



# Field School Unearths the Past, Builds the Future

Elizabeth Varughese, Sara Ramirez, Dr. Miranda Stockett, Dr. William McFarlane, Samantha Phillips, Michelle Phillips and Nick Erickson made up the first JCCC field school to western Honduras.

## Field School

**Cover:** Elizabeth Varughese and Samantha Phillips screen recently excavated soil at Sinsimbla.

**D**r. William McFarlane, associate professor, anthropology, and Dr. Miranda Stockett, adjunct professor, anthropology, led

the first-ever archaeological field school from JCCC as part of a community-based research project in Jesús de Otero Valley in western Honduras.

Five JCCC students signed on to the July 4-27 field school – an opportunity for hands-on excavation of pre-Columbian artifacts while earning credits for two JCCC classes, *People and Cultures of Mesoamerica* and *Archeological Field Methods*.

“In terms of archeology, the Jesús de Otero Valley is a rich research area,” McFarlane said. “It is on the frontier between the Maya and Lenca, so any archaeology done in this area is going to address issues of cultural identity. For example what does it mean to be Lenca and how is that similar or different than being Maya?”

Working with the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History and community leaders, McFarlane and Stockett, experts in Honduran archaeology, have identified the research potential of 14 pre-Columbian sites in the valley. Information gleaned from each site will be a piece of a bigger puzzle.

“Our question as anthropologists is: Why are there so many sites in this valley? Are there

social or political reasons or a chronological reason?,” McFarlane said.

Before the puzzle is solved comes the arduous work of excavating one site at a time. JCCC students began the first excavation in the city of Sinsimbla, centrally located in the middle of the valley, surrounded by agricultural fields. They were digging in the fields from 7:30 a.m.-noon five days a week in the heat and humidity of the Honduran rainy season. After a lunch break, lab work began – washing and documenting artifacts. No lost ark, crystal skull or temple of doom were unearthed, but parts of pots and household tools were prized as windows to the past.

“People say that one man’s trash is another man’s treasure,” McFarlane said. “Just about everything archaeologists look at is trash – things thrown out by people from the past. By looking at this trash, we can infer the range of daily activities conducted at a certain place.”

Students spent weeknights discussing readings for their *People and Cultures of Mesoamerica* class, and weekends provided opportunities for international education and cultural experiences with visits to prehistoric Mayan cities,

modern Lenca communities, colonial centers and ecological preserves.

Students maintained extensive field notes documenting everything that came out of the ground. All artifacts excavated by the JCCC field school have been warehoused in Jesús de Otero. Stockett and McFarlane, as project directors, filed a formal report with the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History and local government officials.

But more than a look at the past, JCCC students and the two JCCC anthropologists are making a contribution to sustainable economic development in the Jesús de Otero Valley. Artifacts unearthed this summer, along with others, will contribute toward a Casa de Cultura in the valley, sought after by locals as a civic center/tourist attraction that preserves archeology, anthropology, theater, music and dance. With encouragement from McFarlane and Stockett, the Honduran Minister of Culture agreed to its funding, and plans call for its completion this fall.

“The responsibility of community-based archaeology is to share what we find out and listen to what community members want from us,” McFarlane said. “The groundwork for a long-term cooperative effort between JCCC, the Jesús de Otero Valley Community and Honduran government has been laid. Each year we can delve further into the prehistory of the valley.” 🌱



Dr. Miranda Stockett, Michelle Phillips, Sara Ramirez and Nick Erickson excavate a residential structure.



Elizabeth Varughese is photographed here in one of the excavation units.



Dr. William McFarlane conducts class in Honduras.