

5 | TYLER

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT TYLER MAGAZINE

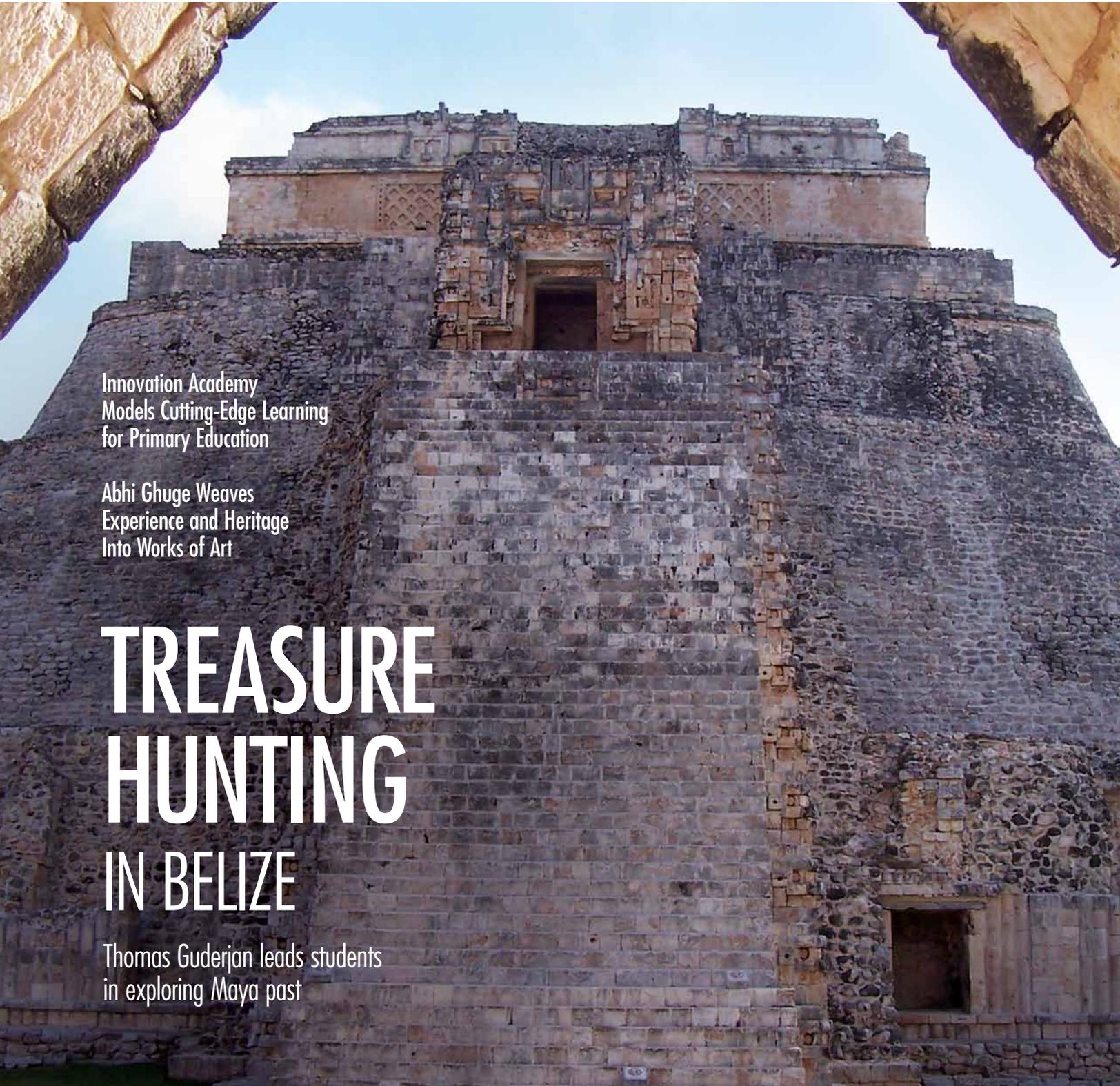
S P R I N G 2 0 1 3

Innovation Academy
Models Cutting-Edge Learning
for Primary Education

Abhi Ghuge Weaves
Experience and Heritage
Into Works of Art

TREASURE HUNTING IN BELIZE

Thomas Guderjan leads students
in exploring Maya past



TREASURE HUNTING IN BELIZE

Thomas Guderjan Leads Students in Exploring Maya Past

As an anthropology graduate student back in 1980, Dr. Thomas Guderjan was invited to accompany his professor for a semester of archaeological field work at an ancient Maya site in Belize.

“I went with the absolute principle that there was no way he was going to make a Mayanist out of me,” said Guderjan, an assistant professor of anthropology at The University of Texas at Tyler, who is now a leading international authority on the Maya.

The Maya civilization is famous for having the only known fully developed written language in the Americas before the age of Columbus, as well as for its art, architecture and understanding of math and astronomy. The ancient Maya civilization spanned more than three millennia – from about 2000 B.C. through the 16th century – and a huge region, parts of which are occupied today by the nations of Mexico, Belize, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

“When I got into the field in Belize, I realized how dynamic the situation was with the Maya, and how much things change,” he said. “So every time you go into the field and do something, if you’re good, you’re fundamentally rewriting textbooks and changing the way everybody thinks about everything, and it was exciting.”

BLUE CREEK AND THE MAYA RESEARCH PROGRAM

Guderjan’s passion for the subject developed further while he was on a Fulbright Research Fellowship to conduct survey work in northwestern Belize in 1990. While there, he undertook an excavation project at the Blue Creek ancient Maya site. Over the next two years, the project’s success prompted Guderjan to organize efforts more formally.

In 1992, Guderjan founded the Maya Research Program, a nonprofit organization that sponsors archaeological and ethnographic research in Middle America,

enabling cross-disciplinary collaboration among scholars and students from around the world. The National Geographic Society, the National Science Foundation and the H.J. Heinz Company Foundation, among other entities, have supported the MRP through the years.

Since its birth, the MRP has been organizing annual archeological fieldwork at Blue Creek, now one of the longest-running Maya research projects. The MRP also has sponsored ethnographic research in the village of Yaxunah, Mexico.

About 10 UT Tyler students participate annually in the Blue Creek project, which also attracts some of the field’s best scholars and dozens of students from other universities, Guderjan said.

“I’m really fortunate to lead a group of scholars from around the world who focus their energies on understanding ancient Maya,” he said. “They do this together every single summer, and they have for 22 years.”

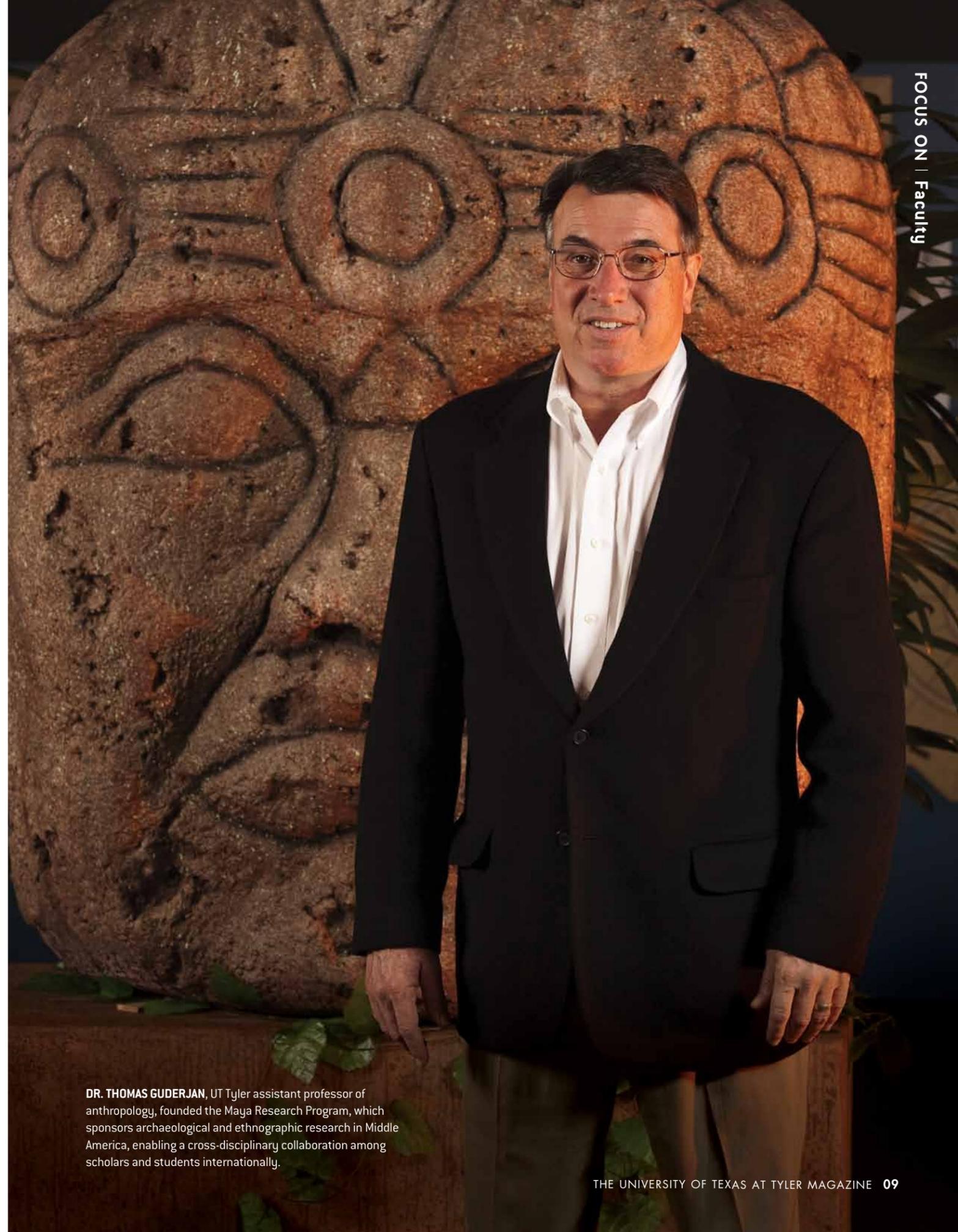
The MRP’s Blue Creek Research Station, a field school of UT Tyler, is certified by the Register of Professional Archaeologists. It is situated in a beautiful, rustic and rural area, encompassing a main building, 1,500 square feet of lab space, studios for an illustrator and photographer, 35 residential cabanas, a restroom and shower building, a modern kitchen and dining hall and a large, thatched-roof covered outdoor area.

Guderjan summarizes much of the work at Blue Creek in his book, “The Nature of an Ancient Maya City: Resources, Interaction and Power at Blue Creek, Belize,” published in 2007.

His other books include “Maya Maritime Trade, Settlement and Populations on Ambergris Caye, Belize,” published in 1995, and “Ancient Maya Traders of Ambergris Caye,” first published in 1993 and updated in 2007.



The “Old Man” of Copan, Honduras.



DR. THOMAS GUDERJAN, UT Tyler assistant professor of anthropology, founded the Maya Research Program, which sponsors archaeological and ethnographic research in Middle America, enabling a cross-disciplinary collaboration among scholars and students internationally.

**OWNERSHIP:
THE PATHWAY TO PRESERVATION**

One of the challenges archaeologists face in Belize is protecting ancient sites from development and destruction. Guderjan recently dealt with such a situation at an important Maya site in northwestern Belize called Grey Fox – one of only three such sites remaining in the area that has never been damaged or excavated.

The site, owned by a group of farmers who were planning to bulldoze it and the surrounding rain forest, contains pyramids, royal elite residences, viewing galleries and two large public plazas.

Guderjan realized there was only one way to save Grey Fox, and that was to buy it.

“My wife actually said to me, ‘Why are you doing this? You have too much to do now.’ And I said, ‘Because if I don’t, no one will. There’s no one but me who can protect this. If I don’t act, it’s gone,’” Guderjan said.

Though it had been owned by the Mennonite Church and was only to be owned by locals, Guderjan, having spent 20 years working with the local people and gaining their trust, hoped for an exception.

By 2011, Guderjan had already been talking for a couple of years with contacts in local political circles to see about buying the land when he learned one Tuesday that it was going

to be auctioned that Saturday.

“We scrambled ... and by Thursday had the mayor’s agreement and everyone else’s agreement that we thought we needed to break the rule,” he recalled.

Guderjan was the only outsider among the dozen or so community leaders who attended the auction. They unanimously decided to grant an exception to the “Mennonite only” rule, and the only bid presented – Guderjan’s bid from the MRP of \$40,000 – was accepted.

“It was done in 15 minutes, at which point, I needed \$40,000 really quick,” he said. “We went right back to our longtime participants and donors and raised it within 30 days.”

An article last year in *Popular Archaeology* magazine said the MRP’s purchase of Grey Fox “means that what information it will afford for a better understanding of the ancient Maya civilization and culture will not be irretrievably lost before the scientists, scholars and visiting public can get to it.”

Guderjan’s team plans to do noninvasive field work at Grey Fox this summer, starting with a botanical survey.

**NURTURING ARCHAEOLOGISTS
IN TRAINING**

Aside from the thrill of exploring and preserving ancient sites, Guderjan also enjoys opening others’ eyes to a world they have

never before seen. For many participants of summer field work at the Blue Creek site, it is their first time abroad and first time as a full member of an international team working to understand a past civilization.

“They not only learn how to dig like archaeologists dig, but they also learn from all of those scholars who are present,” Guderjan said. “... I like to describe it as a crash course in both Maya archaeology and how we know about the past.”

The work can be arduous, Guderjan said: “Sometimes this will be in the mud, sometimes in the tropical sun, and never in air conditioning.”

Students participate in the summer field trip through enrollment in the UT Tyler course, Anthropology 4361: Archaeological Field Methods. Other adults, too, who are interested in anthropological research are welcome on the trip; about half of participants are professionals and retirees, Guderjan said.

UT Tyler senior and history major La Donna Novak, who went on last summer’s expedition, called it a “once in a lifetime experience.”

She’ll never forget the day her excavation team was about to call it quits after digging for hours 7 feet down when part of the side crumbled inward, exposing some ancient Maya jewelry and human bones.



“I was amazed, because I thought to myself, this stuff has been under here at least a thousand years,” Novak said.

Carson Carter, a senior at UT Tyler majoring in political science, also went on the trip last summer. The experience in Belize – his first time abroad and his first archaeological dig – made a lasting impression on him and inspired him to pursue a career in cultural preservation or archaeology site preservation.

“If I had a chance to do it again,” Carter said of the trip, “I would do it in a heartbeat.”

BURIED TREASURE

Regarding his own thrilling adventures, Guderjan’s mind reels back to the summer of 1994, when his team was excavating one of the smaller pyramids at Blue Creek.

On the last day of the field season, he was on a pyramid with an excavator who found under the top staircase a heavy limestone disk

about 4 feet wide with a hole in the center. After lifting it, the excavator pulled out two pottery bowls the size of cereal bowls, one inverted on top of the other, that were buried about a foot deep.

They figured the bowls themselves were all they would find, but then they looked inside of the bowls, and there before their eyes lay jade artifacts.

“It was a complete adrenaline rush,” Guderjan said. “It was like, Oh my God, what have we just found?”

That day, his team continued to dig down the shaft, which they discovered ran 10 feet deep into the pyramid, and they unearthed 400 pieces of jade – one of the biggest collections of jade ever discovered, Guderjan said.

Their find attracted the attention of National Geographic and Archaeology magazines, as well as that of the Discovery Channel. This summer, Guderjan and his col-

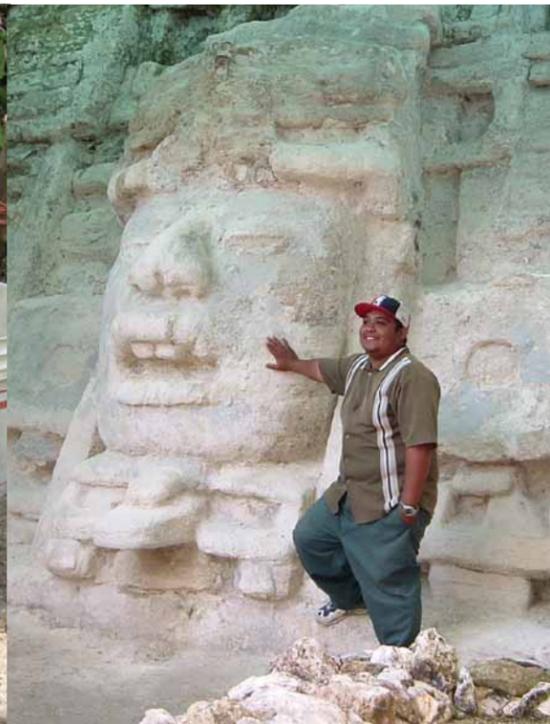
leagues plan to wrap up excavation work at Blue Creek and continue work at two other at-risk Maya sites in the area: Xnoha and Nojol Nah.

Though he has done field trips in Belize for 30 years, there’s always more work to do. Aside from field work, he has more books he would like to write, and intends over the coming years to secure the MRP for the long run: “That’s my big goal – to see that its future does not end with me.”

Looking back, he has no regrets about becoming a Mayanist: “Sometimes, you just are honored to be that person who helps find these things out, because you know that very possibly, if you hadn’t done it, nobody would have, and it wouldn’t be known.” ■

Sites visited by research teams include El Castillo, Chichen Itza, Mexico [pictured at top left]. At top right, students excavate at Nojol Nah, Belize, in 2011.

Below, Dr. Guderjan (front right) gathers with excavation participants for a group photo.



Above, students excavate the Maya center of Blue Creek, Belize, during research activities in 2011. Also pictured is the Kinich Ahau [Sun God] Temple at Lamanai, Belize.