

Richard Freund—not one to back away from a challenge

BY JUDIE JACOBSON

A renowned archeologist and director of the University of Hartford's Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies, Richard Freund has led countless excavations over the years in the volatile Middle East. While there, he has unearthed antiquities in the caves of Qumran, site of the Dead Sea Scrolls; uncovered a treasure trove of ancient "secrets" at the nearby Cave of Letters; and discovered awe-inspiring artifacts in the town of Yavne, the spiritual center of rabbinic Judaism.

Because Freund is accustomed to venturing into perilous places, it was no surprise that, upon being diagnosed with late-stage acute myelogenous leukemia in early 2004, he approached it as simply one more dangerous road to be traveled.

"I was in Israel with students excavating and I could barely move," recalls Freund. "By the time I got to the hospital at the end of January 2004, they were surprised I was still walking around."

And so began Freund's race against time. Doctors told him his only hope of survival was a bone marrow transplant, but no family members were a good match. Freund began to get his affairs in order.

Then, on March 24, 2004, an e-mail from the Dana Farber Cancer Center popped up on the professor's computer. A perfect match had been found through the national donor registry, Gift of Life. On July 4, 2004, Richard Freund received the transplant that would literally save his life.

In May 2007, Freund was guest speaker at the Seventh Annual Partners for Life Gala of the Gift of Life Bone Marrow Foundation in New York. There, in an emotional encounter witnessed by 600 dinner guests, he met the 30-year-old man, Schlomo (Steve) Hackel, who donated the lifesaving bone marrow and talked about what he has been able to accomplish in the three years since. The list includes 50 lectures delivered around the world; expeditions with students to Israel, Egypt, Spain, and Machu Picchu; teaching; and the writing of three books and 10 articles.

Of all Freund has done since his illness, however, it was the start of excavations this past April at what he believes is Mount

Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, that was an especially gratifying, although once again challenging, undertaking. The site is on the Israel/Egypt border, and because the surrounding area is used by the Israeli military for tank training exercises, the only week that archeologists are allowed in is during Passover, when most of the soldiers are on holiday leave.

Accompanied by a team of archeologists and geoscientists from the United States and Italy, as well as donors Joel Grae and Suzanne Bernard Grae, Freund used ground-penetrating radar and electrical resistivity tomography to map the subsurface of the 200-square-kilometer site. They uncovered thousands of artifacts that support the notion—previously disputed by many historians—that Mount Sinai does exist and that the Biblical exodus of the Jews from Egypt did take place.

Exploring the desolate desert site wasn't easy. Under constant armed guard, the crew endured a sandstorm and made do without running water and electricity. For Freund, whose immune system is permanently compromised, the unhygienic

conditions made the trip all the more risky.

"[In April] I stood on top of a mountain in the southern Negev that I think is the true Mount Sinai," he told the dinner guests. "I had to think to myself, as I have every day, 'What would have happened if a donor had not been found?'"

Now, Freund has the luxury of looking ahead. This past summer he returned to Israel. In 2008 he plans to continue excavating in Egypt. Best of all, in 2009 he will celebrate with family and friends when the youngest of his three sons marks his bar mitzvah at an archeological site in Israel. Among those on hand to join in the celebration will be someone very important to Freund and his family—the young man who made it all possible. ■



To learn more about the Gift of Life Bone Marrow Registry, visit www.giftoflife.org.



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Top: Richard Freund holds a copy of the Dead Sea Scrolls while standing in front of a display at the Sherman Museum of Jewish Civilization in Mortensen Library. The storage jars were recovered during excavations at the Gate of Bethsaida, Israel.

Right: Freund and donors Joel and Suzanne Grae excavate an altar discovered near a shrine marked by 12 standing stones (in foreground). Both lie at the foot of the mountain Freund believes may be the “real Mount Sinai.”



(facing page) Schlomo (Steve) Hackel (left) and Freund at the Seventh Annual Partners for Life Gala in New York.