

# Students Unearth the Ancient Maya

High-school students participate in an innovative field program in Belize

**C**AHAL PECH sits on a steep hill overlooking the Mopan River in the modern town of San Ignacio, Belize. In its heyday, during the Classic period (A.D. 250–900), this ancient Maya city was a significant political and ceremonial center—its power evidenced in its temple pyramids, large public plazas, multiple ballcourts, and stone monuments. Today, the site is not only a popular tourist destination, but also a place where the AIA is supporting an exceptional archaeological program for American high-school students.

Since 1988, members of the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project (BVAR), under the supervision of archaeologist Jaime J. Awe, Director of the Institute of Archaeology (IOA) in Belize, have been researching the site. Awe's work has revealed Cahal Pech's long history, including some of the earliest evidence for Maya occupation in the region.

In 2006, Mat Saunders, a high-school teacher from Palm Coast, Florida, and a BVAR alumnus, brought five of his students to Cahal Pech to participate in an experimental field program. Its main goals were to teach the students about archaeology and the ancient inhabitants of Cahal Pech through field research and excavations, and to provide them with an opportunity to live and work in a foreign country. The experiment was so successful that, with Awe's support, Saunders established the BVAR–American Foreign Academic Research (AFAR) program to bring students back annually.

Over the years, more than 40 high-school students have excavated at Cahal Pech, helped map a second Maya site, and archived artifacts for the IOA using digital field microscopes and virtual 3-D photography software. Several of the participants, who describe the experience as “awesome” and “life-changing,” have



Students sifting through the dirt for artifacts (above); head of a ceramic figurine unearthed at the site (far left); Structure C6, uncovered by the students in 2009, pictured after consolidation (left)

returned for a second or third season. Some have gone on to study archaeology in college and beyond.

The AFAR operations illustrate sound archaeological practice and emphasize the importance of education through outreach to the next generation, which is central to the AIA's mission. Specifically, they combine learning with practical action, teaching students how to study an ancient culture in a direct way and showing how sites can be responsibly preserved for the future.

In 2009, the AIA decided to support this innovative program. During the latest field season, 14 students spent two weeks excavating the foundation of a building adjacent to the site's main ballcourt. Its superstructure had been lost over time through erosion and neglect, but excavations

revealed a portion of the monument's penultimate construction phase. Awe and the IOA, with the AIA's backing, decided to preserve the unearthed structure through consolidation. Unlike previous seasons, when the trenches were backfilled to protect them, the recent consolidation effort will stabilize the building and allow it to remain accessible to visitors.

In the coming years, the AIA will work with Awe and Saunders to expand the project nationally by asking AIA Local Societies to identify and financially support deserving students from their communities to participate in the program. If you are interested in sponsoring a student for the 2010 season, or know a young person who would benefit from the program, please contact us by e-mail at [development@aia.bu.edu](mailto:development@aia.bu.edu).