

Professor unearths ancient history

Madeline Deardeuff

In each episode of Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's premier radio show co-hosted by Chancellor Randy Pembroke, PhD, and Greg Budzban, PhD, College of Arts and Sciences dean, the half-hour program highlights the great projects and happenings occurring on campus and beyond.

On this week's episode, which will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, July 8, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound, Budzban interviews Julie Zimmermann, PhD, a professor in the Department of Anthropology.

A native of the St. Louis metropolitan area, Zimmermann received her bachelor's in anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis and her doctorate from New York University. Upon a suggestion from her predecessor, Sid Denny, she came to SIUE and began teaching immediately after graduation. She conducts research in the American Bottom and Illinois River Valley, specifically investigating past Native American lifeways.

"It's a fascinating area, both anthropologically and archaeologically," Budzban says. "Your work is incredibly interesting. What brought you into anthropology?"

"Some of my students have heard this story, but

when I was 13, I read a book about a girl whose dad was an archaeologist," Zimmermann explains. "In the opening chapter, they were going through the jungle, slashing through the trees with machetes and find this hidden temple buried under vegetation.

"As they uncover the temple, the doorway collapses and crushes her father. She spends the rest of the book trying to escape the jungle by herself. I went to my dad, and he wanted us all to go to college, but he never knew of anyone who wanted to be an archaeologist. My senior year of high school, I won a full-ride scholarship to Washington University, and I decided that it was what I wanted to pursue!"

Zimmermann, along with other faculty members from her department and a group of 16 undergraduate students, have been working to excavate a previously uncovered portion of the Gehring site (11MS99), which is located on the west side of campus near Ralph Korte Stadium.

"You have the big tents, and students are out there experiencing what it's actually like to do an archaeological dig," Budzban exclaims.

"It's typical for archaeology students to learn to do field work in that man-



Julie Zimmermann, PhD, left, guides a student through a project during the archaeological field school she's leading.

ner, but it's unusual that we require it for our Bachelor of Science degrees in both cultural anthropology and bioarchaeology," Zimmermann explains. "We have spectacular enrollment as a result, and it's nice to have our living laboratory where we see all time periods of prehistory.

"For example, one of our oldest artifacts we have found has been a 10,000-year-old spear point!"

Zimmermann is also finding items pertaining to the Middle and Late Woodland era, including pottery and arrowheads. On top of that, she and her students are also finding evidence of Mississippian homesteading in

among the Gehring site.

"Everything from 10,000 years ago from the 1800's is at this site," she said.

Around AD 1100-1200, during the "golden age" of Cahokia, the Mississippian people settled east of the Mississippi River from modern St. Louis, including part of SIUE's campus.

"This place grew so quickly and then disappeared so quickly, why? Also, was there a connection between the Cahokia or Mississippian people and the Middle or Late-Woodland people?" Budzban inquires.

"As it turns out, thanks to carbon dating, there were hundreds of years of difference between the

Mississippians and the Woodland people. The theory about Woodland occupation was that they came up through the lower Illinois River Valley. They settled here and in about AD 350, they abandoned the American River Bottom to go back to the lower and adjacent valleys.

"There seemed to be a 100-year hiatus in occupation, perhaps it was a time that the region was prone to flooding, but then the people began to come back. Late Woodland settlements were increasingly common throughout that time, and there were a few villages at Cahokia at that time. Then, about AD 1050, there was a 'big bang' of sorts at Cahokia.

Known as one of the largest Native civilizations north of Mexico, Cahokia encompassed over 2,200 acres across the Mississippi River and showcased "one of the earliest examples of suburban sprawl anyone has possibly ever seen," Zimmermann mentions. A ritualistic center, trading hub and settlement, Cahokia was the center of a chiefdom.

"It seems clear that this was a significant center for thousands of people, at the very least," Budzban says.

During the 2016 field school, Zimmermann and her team uncovered her "all-time favorite discovery," a 1,000-year-old Mississippian home at the Gehring site.

"I like to find the house remains where you can see the footprint of homes and stand where others did thousands of years ago," Zimmermann says. "You can imagine a family, living in that home, curled up with their dog keeping warm at night. It's amazing!"

"We take great care excavating that home's remains, and this summer, our team has been going slowly to do."

Tune in at 9 a.m. this Sunday, June 8, to hear Budzban and Zimmermann's conversation in its entirety.

By Madeline Deardeuff.
SIUE Marketing & Communications