

THE Current

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Bill Schlotter

Anthropologist Michael Gurven Wins Prestigious Plous Award

Michael Gurven of the Department of Anthropology has won UCSB's 2004 Harold J. Plous Award, one of the university's two most prestigious faculty honors.

The honor is given annually by UCSB's Academic Senate, on behalf of the faculty, to an assistant professor who has shown exceptional achievement in research, teaching and service to the university.

Gurven, who joined the faculty in 2001, was presented with the award at the Nov. 4 meeting of the Academic Senate.

In addition to receiving a \$500 cash award, he will be given an opportunity to showcase his research by giving the annual Plous Lecture at a date to be announced early next year.

That research, which involves extensive fieldwork with the Tsimane people of Bolivia, is both broad and detailed.

"Dr. Gurven and his collaborators are expanding upon current theories about several questions of human evolution," the Plous selection committee said in its recommendation of Gurven. "Why are human life spans so long, with significant portions spent in a post-reproductive state? Why are brains so large? Why is childhood long and delayed?"

Gurven's research is also providing science with a documented look at how aging occurs in a non-Western subsistence population that has little access to medicines, immunizations, or supermarkets, the committee said.

And his collection of health-related information is proving important in the identification of key gender-specific medical problems across the lifespan of peoples in several remote Tsimane villages.

As a teacher, Gurven has both restructured and developed his department's biosocial anthropology program, setting up a new series of upper division classes. Students describe him as an enthusiastic instructor.

He is also a much-sought graduate advisor, who has taken both graduate and undergraduate students into the field with him to expose them to field methods and new cultures.

His determination to create a new field research location in Bolivia will provide many more opportunities for UCSB graduate students in the future.

Gurven said he was surprised, and honored to be selected the 2004 Plous winner, which is named for the energetic Harold J. Plous, an esteemed assistant professor of economics at UCSB from 1950 until his death in 1957.

"I am, of course, very grateful and pleased to have been chosen," Gurven said.

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