

University of Texas Austin Field School in Belize 2018

Jane C. Waldbaum Scholarship Recipient Report

Johanna Najera, University of California, Santa Barbara



The Archaeological Institute of America's Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship granted me the opportunity to participate in my first field experience and collaborate with a diverse group of professors. I joined the 2018 field season of the Contested Caves Archaeological Research Project (CCARP) at Mulch'en Witz, La Milpa, Belize directed by UCSB graduate student Toni Gonzalez. My interest in Maya archaeology has led to a research project, named "Chronological Analysis at Mulch'en Witz: Ceramic and Carbon Dating of Plazuela Group B", that I will complete for my Anthropology honors thesis.

Mulch'en Witz is located in the Rio Bravo Conservation area and only 1.6 km away from the ceremonial center La Milpa. The site is named Mulch'en Witz, which translates to "Hill of Many Caves" in the Mayan language, because of the significant number of chultuns,

or man-made subterranean chambers, in the area. Ms. Gonzalez's dissertation is focused on the ritual practice occurring in the La Milpa area and the ancient Maya's placement of chultuns in their landscape. During the 2018 field season, excavations focused on surface units in Group B to understand the relationships between an architectural group and associated chultun.

Being in a small, intimate group and tackling a large project, students were entrusted with many responsibilities and received close mentorship from our project director. I am grateful to have had abundant learning experiences in the short month of this field school and have a new understanding for archaeologists' project planning, tasks, and responsibilities in managing a site and its excavation. In the first days we learned basic skills, such as properly recording lot forms and journal entries, troweling techniques, setting up 1 m x 1 m units, and sieving buckets of earth for artifacts. As the project progressed, our tasks and responsibilities increased to include creating bag tags, measuring elevations and soil munsell, illustrating profiles, and collecting soil samples. I was particularly interested in excavating a 2 m x 1 m surface unit at the center of the plazuela group. We excavated around 190 centimeters deep and recovered ceramic sherds, lithic flakes, and marine shell before reaching bedrock. Overall, the excavations at Mulch'en Witz exposed me to a wide range of architectural components such as a plaster floor, wall face, construction fill, and remodeled steps.



Marcos and I cleaning ceramics with water.

Aside from practicing excavation at Mulch'en Witz, my project director, Ms. Gonzalez, promoted working with other researchers in the camp. I had the opportunity to work under the tutelage of Dr. Lauren Sullivan, project ceramicist for the Programme for Belize from the University of Massachusetts Boston, and Dr. Tom Hart, project paleobotanist from Franklin & Marshall College. With Dr. Sullivan, I analyzed pottery excavated from Mulch'en Witz to relatively date the site. We classified sherds based on quantifiable characteristics, such as surface decoration, wall thickness, and/or rim shape. With Dr. Hart, I practiced floatation methods to recover macrobotanical remains from soil samples collected at Mulch'en Witz. First, we used a floatation machine that separated the light and heavy fraction and then we air-dried them in separate veil bags. In addition, I also gained experience collecting phytolith samples from ceramic vessels and stone metates.



I conducted ceramic analysis in the camp lab.



I learned how to use a floatation machine.



I collected residue from a metate.

The Waldbaum scholarship was crucial to my accessibility to attend my first field school. I paid my transportation fees of \$600 with the funds. Then, the remaining \$400 dollars were applied towards the room and board fee of \$2,100. The UTA field school is under the Programme for Belize Archaeological Project (PfBAP) camp. My group resided in camping tents and ate meals prepared by a wonderful cooking staff. Overall, this experience solidified my interest in Maya archaeology. I plan to pursue a PhD in Maya household archaeology after completing my B.A. in Anthropology.