

LOCAL STUDENT DIGGING UP THE PAST IN SPAIN

By Maria Prato-Gaines, Staff Writer

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CRANBURY — When he was young, Kevin Horng was fascinated with the tales of Indiana Jones, the fictional, debonair archaeologist who traipsed about the world uncovering mystical Indian stones, drinking to eternal life from the Holy Grail and beating the Nazis in a race to the Ark of the Covenant.

But what began as a romanticized childhood fascination, eventually led this 21-year-old Rutgers University student on a journey of his own — to central Spain where he spent a month sifting through 5th century B.C. tombs of a Celtic warrior settlement in the Villadolid province.

Mr. Horng, a senior on his way to a bachelor's degree in anthropology, decided to devote July to an archaeological dig through ArcheoSpain, a nonprofit organization that offers an opportunity for people from around the world to participate in Spanish archeological projects.

While on the dig, Mr. Horng said, he got a taste of not only his future career, but an up close and personal look at the remains of these pre-Roman people, who are now bits of bone and ash buried amongst this Iron Age necropolis.

“We did not find any intact bodies, it was cremated remains,” Mr. Horng said of the site. “I’m interested in finding human remains. It gives us a background if we understand how they treated their dead.”

Mr. Horng said the approximately 50- by 30-foot site is an extension of graves that had been unearthed by earlier archaeologists and students.

Accompanied by 13 other college students, mostly from East Coast universities, Mr. Horng said his team picked, shoveled and sifted away at the dirt seven hours a day for nearly two weeks before discovering what treasures lay under the next 4 feet of soil.

Objects that had remained undisturbed for centuries now became a testament not just to these warriors way of life but also their status, he said.

Mr. Horng watched and in some cases helped as the teams of students retrieved bits of pottery, ash, bone, metallic tools, jugs, goblets, metal clasps, tweezers and spear points.

“It all depends on their status,” he said. “But these were things they considered valuable to them that they would bury in wooden boxes and place in a grave.”

His on-the-job training seems invaluable now, Mr. Horng said, as he learned how to map, measure, catalogue and excavate tombs, using his fields technologies and techniques to collect data for future investigators to study.

But this may not be the final chapter on Mr. Horng's world travels as he hopes his next big adventure will take him to the Roman catacombs, he said.

“Ideally, I'd like to see it all,” he said. “I'm hoping to make this my profession. I just don't want to be in a cubicle.”

As for the next generation of Indian Jones fanatics, Mr. Horng offered a piece of advice, saying never miss an opportunity to learn from the past hands-on.

”There’s always a chance you’ll discover something that no one has ever seen,” he said.