Dr Carenza Lewis

A passion for communicating the thrill of the ‘dig’ and for uncovering evidence of lives long gone is what inspires archaeologist Dr Carenza Lewis. Her latest endeavour is to raise educational aspirations among schoolchildren through involvement in excavation – a venture that is unearthing new information on rural medieval settlements.

The chance discovery of an ichthyosaur vertebra on the East Anglian farm she grew up on set Dr Lewis on the path to becoming an archaeologist at the young age of seven. Her enthusiasm for unearthing archaeological evidence of rural medieval settlements has resulted in a career that combines research within the Department of Archaeology, with media and broadcasting – most notably as part of Channel 4’s award-winning Time Team – and outreach to secondary schools.

Conveying the excitement of ‘getting your hands dirty’ has led naturally to her new enterprise – the Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA, www.arch.cam.ac.uk/aca). HEFA is a groundbreaking initiative within the Department of Archaeology that is funded by Aminhgerig, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HFFCE) and the European Social Fund (ESF). From digging square metre test-pits in their back gardens to introducing them to University life, HEFA is all about encouraging young people to get a flavour of academia through their own hunt for history beneath their feet.

And the icing on the cake for Dr Lewis and the schoolchildren is that their hard work and achievements are recognised in research publications – each of the 10–30 test-pits that have been dug in each of 20 villages across six counties is contributing to a ‘scatter-effect’ analysis of medieval occupation that is overturning previous assumptions. For Dr Lewis, outreach and research have become symbiotically linked.

What would others be surprised to learn about you?

Most of the people I meet through work are usually quite surprised to discover that I juggled my career with three children, who span quite an age range: 5, 11 and 15! Also that I’ve had a huge suite of medical problems – I was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was 33, had a double mastectomy and then three years later I was told it was a mistake. It was a very difficult time. So on the outside I probably look very capable, with a career that looks like it’s been a fantastically smooth progression, but it hasn’t all been plain sailing.

Who or what inspires you?

What I find inspiring is that sudden moment when you discover that something really has potential. When you have an idea and you realise: ‘I don’t think anyone has really thought like this before.’ It’s like when you see through a chink in the door and there’s a whole world out there, when things suddenly come together and you think: ‘Yes, this will work.’ Increasingly, working as I do with young people, my inspiration also comes from the enjoyment and excitement that they get out of the time they spend with us.

Have you ever had a Eureka moment?

In a way, my Eureka moment came with the idea for the Academy, combining aspiration-raising work with young people with original research on villages, both of which need to be done on a large scale. I realised that we could give children the vital enthusiasm, confidence AND skills they need to succeed in fulfilling their academic potential by getting them involved in independent new archaeological research, where their contribution is as valuable to us as it is to them. By digging and analysing their own archeological test-pit, they’re creating one part of a huge jigsaw – the more pieces we have, the clearer and more accurate is the picture. We’ve got all these young people who need to do something really challenging, but who will also really value developing their abilities, interest and confidence. Uncovering, recording and interpreting new archaeological discoveries can do this.

What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever been given?

I always say to the young people we work with that it’s not what you’ve got, it’s what you do with it that makes the difference to what you can achieve, and I think that’s so true – just like with university admissions, it’s not what someone knows that’s crucial, but what they’re capable of learning. Another thing I learned very quickly from doing television is not to be too worried about being wrong. So long as your reasoning is right, otherwise it can be a huge obstacle to ever attempting anything. Ultimately you just have to get on with it and take a little bit of a risk.

If you could wake up tomorrow with a new skill, what would it be?

The ability to create an extra number of hours in the day and to have the energy to use them to do all the things I want to!

What motivates you to go to work each day?

The excitement of novelty and new discoveries; the fact that there’s always something new to do. I just really love what I do – every day is different, the people and challenges are different and you don’t know what’s going to come next. It’s also great seeing the way the work we do affects the kids. That’s really worth getting out of bed for.

What will the future look like in 2050?

As an archaeologist I have a particular time-­‐-­‐depth view of this sort of thing. Society today is very unusual when you look at it in terms of past history, particularly the unparalleled rate at which we consume and our awareness of each other’s lives – locally, nationally and worldwide – through the media. I think it’s creating unprecedented stresses and potential for conflict, and I just hope the generation that is growing up today will be able to find solutions to these problems.

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