

# AUSTIN

JANUARY 2006

MONTHLY

# 50

## WAYS TO SAVE TIME IN AUSTIN

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO PUTTING  
MINUTES BACK ON THE CLOCK

### 2006 SOCIAL DATEBOOK

YOUR DAY  
PLANNER FOR  
TOP PARTIES  
& FUNDRAISERS



LARRY GATLIN  
KIRK WATSON  
ED BARNHART

### NOT GUILTY AS CHARGED

FORMER INMATE FINDS  
HIMSELF ON THE OTHER  
SIDE OF THE LAW

### 30 SEASONS OF "AUSTIN CITY LIMITS"

HISTORY-MAKING  
MOMENTS AT  
STUDIO 6A

US \$3.95 CANADA \$4.95



www.austinmonthly.com

# Lost & Found

## UT GRAD DISCOVERS A CITY AND CREATES THE MAYA EXPLORATION CENTER

BY ROB D'AMICO

**E**d Barnhart walks along a vast expanse of grass, halting from time to time to let his little boy, Edwin, dawdle and play. Howler monkeys jump from tree to tree in the thick jungle canopy nearby and chatter to each other before shouting a succession of deafening screams.

While 2-year-old Edwin focuses on a little rubber ball he kicks at from time to time, Barnhart traces the gray stone walls of an ancient Maya ball court that frames them on each side. His mind drifts into contemplation of daily life there at Palenque, a major city in Chiapas, Mexico, that the Maya abandoned sometime after 799 A.D. They walk in a sacred place that played an important role in the Maya's cultural and spiritual life, and Barnhart

notes that ball game players from that time were once engaged in brutal struggles for victory, sometimes facing death if they lost.

"Now, it's a family-oriented place, and he loves it here, especially the monkeys," says Barnhart of Edwin. "In fact, he prefers it to his home in Austin, which sometimes can be a bit boring in comparison."

Barnhart feels lucky to have the opportunity to work as an archaeologist with a sort of dual residency—someone who "commutes" from time to time between the ruins of Chiapas, Mexico, and a home in Austin's Lost Creek subdivision. He serves as

a founder and the executive director of the Maya Exploration Center (MEC), a nonprofit organization with a mission to uncover lost cities in the dense jungles of Mexico and Central America.

The center funds research and exploration of Maya life with the proceeds of tour packages and higher education projects—with university students and tourists learning about Maya archaeology firsthand at the ruin sites. Although archaeologists serving as tour guides

isn't a new idea, the MEC does have a unique vision—creating a center for tourism, research and education near Palenque. The center would include a library, classrooms, an auditorium and a tower for astronomical observations.

Barnhart set his sights on becoming an archaeologist and explorer as a youth growing up in Dallas, after watching the fictional Indiana Jones's exploits on the big screen. What followed were years of study at the University of Texas, where he earned a doctorate in anthropology, along with stints of labor in the jungles of Central America as a graduate student assigned to various tasks—usually mapping projects. His biggest inspiration and mentor was the late Linda Schele, a UT professor considered the grand dame of Maya art studies, who played a key role in cracking the Maya writing system.

Although he focuses on academia and research for much of his profession, Barnhart still carries an exuberance for discovery,

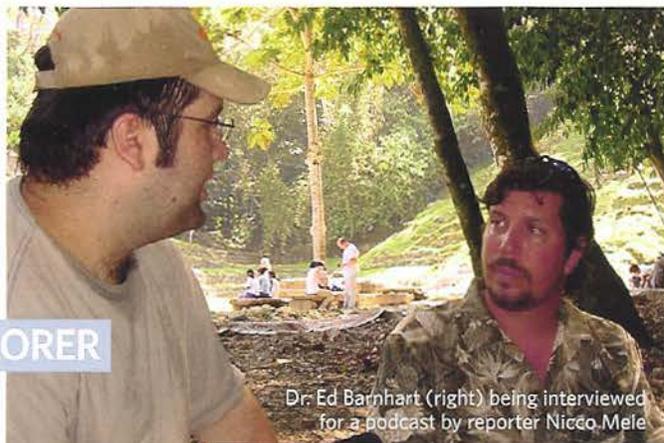
traipsing through jungles and avoiding deadly snakes and stinging insects in search of ruins. "I'm first and foremost a mapper and explorer," he says.

Barnhart counts his 1995 discovery of Ma'ax Na, a city buried under centuries of jungle growth in Belize, as one of the most thrilling moments of his career.

A more recent challenge has been



Palenque



Dr. Ed Barnhart (right) being interviewed for a podcast by reporter Nicco Mele



Palenque

INNU SALON • 2307 HANCOCK • 458-INNU



TALK *continued from page 30*

balancing his work with his family life, which has gotten a bit more complicated. Barnhart and his wife, Angela, who owns a children's clothing store in Westlake, had their second child, Ellie, in May. "It's a lot of back and forth ... two weeks there, two weeks home," he says. "Ellie hasn't been down there [to Chiapas] yet, but she's old enough now, and we plan to take her soon."

Barnhart is comfortable integrating his family and his work, especially since it fits his belief that the key to being a successful archaeologist—and for that matter, tour guide—is becoming part of the community in Chiapas.

"It's not about handing people big tips," he says. "It's about sharing life with the people there. It's about knowing their kids. It's a relationship you have with other folks, not how much money you put in their pockets."

Indeed, being part of communities is what makes the MEC tours so appealing to many. The MEC promotes tour packages for holidays like Thanksgiving and New Year's, not just because it's a convenient time for many people to get away, but also because it provides an opportunity for participants to take part in interesting celebrations among the residents of Chiapas.

For instance, the New Year's package included festivities in El Panchan, with music, fireworks and the traditional burning of the "Año Viejo" Man effigy. And the Thanksgiving tour included dinner at a restaurant with the archaeologists' families, with turkey and trimmings by candlelight under a thatched roof in the forest.

"We're letting people into our lives and research," says Barnhart. "And it's not just a script we read for tours. A lot of the information they hear is over dinner conversation."

Austin also continues to play an increasingly important role in Barnhart's life, not just because it's one of his two homes. Barnhart says UT has emerged as a hub of Maya studies. UT recently opened its Mesoamerica Center (which ultimately will occupy the old site of the Blanton Museum of Art) and continues to host the annual Maya Meetings—a gathering of scholars interested in Maya culture.

What's next for Barnhart? Aside from working on the MEC plans, he hopes to start exploring and mapping again soon.

"People think that everything to be discovered has been discovered," he says. "Not true. There are hundreds of sites out there in the jungle not documented, waiting to be uncovered and explored."



# Asian Living

Original and Restored Furniture and Accessories  
directly from China, Tibet and Mongolia

2135 West Anderson Lane • Austin • Texas 78757 • 512 323 5495  
Inside of North Star Home Centre