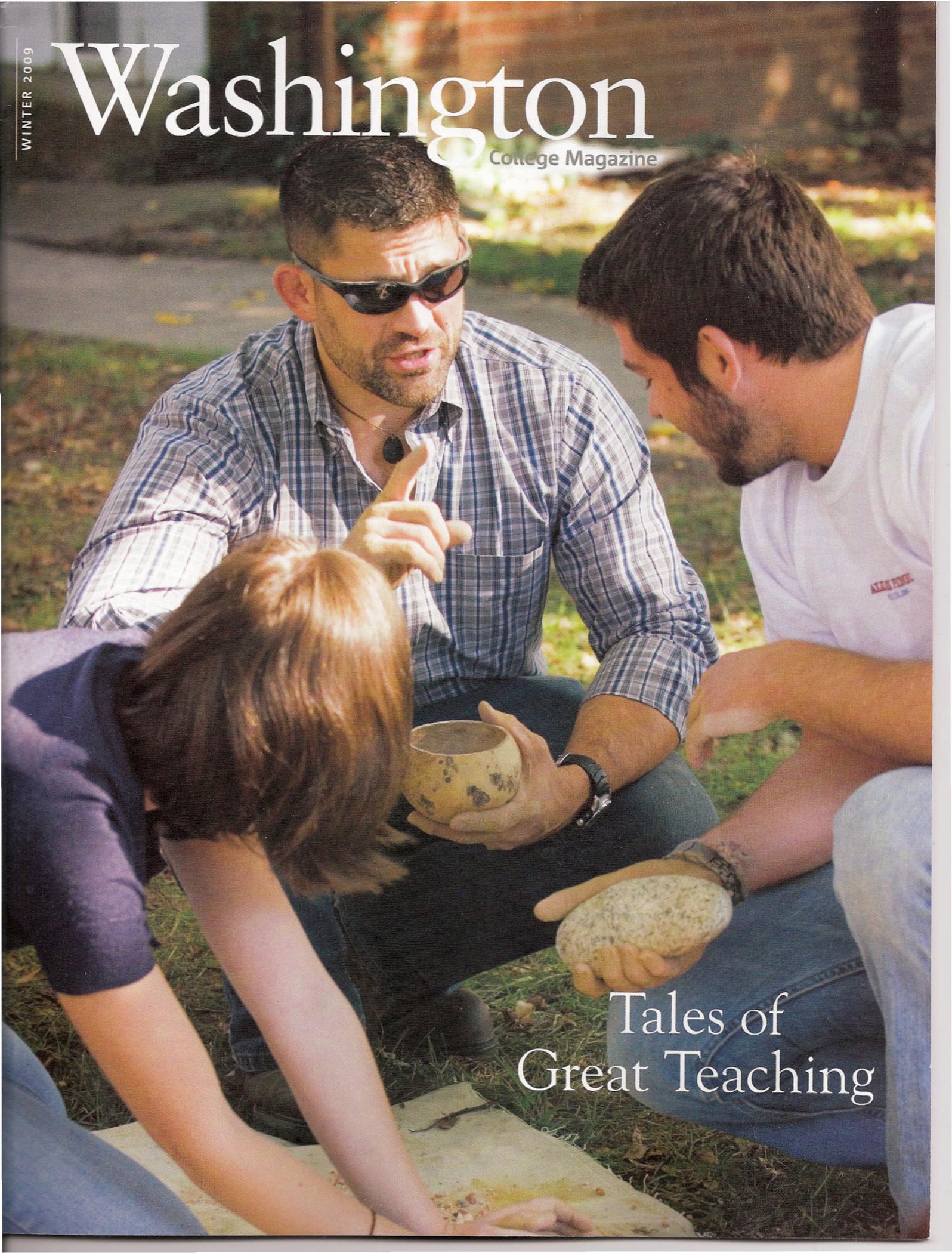


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Tales of
Great Teaching

A Cave Man Can Do It

EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGIST BILL SCHINDLER AND HIS STUDENTS TEST OUR BEST THEORIES ABOUT HOW PREHISTORIC PEOPLE LIVED, AND LEARN SKILLS WHICH PROVE THAT “PRIMITIVE” IS NOT JUST ANOTHER WORD FOR “SIMPLE.” BY JOAN SMITH

“**H** E’S A MADMAN,” says one of his students, describing Professor Bill Schindler, and she means it in the best possible way. Like all great teachers, Schindler, who was hired in the fall of 2008 as an assistant professor of anthropology, is happily obsessed with what he does.

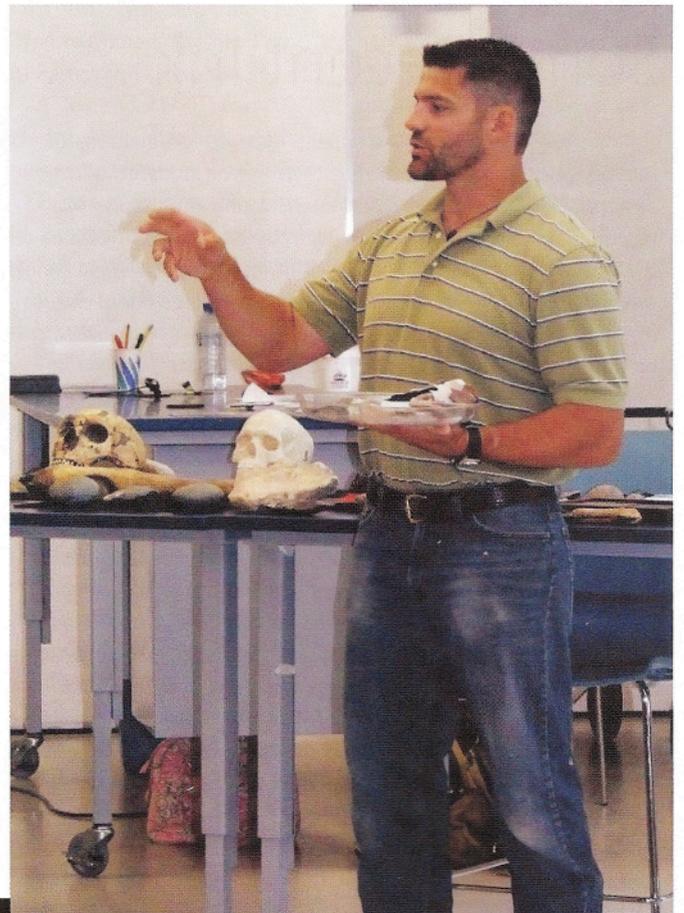
“Today we’re going to talk about my favorite subject,” he says, with his customary spitfire delivery, to the freshmen and sophomores taking his Introduction to Environmental Archaeology class.

“Dead people?” ventures a wag.

“Dead people *eating food*,” says Schindler, and launches into a disquisition on food gathering and processing and storage in the days before we started *writing down* our history. Which sounds a little dry unless you’re sitting in on one of his classes—hearing him enthuse about the culinary virtues of certain berries, nuts, leaves and even bugs (*full of protein!*); or tasting wild persimmons, acorns, native black walnuts and even, perhaps, marrow from the bone of a cow you’ve extracted with a stone tool you made yourself in a previous class.

Dark-haired, dark-eyed, with the compact power of a Division I wrestler (which he was), there’s an urgency to everything he says,

THIS PAGE: Professor Bill Schindler delivers a lecture/demonstration on prehistoric stone tool technology. “When I learn something new, I get excited; I can’t wait to share it,” he says. **OPPOSITE:** Schindler tests a prehistoric stone tool he replicated to process American shad from the Delaware River as part of his dissertation research.







because there's not enough time to tell you all the great stuff he's learned. Before she came to Washington College, sophomore Michelle Firmin wanted to be a veterinarian. Then she took a class with Schindler and got hooked. "I was the kid who would go out there and collect rocks and bring them home and wash them," says Firmin, who is now the College's anthropology tutor. "I didn't really know what to do with it until I came here. I've taken four of Professor Schindler's classes and I'm really excited about doing the archaeology field school with him next summer. He's my favorite."

For a class project this fall, Firmin and her father found suitable pieces of wood she spent hours shaping into *atlatls* or spear-throwers, using a hand axe she'd made under Schindler's tutelage. Just about every day at lunchtime, he sits outside the Lifetime Fitness Center flintknapping—making stone tools by strategically striking or chipping off pieces of one rock with another rock, which is how most prehistoric stone tools were made. Students who aren't content with the more rudimen-

tary skills they're taught in class are welcome to join him.

Traditional archaeologists look at a tool or pot and speculate on its purpose, but experimental archaeologists like Schindler go into the field and test those hypotheses. "I'm like the Nike ad," he says. "Just do it!" For part of his doctoral

"I STARTED FORAGING FOR WILD PLANTS AND EATING THEM WHEN I WAS ABOUT 10."

dissertation at Temple University, he and his wife, Christina, took their then nine-month-old daughter, Brianna, and lived on an island in the Delaware River for two weeks with about a dozen students and volunteers, including Schindler's parents.

They were allowed to bring clothes and equipment to record the experiment, but otherwise they were expected to live as if they were the Indians who inhabited the area 2,000 years ago. "I did bring things for the baby," confesses Christina, now a special education teacher specialist for the Queen Anne's

County School District. But even Brianna lived with everyone else in the shelter they built from saplings, basswood lashings and the bark of tulip poplar trees. They started their own fires, without benefit of matches, and made stone tools and clay pots for cooking and gathered all their food, including fish they

harvested with a net Schindler made from native plants.

"Oh my *Lord*, did we eat healthy," says Schindler. "We felt wonderful, but we all lost a lot of weight—I think the average was 10 to 13 pounds in two weeks—and nobody was out of shape in the first place. Part of it, I'm sure, is that it was such a drastic change in our diet. But the other thing is that we never stopped moving. And when it was time for bed, we didn't huddle around a campfire telling stories. We went to *sleep*."

Schindler says it was "a *great* experience," but the point of the

exercise was not to play caveman. Schindler and his cohorts were testing theories about the way people once lived.

Michael Stewart, chair of the graduate program in anthropology at Temple University and Schindler's dissertation advisor, says Schindler's work called into question a lot of assumptions archaeologists had about how people lived and fished in the Delaware Valley. One of the preeminent prehistoric archaeologists in the Northeast, Stewart says that he and other experts assumed people needed to be living in large, well-organized groups to exploit the fish resource, because it was thought to be seasonal, so you'd need lots of workers to catch and process them.

"When people start forming large organized groups, their relationships change and you see more formalized leadership. So it's a big deal," he says. "Bill took a closer look at fish behavior, fish biology, fish ecology, than I or any of my colleagues had done. And he demonstrated both that there is a substantial fish population in the valley all year around and that the technology needed to process the fish doesn't require large groups. He's taken the discussion to the next level."

Schindler has been an experimental archaeologist-in-training since he was a child. He grew up in New Jersey, hunting and fishing with his father, a land surveyor. "I started foraging for wild plants and eating them when I was about 10. I still remember the first thing I cooked and ate—my mother wasn't too thrilled about it—but I made a lamb's quarter casserole, and I thought it was very good. I didn't know it at the time, but lamb's quarter is actually one of the very first plants we think Indians in this area domesticated. We've found rock hills where tons of these seeds

were collected and stored.”

He was recruited out of high school to wrestle at Ohio State University. “I was a pretty good wrestler,” he says. “But a degenerative eye disease I was unaware I had presented while I was out there and I went legally blind, so needless to say I had some academic difficulties.”

As an athlete at Ohio State, he received free treatment from the University’s ophthalmology students, but glasses they prescribed didn’t help. “I knew Columbus like the back of my hand. I couldn’t see the street signs, so I had to count the roads to know where to turn,” he says. “I had no idea what was going on, and my grades were dropping, so I left school, worked on a pig farm for a year and eventually returned home to work for my dad. At that point, the best anybody could make me see with glasses was 20/800.”

Then, one day, his mother was pointing something out to

him on a computer. “I had to get two inches away from the screen to see it, and she started bawling. That’s when she realized how bad my eyesight was. And she made it her mission to find out what was wrong with me.”

They finally found a doctor who made the diagnosis—keratoconus, a deterioration of the normally rounded cornea that

JUST ABOUT EVERY DAY AT LUNCHTIME, HE SITS OUTSIDE FLINTKNAPPING . . . WHICH IS HOW MOST PREHISTORIC STONE TOOLS WERE MADE.

causes it to change to a more conical shape. “He didn’t know how to help me, but he sent me to a specialist who said, ‘It’s going to be uncomfortable, but I can get you to see.’ And he fit me with these super-special, super-expensive contacts, and they did

help for a while.”

After that, things seemed to fall into place.

“The wrestling coach from The College of New Jersey called and said, ‘Listen, you have a year of eligibility left and I’d like you to wrestle for us.’ I told him I didn’t think I’d get in because of my grades, but he said, ‘I’ll get you in,’ and he did. So three

though he loved teaching, he quickly realized he wasn’t doing quite what he wanted to do. “So we took this huge leap and decided to go to graduate school,” he says. “And for Christina to support me in this was just incredible, especially given my academic track record. I mean, ‘You’re going to study stone tool making....?’ But she was amazing.”

“I just said, if we’re going to do it, let’s get it done,” she says. So they lived with her parents for a year and she got her master’s in educational technology from The College of New Jersey and he got into Temple, despite his grades.

“We were somewhat concerned about his credentials,” Michael Stewart acknowledges, dryly. “But it reminded me of my own spotty academic record, before I decided to do what I loved. And he was just so determined. So we took a chance and he certainly made us proud. I’ve never known anyone so dogged; I don’t think he sleeps.”

It had taken Schindler nine years to earn his undergraduate degree, but he completed his Ph.D. in just four-and-a-half years, which included time for two corneal transplants.

Christina finished her master’s in a year, went back to work, and they started having children—Brianna is now 6, Billy is 4 and Alyssa is 2. “Christina,” says Schindler, “is the Energizer Bunny.”

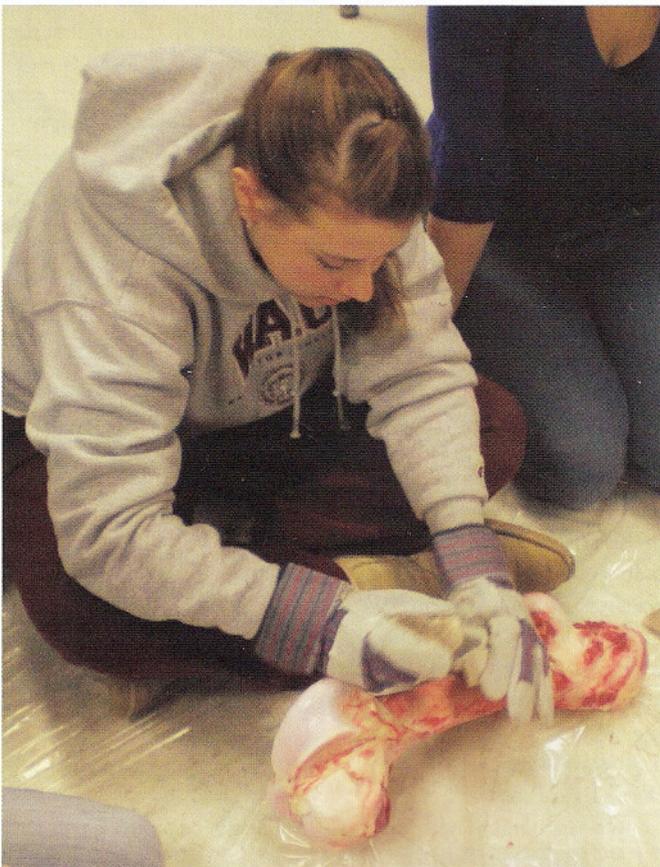
Monmouth University hired him to teach GIS (Global Information Systems or computer

big things happened at about the same time. I could see, I was back in school and I met the woman who is now my wife.”

It was the first day of his second semester, and Schindler noticed her as soon as he walked into history class. “He says he said ‘hi’ to me and I ignored him, but I don’t remember that,” says Christina. “I just remember he sat in the front row and the first question he answered in class was about an alcoholic beverage. And it was prehistoric. And it was mead.”

They worked together at a Princeton restaurant and “we were best friends, first. Then one day we had this epiphany conversation and realized we really loved one another.”

They both taught for a year after they graduated—fifth grade for Christina and high-school history for Bill. And



THIS PAGE: In Schindler’s Human Evolution class last spring, Gina DeBartolomeo ’12 extracts bone marrow from a fresh cow femur donated by the Sudlersville Frozen Meat Locker. The class was testing the relative efficiency of two different components of a 2.5-million-year-old stone toolkit they replicated themselves. **OPPOSITE:** Schindler with his children, Billy and Brianna, last summer at the Denton Hill Traditional Archery Rendezvous in Coudersport, PA. He carved Billy’s bow from the wood of an Osage orange tree and made the children’s quivers from skunk and river otter skins. His parents made the arrows.

Students grind oyster shells in Schindler's Primitive Technology and Experimental Archaeology class to temper clay for cooking pots they'll build by hand. They burnt the oyster shells to make them more friable and to chemically change their structure during a previous class in which they learned to build fire using prehistoric methods. The students will fire the pots in an outdoor fire at the end of the semester.



mapping), but “when the WC job was posted, Christina said, ‘Oh my God, this looks as if it was written for you.’”

The process took months, and they drove down to Chestertown to visit several times, and fell in love with the place. “I wanted this job so badly. We started joking every time the phone rang, ‘John’s on the phone, John’s on the phone.’” Meaning Professor John Seidel, chair of the College’s anthropology and sociology departments, who finally called to schedule an interview. Two months later, on Christina’s birthday, Dean Chris Ames called to offer him the position. “We were living in a tiny Cape Cod in Hamilton, NJ, about 800 square feet with three kids, so not much privacy. And I took the phone upstairs and Christina followed me with all three kids and she lets out this *scream*. I mean, she was *screaming!* And I’m thinking, how am I going to negotiate now?” Schindler smiles fondly. “We were thrilled.”

Schindler is the only prehis-

toric archaeologist teaching at a college in Maryland. “It’s great for us,” says Seidel, “because my focus is primarily historic archaeology, so he can do the Native American stuff and I can cover the colonial and marine stuff, and all of a sudden we’re a much broader department.”

Schindler’s work is all-consuming. On weekends, he is foraging for materials to use in class, making stone tool replicas for museums or teaching other people to make them—last summer he did a demonstration at New York’s Museum of Natural History. During the summer, he is out every day with students who attend the College’s Archaeology Field School, and he is planning to take students to study at Lejre: Land of Legends in Denmark, which he says is “the premier center for experimental archaeology.”

At home, everybody in the family participates. One of Schindler’s fondest research projects is prehistoric food preservation, and they all eat “Daddy

yogurt,” instead of the store-bought kind. In the basement, there are vats of wine and beer in various stages of fermentation, and, in the freezer, pizza conceals a cache of pig’s brains and buffalo bones he uses in class. Barbecuing in the backyard is an exercise in primitive technology, and even four-year-old Billy knows how to make fire the old-fashioned way. “No matches allowed in the Schindler household,” Christina says.

Each child’s umbilical cord was cut with a different obsidian knife Schindler fashioned for the occasion, and the knives, along with photographs of the happy events, hang framed on his office wall. John Seidel points out that this isn’t as eccentric as it might seem: “We have a colleague, Payson Sheets, who actually went into business with some eye surgeons, making obsidian scalpels.” Obsidian is 300 to 500 times sharper than surgical steel and creates wounds that tend to heal faster, with less scarring.

In fact, Christina’s first C-section was supposed to be performed with one of her husband’s blades, but a substitute obstetrician was called in at the last minute. “He looked at me, like, ‘What, are you *crazy?*’” says Schindler. “I’m going to take care of your *wife.*”

Schindler spends every free moment flintknapping or foraging or weaving. In the hours he spent with Christina waiting for Brianna to be born, he finished making the net they’d use to catch fish on the island for his dissertation. “It was an 18-foot diameter cast net and it took me 110 hours to tie,” says Schindler. “My wife goes into pre-term labor, and we’re sitting in the hospital, and you know the IV tree? Well, the IV is hanging off one side and the net is hanging off the other and I’m sitting there tying it.”

“My wife,” he adds, “is a saint.”

Joan Smith is a former writer for The San Francisco Examiner.