In Situ analyses of skeletal remains from Isla San Lucas, Costa Rica Penal Colony Cemetery

Isla San Lucas is a former penal colony on the west coast of Costa Rica (Archaeological Site # P-856-PC)\(^1\). It was an infamous island prison referred to as the "Island of Unspeakable Horrors," "the Island of Silence" and "Devil’s Island."\(^2\) It may have been one of the most dreaded prisons in the country’s penal system; a place where inmates were tortured and starved. However, it was also home to the guards who kept the prisoners on the island, administrators, and even their families. The remains of each group are reported to lie beneath the sands of this beautiful site, now under development as a cultural and biological heritage site by El Museo Nacional de Costa Rica.

The University of Miami is playing a part in reconstructing the history of the humans who lived and died on Isla San Lucas. I am applying for this scholarship so that I can take my academic training in forensic anthropology from the books and lab at UM to "Devil’s Island." A pilot project in 2008 uncovered the remains of one individual – a male who had been shot in the head at least four times – and located the likely sites of other burials. With support from this scholarship, I hope to continue the work as part of the 2009 field season’s team.

My coursework at UM has given me the skill set to interpret the information recorded in bone and teeth. However, the remains are extremely fragile and cannot withstand removal to our lab. Cultural sensitivity also mandates that the remains do not leave Costa Rica. Therefore it is imperative that the research I propose be conducted only in situ, which will take me far beyond the books.
I propose to answer three basic questions about each of the skeletons recovered: sex, age, and stature. I will test the hypothesis that most of the remains will be male, since they constitute the majority of inmates and guards. I will also assess the general health of these individuals as recorded in their bones and teeth. I will conduct a systematic assessment to document paleopathological indications of malnutrition, disease, and trauma. If the historic accounts are accurate, I should find skeletal evidence to support them. The teeth should exhibit defects associated with malnutrition, such as carries, excessive wear, and antemortem loss. Severe malnutrition will also leave clues (like small holes in bone) as the body works to repair itself without needed nutrients. If individuals were tortured by having their teeth pulled or bones broken, I will be able to identify that trauma. It may be that life on the island was as difficult as the oral traditions suggest. However, these questions will remain unanswered until such time as these remains are examined with 21st century forensic science.

This scholarship will allow me to put my training into action in the field as we work to shed light on a little known aspect of Costa Rica’s history.