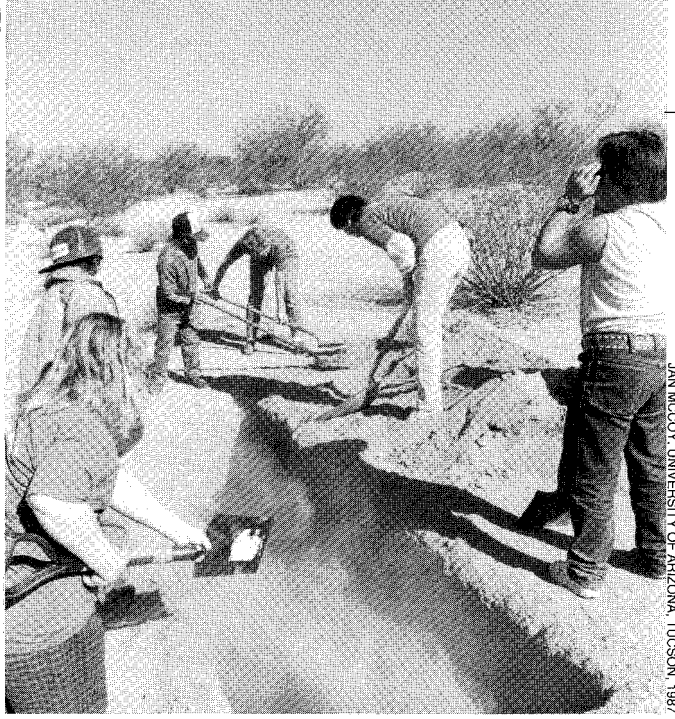

JAN MCCOY, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA, TUCSON, 1987

Project Origins students work at an archaeological site near Tuscon, Arizona.

4 *Unearthing Abilities*

Although you may not be able to duplicate this idea, it may inspire you to make other "impossible" dreams come true.

By Terrie Nolinske

Twenty miles north of Tucson lies one of the few remaining sites of the Hohokam Indians, a highly complex culture that thrived from about 1100 to sometime after 1400. An archaeology team from the University of Arizona was digging at the site to find out more about this culture. What made this team different from others was that 20 of its members were classified as having mental retardation/developmental disabilities.

The team was part of Project Origins, created by James S. Gittings, a doctoral candidate in special education and rehabilitation at the University of Arizona. A special educator and parent of a daughter with Down syndrome, Gittings was looking for nontraditional activities for people with disabilities.

"Archaeology was interesting and fairly rigorous. It contained complex tasks that could be broken down into small parts to be learned separately or as a chain of activities," Gittings said.

A grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education from September 1986 through May 1989 allowed the university's College of Education and the Arizona State Museum to explore archaeology as a means of social integration, behavioral modification and job skills training.

The program basically involved two tasks — excavating and preparing artifacts. Excavation tasks required physical labor to set up tapes and grids marking off areas in which to work, to dig, to move dirt from one area to another in wheelbarrows, to retrieve artifacts, to carry things and to use screens to sift dirt.

"People with autism are really great at using the computer, labeling, writing and doing lots of neat and tidy lab things."

Also, fine excavation procedures required using dental tools, picks and brushes. Once retrieved, artifact preparation began in the lab and included washing, labeling, counting, sorting, bagging and reconstruction.

"Participation varies with each student. Those still in school might be with us two days a week, while those who have graduated and are involved in vocational programs might work all five," Gittings said.

"People with autism are really great at using the computer, labeling, writing and doing lots of neat and tidy lab things but are averse to getting dirty in the field," said Michael Faught, archaeological skills coordinator of Project Origins.

One of the best labelers around was Michael Daley, 22, who has autism.

"Despite poor eye-hand coordination and motor control, Michael took his turn at shoveling, sifting through the screen and retrieving artifacts," said his mother, Mary Ann Daley.

"One young man now works in the museum as an archaeological technician," Gittings said. "He can do 75 percent of what other people can do in that job, and he does it as well as anyone."

To count artifacts, students used a board about 2 feet square with 100 dots on it. Students placed artifacts over each numbered dot. Sudents noted the dot where the artifacts ended to determine the total number of artifacts.

Participants even had the opportunity to travel to northern Arizona with a group of university students and archaeologists to help stabilize a ruin in the Verde Valley, said Paul R. Fish, curator at the Arizona State Museum. The group worked together to replace the adobe in the 15-foot high Pueblo masonry rock walls, which were beginning to crumble. The preserved ruin will be incorporated into a local park.

"These students had been dependent on others for cues or for being told what to do," Gittings said. "By working in a situation where they're expected to listen and to participate like anyone else, they become more independent and responsible for their decisions. Social skills have also improved tremendously."

PAT HELGESON

Michael Daley, a Project Origins student, labels potsherds with University of Arizona graduate student Tina Lee.

Mary Ann Daley said that Michael is much more aware of things going on around him and more attuned to how he should react in a given situation. "Michael looked forward to going to work and enjoyed using the computer. One day he wiped out most of the notes that he'd entered. While others around him became excited, he picked up his notebook to feed the data back in as if to say, 'What's the big deal? We're still here, still breathing. The sun's shining, and I'm going to put this stuff back in, go outside and eat lunch.'"

For more information on the program, contact Project Origins, Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721.

A free-lance writer living in Chicago, Terrie Nolinske also is a licensed occupational therapist, certified orthotist and an assistant professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy graduate program at Rush University in Chicago. She also presents workshops around the country.

Manny Gutierrez, a Project Origins student, and Michael Faught, archaeology lab supervisor, reconstruct a pot found at the Marana Platform Mound site in Arizona.

JAN MCCOY, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA, TUCSON, 1987