

The Jewish Indiana Jones

The History Channel's Josh Bernstein travels the world 'Digging for the Truth'

By Joel D. Amos

As host of The History Channel's hit "Digging for the Truth," Josh Bernstein transverses the globe answering some of mankind's biggest questions. While he does wear a leather jack and signature cap, much like the character made famous by Harrison Ford, Bernstein is on his own trail. Using the medium of television to highlight such mysteries as the Ark of the Covenant the creation of Stonehenge, Bernstein is unlike any other history teacher. This 'Jewish Indiana Jones' is able enlightening his international audience with the glory that is people's collective past.

He is an explorer and survival expert, serving as CEO of BOSS, The Boulder Outdoor Survival School. With "Digging," his mission is in part to illustrate the commonality of world history. The more audiences know about the origins of current society, the more history has the power to weave the world's peoples with the common thread of a shared past.

The History Channel is currently broadcasting Bernstein's second season in its 9 p.m. Monday time slot, and the season one DVD landed in stores July 25.

Bernstein's show is the highest rated original series in The History Channel's portfolio...ever. Off filming season three, Bernstein completed a conversation with the San Diego Jewish Journal which began in Egypt and ended in Mongolia. The Cornell university-trained anthropologist, psychologist and archeologist used any means necessary to answer our questions. It is easy to see Bernstein is living his dream of educating in the classroom that is the world's stage.

SDJJ: How do you see "Digging for The Truth" allowing you to be both an educator and an entertainer?

JB: Well, I don't really consider myself an entertainer. I'm not the kind of guy who seeks the spotlight or tries to be the life of the party. I'm the kind of guy who likes to get a job done and do it as well as I can. But I do recognize that television is a form of entertainment, so I try to make "Digging for the Truth" entertaining. But I consider myself an educator first. It's what I do at BOSS and what I hope to do on "Digging for the Truth." At the end of a show, it's great if you had fun, but I'm hoping you learned something, too. That's rare on TV these days.

SDJJ: You seem to delve into different areas of the mysteries of history - how do you come upon such a fresh perspective on something frankly, so old? You make history come alive for a new generation.

JB: I think it's a combination of things. First, we do try to take a new angle on old stories – whether it's through new research or a more experiential and active approach to history. Secondly, the graphics, the music, and the editing of each show is designed to be engaging, which gives it a fresher feel. And finally, I work really hard to keep myself in a place of discovery and curiosity throughout each journey. Even if I've learned something from previous research or visits, I try to not let that affect my excitement for learning something in person from an expert. I think all of these things combine to make the viewer feel like he or she is learning



and exploring with me.

SDJJ: What drives you to do this?

JB: Mostly caffeine. No, but seriously, it's a combination of my desires to educate and to succeed. I'm a firm believer in passion and excellence. And now, with the success of the show in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, I feel a responsibility to continue what we've created.

SDJJ: I saw you on the Martha Stewart show. I'm picturing you now in Egypt - and now I'm seeing you in Martha's kitchen - quite a world away. How was that experience?

JB: Honestly, there's no difference to me. When in Egypt, I'm working with experts and trying to have a meaningful conversation. When doing talk shows,

I'm working with experts and trying to have a meaningful conversation. My energy and interest are the same. Of course, on a talk show, some of the questions have to do with me personally and not an archaeological mystery. But even then I hope to communicate something of value to the person watching the show. As for specifically being in Martha's kitchen, I had a great time.

SDJJ: Where did you grow up?

JB: I was born and raised in Manhattan. But I'd say I grew up and found myself out West in Wyoming and Utah. That's where I went in the summers after my father died.

SDJJ: Did you have a Bar Mitzvah?

JB: I did have a Bar Mitzvah. As a twin, my brother and I split the responsibilities, which made it a bit easier for each of us.

SDJJ: Do you feel that intense training helps Jewish boys and girls with discipline at an early age so that success in life is just another extension of that rigorous learning process?

JB: I can't say I remember the learning process being rigorous. At the time, my schoolwork seemed much harder and more demanding. But I do think the Bar Mitzvah ceremony is both important and worthwhile, and I'd certainly encourage my children to have it – once I have children, of course.

SDJJ: Does Judaism play any part in the selection of locations and subject? And I mean that only in the sense of the historical aspect of the legacy - like right now, you are in Egypt - just a little bit of Jewish history there. So are there aspects of the sites you choose rooted in that history?

JB: No, Judaism plays no part in the selection of the stories. For “Digging for the Truth” we look for the most compelling stories around the world, whether it’s in the Amazon, the Arctic, the Middle East or elsewhere. But I do think the Bible plays a role at times. After all, the stories and mysteries of the Bible are timeless and in many ways have a global appeal. But my personal religion is rarely relevant to the process.

SDJJ: Not just geographically, but where else on the entertainment spectrum would you like to take the show, maybe an IMAX movie?

JB: I’m not sure an IMAX movie for “Digging for the Truth” would be possible. We shoot a lot of scenes in very remote locations, where the camera and crew must operate under arduous and at times cramped conditions. From what I understand, the IMAX camera is very large and shoots a tremendous amount of film very rapidly. I think that would change the way interviews are recorded and, ultimately, change the flow of the show. But I also don’t think it’s necessary – after all, “Digging for the Truth” has been shot in hi-definition since the very first episode. They have yet to broadcast in HD, but once you see it that way (and I have) I think it will blow people away. As for where the show goes beyond its current format and style, that’s in the hands of The History Channel.

SDJJ: What part of the U.S. do you call home and lately, how often do you get to see it?

JB: Between May and January, while we’re filming, I’ll be in the U.S. for a total of perhaps six weeks – not much. It’s usually split between Utah, Colorado and New York, but we’ll see. After traveling the world for the show for most of the past two and a half years, home is really wherever I end up at night.

SDJJ: What do you make of the show's success? Do you think, despite what is commonly believed, that people do care about where they come from?

JB: I wouldn’t attribute the show’s success to people’s desire to know where they came from. I think people like to learn, to explore, and to see foreign lands. “Digging for the Truth” gives you that – it’s a vicarious road trip and I’m driving your car. Ultimately, I think people find value in seeing the world – its beauty, its history, its people. Some of the show’s appeal may be historical, giving you a chance to reflect on our common past, but it could also be that people like taking a one hour journey with me to a distant land. It’s a great escape.

SDJJ: Finally, of all of history's mysteries, is there one that truly has a hold of you that you are continually working on - your pie in the sky?

JB: I’ve had the distinct and rare pleasure of being exposed to people and places all over the world. Everywhere I go, I do my best to explore each culture and understand what drives it – how that tree in the forest of humanity grew to be different from the other trees, so to speak. Is

there a common quality to all cultures? A basic need of all people? There are many things which divide us – our clothes, our languages, our politics – but what binds us? Finding the answers to this mystery and sharing it can help us work together to solve the important issues which our world faces – whether it's hunger, disease, the environment, etc. It's not an easy task by any means, but I'm patient. For now, I'm happy to keep traveling and learning.