



POWERED BY GRIT

BY JOHN SPINDLER

as archaeologists go, they're hardly the swashbuckling heroes of Indiana Jones fame.

But to companies looking to build a wind or solar farm, run a pipeline or construct a cell phone tower – **Abraham Ledezma '08, Daniel Salas '09, and Craig Picka '09** (pictured left to right opposite page) all anthropology graduates with archaeology emphases – are indispensable.

The three longtime friends own In Situ Archaeological Consulting. And their business success thus far, they say, can be attributed to hard work, perseverance and the training they received as undergraduates at MSUM.

In Situ is a player in the largely unseen world of cultural resource management consulting. Companies that use federal funding are required to ensure the proposed construction site is free of artifacts that could have cultural significance. While some employ in-house archaeologists, others call on firms like In Situ to excavate portions of the proposed site, examine it for traces of artifacts and then issue a report as part of the permitting process.

The seed that became In Situ was planted years ago. Picka and Ledezma have been friends since sixth grade; Salas joined the group while the three were undergraduates. "We were sitting around between classes one day and started thinking it would be nice to start a company specializing in cultural resource management – once we got enough experience," Ledezma recalls.

Their studies at MSUM provided just that. "The undergraduate program at MSUM is totally hands-on: How to dig properly, how to collect artifacts, how to number them, how to make sense of what you're seeing – everything you need to know to be an archaeologist," Ledezma says.

That practical experience earned the three admission to graduate school at Missouri State University. After completing their studies, they parted ways. Picka and Salas lived together while working for separate companies during the North Dakota oil boom. Ledezma worked in Ohio. They talked every few days, sharing what they were learning, discussing better ways to do their jobs and dreaming of starting their own business.

After a few years, and with Ledezma and his fiancée expecting a baby they hoped to raise back in Minnesota, it was time to take the leap. The three moved back to the suburban Twin Cities and launched In Situ in October 2015. One of the first calls

they placed was to their mentor, Dr. George Holley, professor of anthropology at MSUM, for advice.

They realized that success wouldn't come easily. About a half dozen companies in the Twin Cities alone do what In Situ does, and all have firmly established track records. Competition for contracts is often driven by price, with the job going to the lowest bidder.

Undeterred, the three began spreading the word. "We talked to anyone and everyone we could find, telling them who we are and what we do," Ledezma said. They were elated to quickly land a small contract.

But then things went quiet – and stayed that way.

Because Salas and Ledezma are Latino, they applied to have In Situ classified as a disadvantaged business in Minnesota and North Dakota. The process is intense, and approval took months. Once they received it, "We thought the contracts would come rolling in," Ledezma says. "But they didn't."

Months passed. The phones were silent; email blank.

To make ends meet, Salas took a part-time job at a Minneapolis dairy. Ledezma earned extra cash cleaning bathrooms at a community center in Chaska.

Finally, out of the blue came a call from a global engineering firm with an office in Minneapolis. It had its own archaeological consultants on staff, but they were too busy; would In Situ be interested in picking up some of the slack?

That job led to another, and then others from different organizations. Suddenly, In Situ was awash in business. "Now we're working six or seven days a week," Salas says, triumphantly.

As every small business knows, keeping the momentum going is everything. In Situ's plans for that harken back to their undergraduate days when "our professors always taught us that if you invest a lot of time in your papers, it shows that you're serious about your work," Ledezma says. So they've created a template that allows them to produce higher quality, more detailed reports than their rivals, enabling them to report like the big players but at a competitive price.

While hardly taking their success for granted, the three are already thinking about hiring staff – and know exactly where to look. "We're going to hire from MSUM," Picka says, "because we're sure they'll be well-trained." ■