

AWARD

## Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology: The Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS) Program

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Accepted: 14 February 2017

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The staff of the Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS) Program in December 2016: *Left to right:* Russell Skowronek, Juan Gonzalez, Kenneth Summy, Roseann Bacha-Garza, Nick Taylor, Rolando Avila, and Christopher Miller. Not pictured is the CHAPS team member Bobbie Lovett, anthropology lecturer and field archaeologist, who passed away early in 2016. (Photo by Gail Fagan; courtesy of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.)

The 2017 Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology was presented to the Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS)

Program on 6 January 2017 at the 50th Annual Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology in Fort Worth, Texas. The CHAPS Program, housed at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), is a truly interdisciplinary public/private partnership with an outstanding record of community engagement in public historical archaeology. It is different from some of the previous programs that have been recognized in that it is relatively young, established only in 2009. But this

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youthfulness has not stopped it from achieving great success. The program's ambitious goals are to create archaeologically and historically literate citizens who are aware of their local cultural and natural history and its importance to the future of the Rio Grande Valley. Located on the border with Mexico, 85% of the populace speaks Spanish as its first language. Most are the descendants of settlers who arrived in the region in 1750. It is said that they did not cross the border, but the border crossed them following the Mexican-American War. The program helps local school districts develop interdisciplinary K–17 curricula to prepare students for future enrollment in “STEAM” subjects (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) and teaches students the importance of stewardship, covering site preservation, ethics, and laws that affect nonrenewable local resources.

Dr. Russell Skowronek, professor of history and anthropology, and associate dean for the School of Interdisciplinary Studies and Community Engagement in the College of Liberal Arts, is the founding director of the CHAPS Program. Although Russ serves as the lead, he teams with a dedicated group of affiliated faculty in anthropology (Bobbie Lovett), biology (Kenneth Summy), communications (Nick Taylor), education (Rolando Avila), geology (Juan L. Gonzalez), and history (Christopher Miller) and staff at UTRGV. Project manager and historian Roseann Bacha-Garza deserves much credit for keeping the program running smoothly. The program also works with the Border Studies Archive (Margaret Dorsey) and Public Policy (John Milford) at UTRGV. The CHAPS Program has also built long-term partnerships with a host of institutions, including those from other universities, local to federal government agencies, civic and tourism entities, museums, and a wide array of assisting scholars. These collaborations have resulted in powerful and creative content for the CHAPS Program's many products, but, perhaps equally important, have created an unusually wide network of persons who see themselves as stakeholders in the program's mission.

The merits of this program have been acknowledged by others prior to this recognition by the SHA, including an award of merit and the Chairman's Award for Community Education from the Texas Historical Commission, both in 2016, and the Texas Archeological Society Distinguished Service Award in 2015. The program's accomplishments are especially outstanding considering that most of its funding is from grants. Its largest grant

was nearly \$100,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a project titled “Inserting the Hispanic in a Hispanic Serving Institution through Curriculum Innovation.” This led to a major bilingual report (Alfaro et al. 2014). A host of smaller grants from foundations (e.g., Summerlee, Summerfield G. Roberts, and the Texas Historical Foundation), cities (e.g., Brownsville, Rio Grande City, Roma), and a variety of other sources, including donations from interested citizens. It is well known that this kind of fundraising takes a great deal of effort to research, recruit, and then administer.

My first contact with the CHAPS Program was through its Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail, the first Civil War trail in the state of Texas. Located in the south Texas border region known as the Rio Grande Valley, this trail traverses a five-county region along 200 mi. of the Rio Grande between Brownsville and Laredo, documenting an important facet of American history and highlighting the fact that the last battle of the Civil War was fought along the Mexican border at Palmito Ranch near Brownsville, Texas. During the Civil War, the Rio Grande served as a significant point of contention, forming one of the international borders claimed by the Confederacy. The trail was launched with a website (<<http://www.utrgv.edu/civilwar-trail>>), bilingual podcasts, a trail map/guide/brochure, and quick response (QR) codes, and, recently, 18 new interpretive signs have been unveiled. An edited volume and a trail guide will be published by Texas A&M Press, and, yes, even a movie is being developed. A nine-minute-long pilot film entitled *The Cotton Times* appears on the webpage for the trail.

But I quickly learned that the CHAPS Program does so much more (<<http://www.utrgv.edu/chaps>>). One of the CHAPS Program's early endeavors focused on the development of a culturally relevant curriculum designed specifically for Rio Grande Valley students, working with teachers to design a place-based approach that would make lessons memorable and enable students to recall information as it relates to their shared culture and community heritage. Another of the CHAPS Program's innovative programs has been “Native Peoples of South Texas: A Traveling Trunk for K–12.” The CHAPS Program developed an interdisciplinary course in which students gain an understanding of the archaeology, anthropology, history, geology, and biology of this dynamic borderlands region. The course is best seen as a rapid-assessment “methods”

course that records the “story” of farming families and their land. It is taught through a combination of lectures, required readings, group and individual discussion, music, films, and individual and group writing assignments, and requires conducting oral histories and archaeological, biological, and geological field research. As its inspiration it drew on the work conducted by Marley Brown on Mott Farm. Topics include indigenous cultures, race and ethnicity, cartography, institutions, political economy, women, gender relations, family and land history, and the environment. To date six farm families, whose ancestors came to the region in the 1920s from Belgium, Canada, England, Germany, Mexico, Sweden, Ukraine, and other parts of the United States, have been studied. The findings are published as reports that are placed in regional libraries.

The CHAPS Program has developed additional educational tools that are available to public school teachers. These resources include artifact-identification posters, lesson plans, and collected oral histories, including a focus on locally enduring Tejano families. The CHAPS Program also participates in a number of multicultural events on the UTRGV campus and throughout the community, including the International Archeology Fair held in conjunction with the National Park Service, and “Juneteenth” observances with the local African American community. The CHAPS Program has also

focused attention on the native peoples of Texas and their great time depth, with studies and publications tuned to topics such as lithic and water resources in relation to prehistoric occupations.

The diversity of undertakings, and especially the diversity of participants and recipients, partly explains the success of the CHAPS Program. But these successes would not have happened without the creativity, diligence, and persistence of its leadership and staff, and their commitment to bring this history (some of it partially forgotten) into focus and into a broad range of arenas. For this the CHAPS Program is especially deserving of the Daniel G. Roberts Award for Excellence in Public Historical Archaeology. The SHA congratulates the CHAPS Program for its outstanding work and looks forward to its future endeavors.

## Reference

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