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# CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY Monterey Bay

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## Digging through time

Archaeology professor  
shares joy of discovery



# A man with a mission

*Working with Professor Ruben Mendoza, archaeology students uncover a career*



DOAN PORTER

**Students Adrian Lopez (left) and Adam Harris, both now graduates, listen to Dr. Ruben Mendoza as he explains the significance of a pottery fragment unearthed at the Royal Presidio Chapel archaeological site in Monterey.**

**By Joan Weiner**

Generations of California elementary school students have visited the adobe missions that dot the state from San Diego to Sonoma. The 21 missions, begun in 1769 by Father Junipero Serra, had a big impact on Dr. Ruben Mendoza.

“My interest in history started on a fourth-grade field trip from my home in Fresno to Mission San Juan Bautista,” Dr. Mendoza explained. “I fell in love with it, but I wanted to know more.”

That school trip ignited a lifelong passion.

Dr. Mendoza went on to earn an undergraduate degree from CSU Bakersfield and graduate degrees in archaeology at the Uni-

versity of Arizona. He came to CSU Monterey Bay as a founding faculty member in 1995.

A chance meeting with the pastor of Mission San Juan Bautista resulted in an invitation to work there. That was 15 years ago. Since then, he’s worked at many of the California missions, as well as some in the American Southwest and Mexico. Dr. Mendoza is also a charter board member of the California Missions Foundation. He’s become the local go-to expert on the subject and one of only a handful of mission archaeology and conservation specialists in California.

Students in CSUMB’s Division of Social, Behavioral and

Global Studies can pursue a concentration in archaeology. Each year, 15 to 20 students do so, many of them attracted by the prospect of working with Dr. Mendoza. Some continue on to graduate school. Public agencies and contractors hire others. Because much of the California coast is archaeologically sensitive, contractors need trained people to determine whether an area under construction is historically significant.

## HANDS-ON LEARNING

When asked what appeals to students about the subject, Dr. Mendoza has a ready answer. "They see it as sexy, interesting ... the 'Indiana Jones' mystique. My job is to demystify the field," he said. He may "demystify" it, but he does it in

**Archaeology student Brenna Wheelis works to rehabilitate and repaint damaged portions of a model of Mission San Juan Bautista.**



RUBEN MENDOZA

**This mortar and pestle was likely used by the ancestral Es-selen Indian communities in the Soledad area prior to the founding of the mission at Soledad in 1791. These tools typically were used to grind foods such as acorns, seeds and grasses.**

a way that attracts students. Adrian

Lopez, a 2007 graduate of CSUMB, is pursuing a

master's degree in urban and regional planning at San José State University, focusing on historic preservation. That interest is the result of Lopez's work at the Soledad Mission, Mission San Juan Bautista and the Royal Presidio Chapel in Monterey while enrolled in Dr. Mendoza's classes.

"He's involved with students in a very direct way," Lopez said. "He's an educator, a motivator and an inspiration. He inspired me to continue my education."

When they work with him at the missions, students take on specific community service projects. Some of what they do involves answering questions from the public,

conducting tours and installing museum exhibits. They also do fieldwork, learning to identify, catalog and interpret their findings through the science of archaeology, and they learn about public service.

"There's nothing better than putting them in the field for hands-on work," Dr. Mendoza said.

Brenna Wheelis enrolled in his Mission Archaeology class in 2007 to fulfill a Service Learning requirement. "I was hooked. I completed over 160 Service Learning hours that semester," she said, well beyond what she needed.

Since graduating last spring, Wheelis has been part of the excavation and recovery of a Native American burial site in Carmel Valley, and she co-authored a

historic structures

report on the 1932 Maryknoll Rectory at Mission San Juan Bautista



RUBEN MENDOZA

with Dr. Mendoza. Many of his students are cited in his scholarly publications for their contributions to the work.

“He’s highly accessible to his students,” Wheelis said, “and never discourages their curiosity. He takes a genuine interest in what his students think ... and creates a curriculum that develops individual scholarship. He’s had a tremendous influence on my decision to apply to graduate school in order to pursue archaeology as a career.”

### ‘COLUMN OF LIGHT’

Digging into the missions’ past is more than an academic exercise or teaching tool for Dr. Mendoza. He believes that knowing what went on there helps us understand who we are today, and how California became what it is.

Asked to name the most significant work he’s done, he didn’t hesitate.

“Discovering the Serra chapels at the Royal Presidio of Monterey,” he said. He’s referring to the discoveries in the summer of 2008 of the “first” and “second” chapels, each consisting of rectangular adobe buildings located directly in front of the present San Carlos Cathedral (constructed in 1791-95). The area marks the spot where, in 1770, Father Junipero Serra celebrated the earliest Mass in a formally constructed church on the California coast.

“And the solstice studies are turning out to be a big thing. It’s like a Dan Brown novel,” he said, referring to the author of ‘The Da Vinci Code.’

“I’m looking at symbology, iconography and ancient secrets. I’ve got competitors, I’ve got collaborators.”

Dr. Mendoza has documented that 12 missions in California alone are aligned to mark the winter or summer solstice. The solar geometry was first brought to his attention on the morning of Dec. 21, 1997, at Mission San Juan Bautista by the pastor, when the altar was bathed in sunlight, casting what he calls “an intense column of light” directly on the tabernacle. He is convinced it’s the result of a deliberate design by the Spanish missionaries who built the missions.

Dr. Mendoza predicted and documented a similar illumination



**This hand-painted colonial *sopero*, or soup bowl, dates to the late 18th or early 19th centuries. It probably was made in the region of Puebla, Mexico, but may have been produced in early California.**

at Mission San Carlos Borromeo in Carmel on the summer solstice on June 21, 2003.

He has gone on to document scores of other solstice and feast day sites in the American Southwest and Mexico and presented his findings before the Society for American Archaeology in St. Louis this April. The public will have an opportunity to learn more about Dr. Mendoza’s work at Mission San Juan Bautista. PBS television plans a documentary on the archaeology, historiography and conservation efforts there.

Mission study is an emerging field,

he said: “There’s so much that’s unknown. Many records have not yet been scrutinized. We’re in a post-colonial era. What happened in the colonial era?

“No answer you give in this moment will hold in the next moment. For me, that’s exciting,” he said.

“When I see the fourth-graders at the mission ... I do this for them.”

### To get involved

‘Hundreds of students have been put to work, visitors’ needs have been addressed and new knowledge has been generated about the missions. None of that would have happened without funding.’

– Dr. Ruben Mendoza

To help support the archaeology program, contact Vice President for University Advancement Mike Mahan at 831-582-3366 or visit [CSUMB.EDU/give](http://CSUMB.EDU/give).

RUBEN MENDOZA