring opportunities ahead, all in pursuit of the betterment of society, our planet, and all its inhabitants. We wholeheartedly share these values and can’t wait to see their impact on the world.”

Svante Pääbo, director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, has conducted seminal research in paleogenomics, a scientific discipline that deepens investigations into human origins and evolution. In 2010, he and his colleagues successfully sequenced the first entire Neanderthal genome, creating a new foundation for the deeper understanding of medical advances informed by genetic data from our closest extinct hominin relatives, including an expanded understanding of susceptibility and resistance to infectious diseases such as COVID-19. Pääbo’s revolutionary work—including new techniques for handling, extracting, and analyzing DNA fragments from ancient specimens for genomic study—are used by Museum students, researchers, and scientists from around the world to investigate

ancient specimens from the Museum's world-class scientific collections, including in the Museum's new Ancient Biomolecules Laboratory (AbLab).

"I feel deeply honored to receive this degree from the AMNH, a world-leading institution that has been a pioneer in introducing and applying new techniques to the study of the natural world, including DNA from living and extinct organisms," said Svante Pääbo.

The Museum will also recognize devoted philanthropists Allison Hughes Mignone, accomplished civic leader and vice chair on the Museum's Development Committee, and Roberto A. Mignone, founder and president of Bridger Capital LLC and vice chair of the Museum's Board of Trustees, for their leadership and commitment to advancing science and its public understanding, including through their extraordinary support for the Museum's scientific research and educational programs, as well as for the creation of the magnificent [Allison and Roberto Mignone Halls of Gems and Minerals, which opened in 2021](#).

"Twenty-five years ago, when Roberto and I began our philanthropic journey, we chose to support AMNH. We were captivated by the Museum's commitment, not only to advancing science but also the institution's ability to give joy, wonder, and ultimately understanding to visitors of all age groups. Our children spent many of their formative years exploring the wonders of science by wandering the halls of the Museum. We want to make sure that all children in NYC have similar opportunities to appreciate science and scientific inquiry," said Allison Hughes Mignone.

"We are grateful for the opportunity to support one of New York's finest education and scientific research institutions. The AMNH conducts world class scientific inquiry, and just as importantly also transmits these breakthroughs to inform the public. We are fortunate to share today's honors with true heroes – the scholars who will advance the frontiers of knowledge and the STEM teachers who are entrusted to develop our most important natural resource, the children of our city," said Roberto A. Mignone.

The Museum's Richard Gilder Graduate School houses two graduate programs, [the Ph.D. program in comparative biology](#) and [the Master of Arts in Teaching Earth Science Residency Program](#) (MAT ESRP), the only free-standing, degree-granting programs of their kind at a museum in the United States.

This year's commencement will celebrate [four doctoral graduates in comparative biology](#) – **Alexandra Grace Walling, Nayeli Gutiérrez Trejo, Hollister Wade Herhold, and Tobit Liyandja**—whose wide-ranging Ph.D. dissertation research included the genomic study of genetic interchange processes and the evolution of photosynthesis in bacteria; the evolutionary history of longhorn beetles and milkweeds, their plant hosts; 3-D visualizations of an array of insect respiratory systems; and the evolutionary ecology and biogeographic history of a diverse group of central African carp fishes. Including this year's degree recipients, the Richard Gilder Graduate School has produced 44 Ph.D. graduates since its first cohort arrived in 2008, and its alumni hold positions in science, academia, education, and museums around the world.

The commencement will also honor 15 graduates from the Museum's MAT ESRP program, 14 of whom have already begun their teaching careers in high-needs public schools. Since the program's first cohort began in 2012, it has prepared 167 Earth science teachers, reaching approximately 80,000 students in New York and beyond. Close to 50% of Earth science teachers hired in New York City public schools between 2020 and 2021 are MAT ESRP graduates; and students of MAT ESRP teachers in New York

City are outperforming students of non-MAT ESRP prepared teachers on the Earth Science Regents exam.

The [Museum's MAT ESRP graduates](#) are **Edinson Aguinaga Arancibia**, teaching at International High School at Prospect Heights, Brooklyn; **Caroline Cassese**, teaching at High School of Arts and Technology, Manhattan; **Constantin Dubischar**, teaching at Clara Barton High School, Brooklyn; **Shaina Durand**, teaching at Pelham Preparatory Academy, the Bronx; **Jonathan Egloff**, teaching at the College Academy, Manhattan; **Marcos Fernandez**; **Mary Jimenez**, teaching at James Madison High School, Brooklyn; **Ryan Korman**, teaching in Boys and Girls High School, Brooklyn; **Matthew Lutz**, teaching at Newcomers High School, Queens; **Kelly O'Donnell**, teaching at Academy of American Studies, Queens; **Kai Peterson**, teaching at Lyons Community School, Brooklyn; **Mekayla Sullivan**, teaching at Lyons Community School, Brooklyn; **Erin Szablewski**, teaching at Williamsburg High School of Architecture and Design, Brooklyn; **Kim Vū**, teaching at West Brooklyn Community High School, Brooklyn; and **Robert Zummo**, teaching at Uniondale High School, Long Island.

### **Education at the Museum**

Since its founding in 1869, the Museum, with its mission of science education, has played a unique role in the educational life of New York City and beyond. As a top destination for field trips, the Museum serves up to 400,000 school and camp group visitors each year. The Museum's educational offerings range from classes for young children that encourage learning about the natural world to mentored research experiences for high school students, to graduate level programs through its Richard Gilder Graduate School, and professional development programs for teachers. In May, the Museum opened the [Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation](#), a new facility representing the most comprehensive addition and modernization of educational space at the Museum in nearly a century, which is activating its educational mission in wholly new ways.

### **Paleogenomics and Human Evolution at the Museum**

The Museum's scientific collections provide the evidence that scientists use to investigate and answer fundamental questions, identify new species, and formulate new research questions and directions. The Museum's new Ancient Biomolecular Lab (AbLab), a state-of-the-art, National Science Foundation-funded facility designed to train and assist researchers working with ancient and historic biomolecular data, is only the second of its kind in North America and will allow deeper investigations of genomic change over time scales ranging from the near-present to several thousand years ago.

In addition, through scientific research and public education, the Museum advances the understanding of human evolution. Active investigations into human origins include ongoing research by Museum students and scientists including Ashley Hammond—a Museum curator and Richard Gilder Graduate School professor whose work explores the fossil record for hominoid (ape and human) evolution in East Africa with a focus on bipedal locomotion, the hallmark of the human lineage—and Sergio Almécija—Senior Research Scientist in Biological Anthropology who studies the evolution of humans alongside that of our living closest relatives, the apes. Through programming and exhibits, including the Anne and Bernard Spitzer Hall of Human Origins, the Museum also engages millions of visitors each year in the science of human evolution.

### **American Museum of Natural History (amnh.org)**

The American Museum of Natural History, founded in 1869 with a dual mission of scientific research and science education, is one of the world's preeminent scientific, educational, and cultural institutions. The

Museum encompasses more than 40 permanent exhibition halls, galleries for temporary exhibitions, the Rose Center for Earth and Space including the Hayden Planetarium, and the [Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation](#). The Museum's scientists draw on a world-class permanent collection of more than 34 million specimens and artifacts, some of which are billions of years old, and on one of the largest natural history libraries in the world. Through its Richard Gilder Graduate School, the Museum offers two of the only free-standing, degree-granting programs of their kind at any museum in the U.S.: the Ph.D. program in Comparative Biology and the Master of Arts in Teaching Earth Science Residency Program. Visit [amnh.org](http://amnh.org) for more information.

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The Museum expresses its utmost appreciation to the late Richard Gilder, a steadfast and most generous benefactor and friend whose visionary philanthropy enabled the Museum to establish the Gilder Graduate School.

Additional support for the Richard Gilder Graduate School has been generously provided by the Hess Foundation, Inc.; an anonymous Museum Trustee; the City of New York; Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., Gerstner Family Foundation; the National Science Foundation; the Annette Kade Charitable Trust; and the Maxwell I Hanrahan Foundation.

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The Gilder Center is also made possible thanks to the generous support of the City of New York, the Council of the City of New York, the Manhattan Borough President, the State of New York, the New York State Assembly, and the New York State Senate.

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