

## Regional

# Professor finds history in our own backyards

Archaeology is about studying the past, but it can also teach us lessons that help us become wiser users of today's resources.

One researcher trying to learn from those lessons is Julie Holt, chair of the department of anthropology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Born in Barnhart, Mo., about a half-hour south of St. Louis, she received her bachelor's degree in anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis, and two master's degrees and a doctorate in anthropology from New York University.

She is well known for her hands-on approach to teaching.

"We believe that you learn best by doing, so our students don't just read about anthropology, they actually do anthropology," Holt said. "For our archaeology students, that means eight 40-hour weeks out in the hot Illinois summertime, excavating on a real archaeology site, and they have a good time and they learn while they are doing it."

Students in this year's field school find added values to these experiences.

One of them, Kate Jamrock, an anthropology major, said she had no idea that field school was going to be such hard work.

"It is a lot of work and very tedious and teaches me a lot of patience," Jamrock said. "So there are values learned here."

Jamrock said she plans to become a forensic pathologist.

Holt specializes in studying animal remains associated with archaeological sites. "The most obvious thing we can learn is about the diet of the people and also the environment, because the animals they were hunting, fishing, and eating are dependent upon the environment around them," said

## Aldemaro Romero College Talk

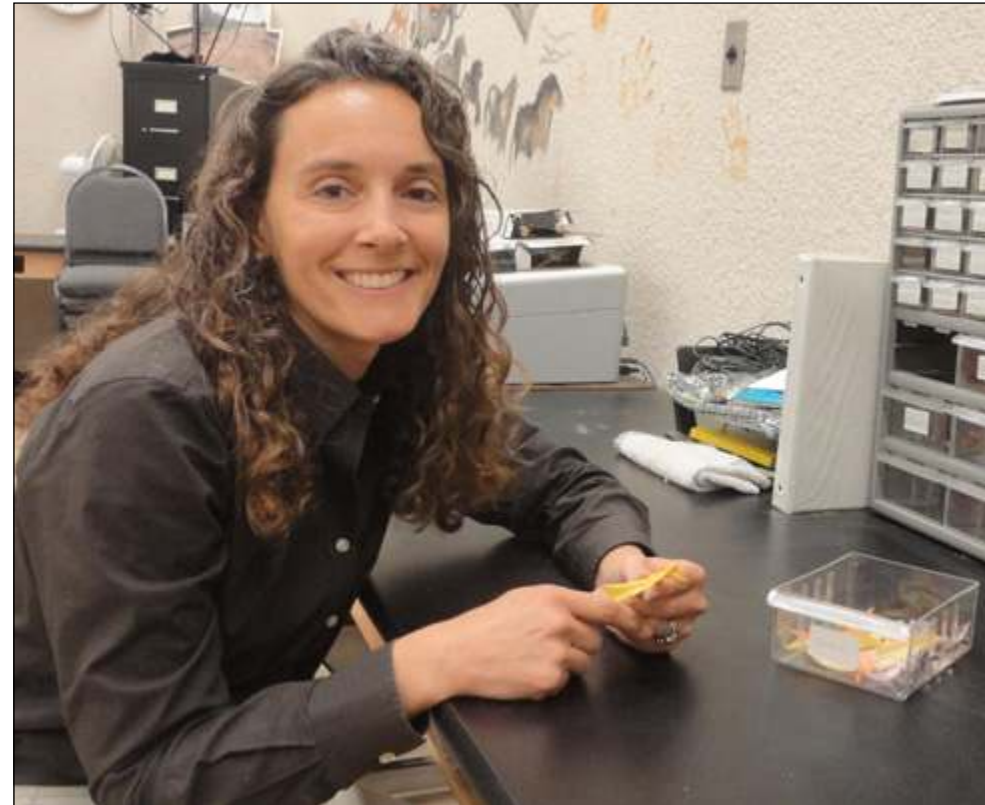
Holt. "So diet and environment are the most important things, but it also tells us about their religious attitudes toward the animals — how they hold animals in certain symbolic importance. For example, why don't they eat opossums? Opossums are available, but they don't eat them because they are taboo. The same can be said of eagles and other birds."

Holt teaches a course on Illinois prehistory and finds river areas especially telling about past civilizations in the region. "What is really exciting about Illinois is that we have the Mississippi River just a couple miles west of us and then up to the north, not very far around Alton, is where the Illinois River comes in," Holt said. "The Illinois River valley and the American Bottom, as the Mississippi River valley is called, are really hotbeds of Illinois pre-history. So we are really lucky here at SIUE to be right, basically, where those two river valleys meet."

Unlike what is depicted in movies, archaeological digs are very methodical and geometrical. "The main reason archaeologists dig in squares is because we map in squares, so it is much easier to map if we are digging in a square," Holt said.

"That is why we have square holes — so we can grid it and map it. We screen the dirt we excavate to get the artifacts out of it and see what is in it because it does still tell us something about the past activities here," she said.

The archaeology field school provides stu-



Shan Lu/SIUE

Julie Holt, chair of anthropology at SIUE, works at her desk.

dents not only with learning and fun, but also important training for careers. And careers in archeology can emerge from unexpected sources. For example, every time a bridge or road is built, the need for archaeologists grows.

"Federal law dictates that if federal fund-

ing is being used for those roads and bridges, archaeology is going to be done because federal law protects the cultural resources," said Holt.

Often when people think of archaeology in the Americas, they think of the Aztecs, Incas and Mayans, but there is a lot of his-

tory and pre-history right here in southern Illinois that the general public doesn't know much about.

"Yeah, absolutely, it is all buried right here in our backyards," said Holt. "And I know when I was 18 and started studying archaeology, I thought, 'Why are people going to Egypt to do archaeology when we have archaeology here?'"

"I grew up in this area and it means a lot to me to be in the area where I do my research, to live here, to know it, to breathe it, to look around and see," she said.

"I am interested in the human relationship with animals and plants and the environment through time, and to actually live here and look around and see it. I wish everybody could see it the way I do."

A big question that surrounds ancient civilizations is why they disappeared. Why did the civilizations in this area vanish? Holt has answers.

"If you look at most areas of the past, a village can be in a spot for a hundred years or a thousand years and ultimately they all disappear," said Holt. "So I think, ultimately, there comes the day when every society outstrips its resources. And they use up the environmental resources around them and it is time to move on and so, whether we are talking about a little village or a big city like Cahokia, I think that is pretty much the story in most cases."

*Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at [College\\_Arts\\_Sciences@siue.edu](mailto:College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu).*