

Field School allows archaeology student chance to get 'his hands dirty'

Part of a series profiling undergraduate researchers provided by University of Pittsburgh Office of the Provost.

By Niki Kapsambelis

The prospect of spending the summer in humid upstate New York digging for pieces of Native American pottery might sound like a trial for many students. But for an outdoorsy type like Tony Sudina, it's nothing short of heaven.

A senior in the Department of Anthropology, Sudina found his calling in the summer of 2006 when he attended the department's Archaeology Field School in Ithaca, New York.

The six-week program, run by faculty member Dr. Kathleen Allen, explores two Cayuga Iroquois sites occupied during the mid to late 1500s.

"Right away, I fell in love with archaeology. Being out for eight hours a day, it was something I was just meant to do," says Sudina.

From Trafford, Pennsylvania, Sudina arrived at Pitt with intentions of studying medicine. And while he quickly realized that he'd made a mistake in his career choice, he was equally convinced he was at the right school.

"As soon as I came to Pitt, I fell in love with it," he says. "Pittsburgh in general has such a great academic community, and there's so much collaboration. Driving past the Cathedral of Learning, it's kind of awe-inspiring. You want to be a part of something greater."

In the spring of 2004, he took Allen's introductory archaeology course, and found his discipline as well. He will also graduate with a dual major in environmental studies through the Geology Department, which complements his archeological research.

"It's cool how you can combine a social science such as anthropology with a natural or hard science such as geology or chemistry," Sudina says, because the dual degree appeals to both sides of the brain:

"I'm more of a social scientist, or I like to think that I will be. That's how my brain functions."

Through the field school, Sudina was able to collect pieces of Iroquois pottery and conduct both lithic and ceramic

analysis. Such an opportunity is somewhat rare for undergraduates, and Sudina credits Allen with providing the rich backdrop against which students can test their skills.

"In archaeology, a lot of people will work with a collection, or you need to get funding and you need to go out in the field and do your own research," Sudina explains. "What's so great about Dr. Allen's field school is it's available to all of her students to use ... If you can put forth a new idea or research that could be further explored, you have the world at your fingertips."

Allen has run the field school every other year since arriving at Pitt in the early 1990s. Designed to give students practical experience in field techniques and material analysis, the school evolved from a public talk that Allen gave in the area. Afterward, two women from the audience approached her to say they had an archaeological site on their property, which they invited Allen to explore.

The first year she ran the field school, Allen took 28 students; nowadays, that number is fine-tuned to 16 or 18. For six weeks, they occupy two houses in Ithaca, N.Y., cooking and working cooperatively on household chores and using a second-floor kitchen in one house as a makeshift lab.

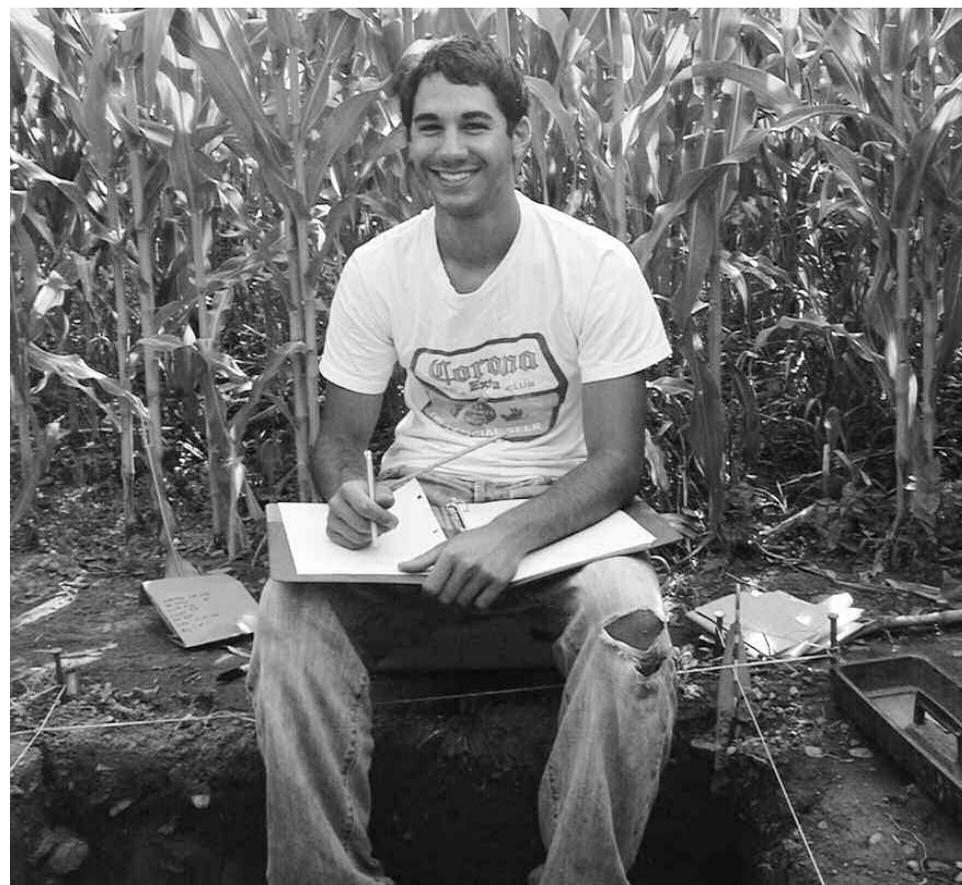
"When I have the information sessions, I really stress that you have to like being outdoors," says Allen. "Given where we are, the conditions are really not that bad compared to how they can be in some other parts of the world."

Allen laughs when she recalls how colleagues working in the jungles of Guatemala contrast their conditions with those of the field school.

Sudina, who is spending the spring writing his honors thesis, plans to take a year off after graduation and then pursue graduate studies.

And he remains an enthusiastic advocate of working in the outdoors.

"Anybody who has the opportunity to study abroad or do a field school, I definitely encourage it. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. ... You get out of the office, out from behind a computer screen, and get your hands dirty."



Undergraduate Tony Sudina maps an Iroquois site during Pitt's summer field school in upstate New York (Photo by Dr. Kathleen Allen)

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