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Bill Schlotter

Nonprofit Group Formed To Help UCSB Archaeologist Raise Funds For El Pilar Maya Research Project

Photos of El Pilar and Anabel Ford available on request.

Three Santa Barbara businessmen have formed a nonprofit corporation to assist UC Santa Barbara archaeologist Anabel Ford with her work at the El Pilar Maya research site in Belize and Guatemala.

Called "Exploring Solutions Past: Maya Forest Alliance" or ESP, the group plans to help Ford by raising funds to finance projects by her Belizean and Guatemalan alliance partners at El Pilar.

"We wanted to see what we could do to help further her efforts working with the Maya people at El Pilar," said Santa Barbara attorney Randall Fox, who serves as the group's secretary.

"The idea is that there is a synergy from gathering people together who have a common interest."

Other members of the ESP board are financial officer Lewis Ciener, a local CPA; conceptual designer Fred Usher; and University of Texas graduate student and longtime Ford associate Clark Wernecke.

Ford will serve as ESP president.

Ford's project at El Pilar is unique in both its focus and its involvement of the local communities.

"I think what interests us is her different approach," said Ciener.

"She's going about the whole thing in a really different way."

While other Maya research projects investigate ceremonial aspects of Maya culture and speculate about why the civilization ended, Ford is looking at how ordinary Mayas lived and why they thrived for so long.

And she is asking whether ancient Maya ways of agriculture might have modern applications.

Also unlike other archaeologists, Ford has made a special effort to involve residents of the El Pilar area in the project as vested partners.

She has forged alliances between Guatemalan and Belizean neighbors and their governments and involved all in the preservation, direction and economic benefits of the site.

Ford said providing these indigenous groups with funds to pursue their goals for the site is the chief objective of ESP.

"With just a small amount of investment, they really could do a lot of things," Ford said.

"The reality is that the human resources are terrific, but the funding for the activities is very, very meager."

Ford will introduce ESP at her annual public potluck reception at 5 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 29 in UCSB's MultiCultural Center, which is cosponsoring the event. Guests are asked to bring a favorite dish and to make a \$15 donation.

Ford will also show videos and slides of El Pilar while bringing the audience up-to-date on the past year's achievements at the site.

Among achievements are a new trail guide for site visitors, increased formal involvement of Guatemalan and Belizean college students in the project, and

representation of project leaders in a coalition that seeks to conserve Maya rainforest resources into the future.

For further information, visit the El Pilar website at <http://www.marc.ucsb.edu>.

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