When excavations of an ancient Maya acropolis in Belize revealed doorjambs to an unexplored room in 2013, UTSA Associate Professor of Anthropology Kathryn Brown suspected something special lay in the chamber beyond them.
Warfare has emerged as a major area of interest for Brown and Yaeger and relates to a number of recent projects, from images in the sage room, to 20 projectile spear points found last summer at an elite residential group at Xunantunich, to evidence of fortifications at sites, including two burned palisades Yaeger identified at Buenavista del Cayo, another Maya archaeological site in the area. The kind of warfare the Maya engaged in apparently was more complex at an earlier time in history than previously thought, Yaeger and Brown explained.

“What we are seeing a century or two earlier is very deliberate fortification of sites suggesting that intensity of warfare was something that Maya—at least in our part of the Maya world—were living with, coping with, and surviving with for generations before the collapse,” Yaeger said.

“This was one of those moments when you are seeing a face come out and a turkey head and a jaguar head,” recalled McCurdy, who earned her Ph.D. last summer and lectures at Texas Christian University and UT Arlington. “We just looked at this yesterday and it was just white plaster.”

She was right...
Brown and Yaeger’s research projects are funded through a number of mechanisms including a three-year $307,500 Alphawood Foundation grant; the Termini Endowment for Maya Archaeology; three endowments from the University, the Belize Maya Program Endowment, Brown’s Lutcher Brown Endowed Professorship, and the President’s Endowed Professorship, which Yaeger was awarded in 2016. In 2013, another Alphawood grant supported a Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) survey of the landscape in the Mopan River Valley. A team of scholars collaborated on the grant for the survey, which continues to yield data.

“We are able to pinpoint large sites and even small sites we didn’t know existed before because it takes decades to survey on foot through the jungle with your machete,” Brown said of the LiDAR survey. “So this really moved our research forward.”

“It helped us understand that the site of Xunantunich was actually two centers – a Pre-Classic center and a Classic center, and that they were separate and had different histories,” Brown said.

The LiDAR survey also revealed fortification features previously undetected. While LiDAR is a sophisticated tool, Brown and Yaeger also appreciate a more basic convenience—two vehicles for their research teams’ use in Belize, purchased by the University. The vehicles are the first UT System-owned vehicles to be kept in a foreign country.

Graduate students have projects of their own that fit into the overall scope of the research program, Brown said. One such student is Whitney Lytle, a doctoral student who said she chose UTSA in order to work with Brown. Lytle has been working at sites in Belize since 2008, but this past summer, she uncovered an elite burial at one of the archaeological sites at Xunantunich. She described her excitement at finding a large quantity of chipped stone objects, as well as carved shells and jade ornaments.

“I love the idea of being able to tell these people’s stories and how they were incorporated into the Maya socio-political systems and how the activities that happened on these structures reflected what was happening in the overall Maya world, and how these might help us interpret patterns that we see at other sites,” Lytle said.

Brown and Yaeger direct the Belize Summer Field School, a four-week course that teaches students basic archaeological field methods, including mapping, surveying, excavation and artifact analysis.

“Archaeology is one those disciplines that you can read hundreds of books about but not really understand until you actually do field work,” Yaeger said. “Our field school provides UTSA students an opportunity to really understand what it’s like to do archeology. They are not digging in a sandbox, they are digging real sites and collecting real data that helps us answer these questions.”

The opportunity to gain life experiences in a new environment—in a foreign country, in the jungle, without air conditioning and hot water—is just as important as the intellectual and academic opportunity, said McCurdy, who attended the field school in 2008 without ever having excavated.

“It also is a personal growth thing and certainly from my own experience, some of the most poignant things I remember are getting stuck in the rain and having a Frisbee and playing rain Frisbee,” she said.

Miranda Martinez, a junior anthropology major at UTSA, attended the field school last summer.

“It was the most amazing experience I’ve had, honestly,” she said.

Martinez said she wouldn’t trade her time in Belize. “You pick up a ceramic piece and you look at it and you know that hundreds of years ago this was in someone else’s hand and it hasn’t been touched since then. That moment really hits you: I’m actually connected to these people who were an amazing civilization and did amazing things.”