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TOP STORY

## Mesa veteran found hope and a new life through archeology

BY RICK BARRS Tribune Managing Editor 12 hrs ago



Army veteran Ricky Nelson of Mesa digs deep during one of his archeological forays in the south-central Andes Mountains in Peru.

Special to the Tribune

Army veteran Ricky Nelson is heading to the south-central Andes in Peru on May 21 to study the ancient Chanka people of the region.

Nelson, 26, of Mesa, is scheduled to be there for 11 weeks doing what he loves, participating in a dig as a future full-fledged archeologist.

A junior in the Barrett Honors College at Arizona State University, he credits his discovery of the field of archeology, first as a student at Mesa Community College, with not just enriching his life – but saving it.

“I was a hopeless drug addict, and I might have stayed that way if I hadn’t walked into that archeology class (at MCC),” the Mesa resident said.

When Nelson left the Army after three years, following a six-month tour of duty in Afghanistan and a brain injury suffered in a freak training exercise accident, he couldn’t work because of his injury and because he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

He wound up on the streets of Colorado Springs, Colorado, one of the places he was stationed in the Army and not that far south of Elizabeth, where his parents had moved after living in Apache Junction during his childhood.

Nelson said he started using drugs in the service and had stepped up their use to feel better, but it didn’t work. His drugs of choice were methamphetamines and opioids. His alienated parents wouldn’t help him, he said, telling him he had to battle his demons on his own.

The result was that he spent three years as a homeless veteran, getting a fix whenever he could scrape together enough money.

Contributing to his depression during that period, he said, was the death of his infant son, who died of fetal drug syndrome after being born a crack baby to his addicted mother.

This happened while Nelson was still in the Army, but he believes it was a big factor in what he went through later as a homeless vet.

He was so devastated by the boy’s death that he went AWOL for a few months, turning up in Holland, where he worked for a man in his rose gardens.

He wears rose tattoos on his right arm to commemorate that time of grief, with his son’s name wrapped around one of them.

When he was medically discharged from the Army, Nelson said he was denied benefits for a long time.

“I loved the Army,” he said, citing a long, patriotic tradition of serving in the military in his family – so much so that he had considered making it a career.

But the former Specialist 4 said, “The Army abandoned me at first. I couldn’t work (because of the medical problems), and I had nowhere to go.”

His salvation began when the Army reconsidered his case, declared him 80 percent disabled and awarded him benefits, including an initial back payment of \$30,000. His parents found him and told him the news.

The money and “sheer willpower” got him off the streets and out of Colorado, he said.

“I had to get out of there. I had to leave all that darkness behind,” he said. “So, I headed back to Arizona”

Nelson said his will to leave the streets was bolstered by the death of a close friend in his homeless community: “When I saw my buddy shoot himself, I realized that some people don’t make it out – and I became determined not to become one of those people. “

Nelson at first moved into a cheap hotel in Peoria and eventually into a \$500-a-month apartment in Mesa.

“To tell the truth, I was still using then,” he said. But he entered MCC, took that anthropology class and kicked the habit. He almost immediately knew that he never would go back to drugs because he suddenly had a purpose in life, something to live for.

“I was home,” he said.

Once he got off drugs, he said, his weight went from 105 to 162 pounds.

“I went to (Narcotics Anonymous) for a time, but I had to stop,” he said. “I just couldn’t be around the kind of people who went there, who were so down on themselves.”

This will be a return trip for him.

Nelson was at the same Sondor dig last summer, excavating Chanka remains as a fellow at the Institute for Field Research, a nonprofit study-abroad program for anthropology students that has participated in excavations on every continent except Antarctica.

Sondor is one of three formal digs across the world where Nelson has worked.

After he graduates ASU with a bachelor of science degree in anthropology, Nelson plans to pursue bioarchaeology, with a specialty in strontium isotopes and ancient DNA.

What this means, he said, is that he wants to find out how ancient civilizations were affected by what they ate and how, for example, their diets may have stunted growth.

His goal is to someday teach archeology to college students in the field and in the classroom.

He wants to make his parents proud, he said, by becoming “not only the first person to get a college degree in my family but the first to get a doctorate.”

In addition to his selection to ASU’s Barrett, Nelson said, he has received a Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship for study abroad.

IFR board member and anthropologist Danielle Kurin, who mentored Nelson in Peru and will again on his return trip, recalled that he helped lead excavations of an Inca fortress from the 15th century, that he was involved in some of the most physically demanding tasks during his time at the dig and that he was an upbeat mentor to younger students involved.

“Always diligent and disciplined, Ricky meticulously helped exhume dozens of skeletonized individuals and thousands of artifacts from beneath ancient house floors and from within the maws of precipitous slope-side burial caves,” she said. “Ricky has faced many challenges in life, but he has always persevered.”

Kurin described Nelson’s infectiously friendly personality as enabling him to “gracefully (embed) himself within the local indigenous Quechua community.”

Many indigenous cultures mistrust foreigners on their turf, but the situation is different for archeologists, Nelson said:

“As an archaeologist, people look at you differently. You’re not trying to change the culture, you’re trying to protect it.”

Nelson said it boggles his mind that about three years ago, he “was on the streets with no hope in the world.

“Now I have all the hope in the world,” he said “I have filled that hole in my heart with archeology, with learning how to be a scientist.”

Ran Boytner, IFR’s founding executive director, lauded Nelson’s dedication to archeology and predicted that he will have a long, productive career in his chosen profession.

But Boytner took exception to the ASU undergrad’s belief that archeology saved him from the horrors of drug-addicted homelessness:

“Ricky is an intelligent, quite extraordinary young man who pulled himself up by his bootstraps with hard work and perseverance,” Boytner said.

“He did it all himself – he just needed an excuse.”

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