David A. Schwartz, M.D.

David A. Schwartz, M.D., currently residing in Atlanta, Georgia, has been a member of the Penn Museum for three years and recently joined the Director’s Council, but his love of the Museum dates back to his childhood. We sat down with him recently to discuss his past and present relationship with the Museum.

You have been visiting the Penn Museum since you were a child. What are some of your earliest and favorite memories of your time spent here?

Through most of my childhood, growing up in Philadelphia, my father was chronically ill and was an in-patient at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. Since children were not allowed to spend time in the hospital wards, several days a week, my mother would visit my father at the hospital and leave me at the Penn Museum. I spent my childhood and much of my teen years exploring the Museum. I carried notebooks with me and I would do tracings of hieroglyphs. One day, a gentleman named Dr. John Alden Mason, who had retired as the Curator of the American Section but was still active in the Museum, saw me doing a tracing of one of the stelae from Mesoamerica. He invited me to his office, and we began a long relationship where Dr. Mason took me under his wing. He spent an awful lot of time helping me appreciate archaeology and anthropology, and he introduced me to other famous anthropologists such as Dr. Carleton Coon, Dr. Loren Eiseley, and Dr. Linton Satterthwaite. I remember Dr. Mason as a kind, gentle man who was very interested in communicating the thrill of anthropology to young people like myself. I was very lucky, because not only was Dr. Mason a world-renowned archaeologist, but he was also a world-renowned linguist, ethnologist, and sociocultural
anthropologist. He was an expert, essentially, in all of the basic fields that we now consider anthropology. My life-long love of archaeology really stems from the attention that Dr. Mason gave to me.

As you know, we’re about to open a wonderful exhibition exploring Dr. Mason’s excavation at Sitio Conte called *Beneath the Surface: Life, Death, and Gold in Ancient Panama*. We know you will be coming up to see it. What do you know about this excavation?

I am very excited to come up for the exhibition. Sitio Conte was a major excavation and a very early one in the history of Mesoamerican archaeology. It involved great personal hardship on behalf of the excavators. The first excavations by Harvard were in the 1930s; the Penn Museum, under Dr. Mason, took over in 1940. Tropical diseases were rampant—yellow fever, malaria, and cholera were common threats. This placed the excavators and the people who helped them at great personal risk. Yet they were dedicated enough to put up with those hardships and dangers. The annals of archaeology are filled with archaeologists who became ill and died as a result of work in dangerous field conditions.

An interest in archaeology and the Penn Museum runs in your family: your daughter Jessica recently spent her 4th annual week participating in the Museum’s *Anthropologists in the Making* summer camp and has developed a special relationship with our conservation staff. Could you tell us more about her experiences?

Jessica is eleven and has dreamed of becoming an archaeologist for over four years now. I subscribe to a number of archaeological magazines, and I always catch her reading them at home. This year, [Museum Conservator] Molly Gleeson took a special interest in her, which was very, very kind of Molly, and worked with her a little *In the Artifact Lab*. Jessica was thrilled, and now Jessica, in addition to wanting to be an archaeologist, wants to be an archaeological conservator. Of course, she may change her mind. Now we are asking, “What’s the next step for Jessica for next summer?” She is a little young to go on an active dig, but I might be able to find something where we can go as a group—maybe in the Sinai, maybe in the States, maybe somewhere in the Americas—to work on an archaeological dig for a few weeks.

Would it be fair to say that both you and Jessica were wandering through the Penn Museum’s galleries and found a calling?

I think that would be extremely fair to say. I owe a tremendous amount of what has motivated me in my life to this Museum, not just to the people who were so kind to me here for so many years, but to the actual bricks and mortar of the building. Even though I am not a practicing archaeologist—I was trained in anthropology in college and then went into public health—my archaeology and anthropology training have never left me. I use it every day in what I do in understanding disease in Third World countries. I am working on a textbook now that incorporates sociocultural anthropology with epidemiology and medicine in terms of internal health. I don’t know what my career would be if it was not for this Museum and the time I spent growing up here.