

# Maryland professor roughs it for National Geographic and primitive experience



"The Great Human Race," a weekly television series that began airing on the National Geographic Channel on Feb. 1 will conclude its 10th and final episode Monday. The series features Bill Schindler, an associate professor of anthropology at [Washington College](#) in Chestertown. (National Geographic)



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**A**fter tracking down a wild boar in the Eurasian country of Georgia, Bill Schindler raised a primitive spear-thrower called an atlatl and fired at his next meal.

As the boar squealed, Schindler and Cat Bigney scrambled to hold down the wounded animal.

"I've got the trachea right there," Schindler told her as he cut the boar's throat with a primitive knife.

"Hold it open so it just bleeds out quick," Bigney replied.

After a few moments, the boar's demise was sealed.

"He's gone," Bigney said.

The hunt was broadcast on the "The Great Human Race," a weekly television series that began airing on the National Geographic Channel on Feb. 1 and will conclude its 10th and final episode Monday. The series features Schindler, an associate professor of anthropology at [Washington College](#) in Chestertown, and Bigney, a survival training instructor, as they travel the world and attempt to survive in the wild savanna just as primitive people did many, many millennia ago, using only the tools available to early humans, according to National Geographic.

The program has brought new recognition to Washington College on the Eastern Shore, which is better known for its literature studies.

For Schindler, 43, whom National Geographic bills as an "experimental archaeologist," the series has been one of the most immersive experiences he's had yet in the ancient technologies he has studied his entire career.

"Some of the biggest moments were when these technologies showed their true value and their true power," he said. "It's one thing to make a stone knife in class and stick it on a shelf; it's another to rely on that one stone edge for everything you need for eight days."

Schindler's star turn was no Hollywood story. The producers at the National Geographic Channel found him through LinkedIn, the professional networking site. After a few interviews, he was sent to the North Carolina mountains to see how he got along with Bigney, who teaches survival skills for the Boulder Outdoor Survival School in Utah.

Shortly after, Schindler and Bigney were in the Tanzanian savanna trying to live using only the technologies available to *Homo habilis*, an early human ancestor. Unfortunately for them, those technologies were limited to crude stone tools and sticks. *Homo habilis* didn't know how to make fire, so Schindler and Bigney slept in a baobab tree to stay safe from predators.

In the second episode, Schindler and Bigney lived as *Homo erectus* in Uganda, spending hours trying to make fire by rubbing wooden sticks together. One night, they tried to sleep on the ground with only a fence of thorny branches and a small fire to protect them. More than a dozen hyenas and a lion circled them.

The two of them yelled and waved fiery sticks to scare away the animals, which worked. Schindler said it was one of the scariest moments on the show, despite some protection from the camera crew. Chad Sandhas, a senior director at National Geographic, said local crews hired by the show carry guns when

wild animals are present.

"There was a safety net to some degree; they weren't irresponsible," Schindler said of the show's producers. "But I don't know what would have happened if something went down."

In the other episodes, the two lived using *Homo sapiens'* technologies, but only what was available in the location in the period when humans arrived. Those adventures occurred in Oman, Turkey, Mongolia, Siberia, Alaska and Oregon.

Schindler said he and Bigney became sick several times from drinking tainted water, and he got a blood infection from a wound on his arm. On the Pacific Ocean, he got so cold it took two hours for his core body temperature to get back into the safe zone. One of the hardest things wasn't finding food, he said, but ensuring that they had enough water to survive.

Adjusting to a diet of insects, leaves and hunted animals, including their organs and brains, wasn't as difficult for Schindler. He said he follows a mostly paleo diet at home, hunting and gathering much of his food.

After the third episode, Schindler began making all of his clothing by hand, tanning leather by soaking it in a solution of animal brains and water, then smoking it over a fire. He then sewed it with animal tendons on breaks from the show at his home on the Eastern Shore.

"I spent close to 500 hours making clothes," he said. "I learned so much about clothing I could probably spend the rest of my career doing nothing but researching clothing."

Brian Lovett, executive producer of "The Great Human Race," said the team felt they had a rare find in Schindler — someone who was an expert in primitive technologies but also has experience in using them.

"He's tough as nails and never quits an objective he has set his sights on," Lovett said. "Whether it's freezing cold or 120 degrees in the desert, he just gets to work. His enthusiasm being in nature, and doing these skills and teaching, was evident to all of us there. As for primitive skills, it's what he teaches for a living as a professor, and when he told me his classroom isn't indoors — it's all hands-on in the dirt — I felt we had a unique expert. At one point I went to his home and took a look at his arsenal of primitive tools that he made himself. It was clear he was the real deal."

The show has brought some welcome attention to Washington College, said Emily Chamlee-Wright, the provost and dean. Chamlee-Wright said she recently spoke to students who will be attending the university in the fall and are excited about the show.

"People can imagine Professor Schindler as a teacher, and that association is fantastic if they can

associate that level of teaching with what goes on here at Washington College," she said. "A lot of the teaching and learning at Washington College really goes beyond the traditional classroom."

Rachel Brown, 21, took Schindler's experimental archaeology class two years ago and says she helped butcher a deer and craft a boat large enough to seat three people — all in Schindler's backyard.

Since the show began airing on Monday nights at 10 p.m., students from across the university have been gathering to watch it at a movie theater on campus. Schindler's family attends the screenings and his daughter bakes cookies. Students have gotten into the act, bringing in homemade jerky and liver stew and wearing shirts that say "The Great Human Race."

"Traditionally, you do your research and you write a paper," said Brown, an anthropology and Hispanic studies major from Wilmington, Del. "Subverting that and saying, 'No, let's take an active role in what we're learning' ... that perspective has informed the rest of my coursework."

The show helped reshape how Schindler, who took the summer and a semester off to film the show, teaches his students. He is now working on developing a class similar to the show, in which students would be immersed in ancient survival technologies.

"One of the coolest things for me is that I had the same opportunity to learn the same way I teach, completely immersed," he said. "It's awesome to bring that back to the classroom and incorporate that into my teaching."

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