On a warm June day in summer 2015, Maha Darawsha stepped down into a 6-foot-deep excavation hole at an archaeological site in Nazareth, Israel. Kneeling in the pit, she began to remove a final layer of dirt, revealing an incredible sight: an ancient, predominately blue and white tile mosaic floor that is an important part of world history.

The mosaic floor appears to be from one of the earliest churches in the history of Christianity and was uncovered at the Church of the Annunciation (Greek Orthodox). The team of archaeologists was led by Professor Richard Freund and Adjunct Professor Darawsha of the University of Hartford and Professor Shalom Yanklowitz of the University of Haifa in Israel. Collaborating with the University of Hartford on the project are Professor and Dean Philip Reeder from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pa., and Professor Harry Jol from the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. The site is licensed by the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The Church of the Annunciation is recognized by Christians worldwide as a shrine of great significance dating back to the origins of what became Christianity. According to ancient belief, the Archangel Gabriel “announced” the forthcoming birth of Jesus to Mary at a spring or well that she was visiting. It became the place where Greek Orthodox officials located their church in the Byzantine period. The church was destroyed multiple times and rebuilt there in the pre-modern period.

The mosaic floor is thought to have been created in the fourth century, when Queen Helena, mother of Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, came to the Holy Land to establish Christian pilgrim sites for the new religion of Rome.
“The mosaic floor is beautifully decorated with multiple stylized crosses and iconography,” Freund says. The floor was discovered as a result of ground-penetrating radar and electrical resistivity studies sponsored by the University of Hartford.

Darawsha is credited with finding the magnificent mosaic floor, and she spoke about the find at a press conference organized at the site by the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Nazareth in mid-June. She was born just outside of Nazareth and teaches Arabic language and culture and archaeology at UHart. She is also a faculty member at the University of Connecticut in Arabic language and culture.

Freund, who is the director of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies and Greenberg Professor of Jewish History at UHart, notes that “the bishop and the entire Greek Orthodox community are very excited by the discovery of the ancient mosaic. The church is already preparing the site for pilgrims and visitors. They are putting in glass viewing stations [through which one] will be able to see the mosaic beneath.”

Two UHart seniors, Judaic studies majors Arieh Fried ’16 and Zosh Simonson ’16, had the incredible experience of being brought to Nazareth by Freund to help out at the site. They had been working at the Bethsaida archaeological site in northern Israel for about a month before.

Zosh admits that he didn’t initially understand how significant this find was. “But when we were told that we couldn’t take any pictures at the site, we realized something was up.”

They began assisting the archaeologists and others at the site by removing buckets of dirt. As they listened to the people around them, Arieh says they began to get a sense of how important the mosaic floor was.

Despite the summer heat, the young men say they enjoyed their experiences at both the Nazareth and Bethsaida archaeological sites. Zosh says he would like to go back and work at the Nazareth site next summer, although he thinks his ultimate career path will involve working in the Jewish community. Arieh, who says he enjoys the research aspects of archaeology, has begun applying to graduate schools to study museum administration.

While both students have been to Israel numerous times, this past summer was the first time they had gone to work at an archaeological site for Freund. In addition to their time at Bethsaida and Nazareth, the students and Freund visited other well-established archaeological sites in Israel.

FACING PAGE: University of Hartford Adjunct Professor Maha Darawsha in the pit with the ancient tile mosaic in Nazareth just before she removed the last layer of dirt.

ABOVE: Judaic studies student Zosh Simonson ’16 digs in an archaeological pit in Nazareth near where the mosaic was found.

RIGHT: (L–r) Ehab Bajali, a leader in the Greek Orthodox community; Richard Freund of the University of Hartford; Greek Orthodox Bishop of Nazareth Kyriakos; Professor Shalom Yanklowitz of the University of Haifa; Maha Darawsha of the University of Hartford; and Father Bishara at the press conference in Nazareth about the discovery.

For the past 14 years, Richard Freund has pursued his primary area of interest, Biblical archaeology. The director of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies, Greenberg Professor of Jewish History at the University of Hartford, and director of the University’s Nazareth Excavation, he has worked in the Nazareth area on the Mary’s Well and Bathhouse Project, the Church of the Annunciation, and Mary’s Cave, on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Arab Orthodox Council, and the Israeli Antiquities Authority. The work has tracked archaeological remains from the Roman period to the Byzantine and Crusader eras to the modern period.

The Nazareth Excavations Project is just one of many conducted by Freund. He has directed six archaeological projects in Israel—including at Bethsaida, Qumran, the Cave of Letters, Yavne, and Har Karkom (Mount Sinai)—and three projects in Europe: the mapping of a former Nazi extermination camp at Sobibor, Poland; the Great Synagogue in Vilna, Lithuania; and the potential site of the Lost City of Atlantis off the coast of Spain.

Freund is the author of six books on archaeology, most recently Digging through History: Archaeology and Religion from Atlantis to the Holocaust (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), as well as two books on Jewish ethics, and has appeared in more than a dozen television documentaries.

Fluent in 10 languages, Freund earned his bachelor’s degree in Judaic studies at Queens College in Flushing, N.Y. He received his master’s degree in Talmud and Rabbinics and his PhD in philosophies of Judaism from The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.
Nicole Awad is a very grateful young woman. “I feel so blessed to have people like Professor Richard Freund in my life. Being at the University of Hartford has been life-changing for me,” says the junior from New Canaan, Conn.

In her work with Freund—the University’s Greenberg Professor of Jewish History and a world-renowned archaeologist—Nicole has worked on projects ranging from attempts to uncover a 17th-century stockade fort at Griswold Point in Connecticut to being part of an excavation team in Rhodes, Greece. This past summer, she worked with a team that discovered and mapped the subsurface of the 17th–18th–century Great Synagogue of Vilna in Lithuania, a project that garnered worldwide attention for the team and for Nicole, whose picture using the ground-penetrating radar equipment at the site was included with most of the news stories.

Although she laughs about the attention she has received, she acknowledges how special her experiences have been. “The opportunities are amazing,” she says, noting that she is now presenting papers at conferences and is able to talk to other archaeologists on a peer-to-peer basis. “Now I’m having conversations with people that I looked up to before,” she says.

Born in Lebanon, Nicole says she has always wanted to be an archaeologist and that she was drawn to the University of Hartford because of the possibility of being able to work on Freund’s project. “When I started, I asked a million questions; by the Lithuania project, I was mapping a whole site.”

She calls Freund and the other faculty in the University’s history department “inspiring role models,” not just because of the work they are doing, “but you can also ask them as many questions as you want. And the fact that they involve us in their work, even though we are just students, is incredible.”

Freund has great praise for his students: “I have seen some of the finest work by any undergraduates anywhere in the projects by students from the University of Hartford. It is not just geoscience and archaeology. It is history, anthropology, art history, chemistry, and allied sciences. If you attend our Undergraduate Colloquium in the spring, you can listen to a project presentation that ranks up there with presentations by graduate students at professional conferences. Niki’s presentations have been especially awe-inspiring. She will be listed as a coauthor on the next set of our publications.”

Nicole also includes Maha Darawsha, Freund’s former graduate student and now an adjunct professor of archaeology and Arabic language and culture at UHart, in that group that inspires her. Nicole says her father wasn’t initially thrilled with her decision to pursue a career in archaeology because he was worried that there are so few women in the field. However, after seeing Nicole working with Darawsha, “my dad is now behind me 100 percent,” she says.

Nicole plans to attend graduate school to continue her studies in archaeology. She will be with Freund this winter and spring when he returns to Rhodes, and she plans to accompany him to Israel and Lithuania in summer 2016. In addition to the Great Synagogue project, she also wants to work on the Church of the Annunciation project in Nazareth.

The Jewish community of Lithuania was one of the most significant centers of Jewish life in the world before World War II, with a population of several hundred thousand Jews that spread from the Baltic Sea to Russia in the east. The Great Synagogue of Vilna and its massive campus were the hub of this dynamic Jewish life.

Freund and the team—Professor Philip Reeder, dean of the Bayer School of Science at Duquesne University; Professor Harry Jol of the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire; Joan Silber, a member of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad; and students Nicole and Alexis Pingel from the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire—have mapped the subsurface of the now-buried Great Synagogue, including an entrance and steps into the synagogue, the central shrine for the Torah scrolls, the bemah (the area where services are led), and the Jewish bathhouse and ritual bath system attached to the complex, all located 4 to 8 feet below street level.

Says Freund, “We are pioneering a new way of doing archaeology, and Nicole will be on the cutting edge of archaeological studies wherever she goes.”