Spring 2009 Scholarships

At our annual Awards and Scholarship luncheon, held most recently in June 2009, fourteen students were honored for their academic excellence and contributions to the department and university. They were as follows:

- Nolan Giehl: Kristin King Morana Scholarship
- Joycelyn Cheung: Thomas Redican Memorial Scholarship
- Kate Triglia: Jeri Ewy Thiel Memorial Scholarship
- Laura Sorveti: J. Irving Snetsinger Award for Writing Excellence
- Trevor Walker: J. Irving Snetsinger Award for Writing Excellence
- Erin Newman: J. Irving Snetsinger Award for Diplomatic or Political History
- Barbara Stickel: Dan Krieger Award
- Teresa Moreno: Madalene P. Farris History Award
- Joshua Harmon: Spencer Wood Memorial Award
- William Kramer: Spencer Wood Memorial Award
- Robert Maharry: Spencer Wood Memorial Award
- Ara Kim: Faculty Award for Academic Excellence
- Justin McCollum: Faculty Award for Academic Excellence
- Alyssa Carnahan: Robert Detweller Outstanding Senior of the Year

Congratulations to our award winners, and many thanks to our generous donors who have made all these wonderful awards possible!

From the Department Chair, Dr. Andrew Morris

Some 2500 years ago, Confucius said that at age forty, one should be mature and be able to proceed without confusion. I am confident that the Cal Poly History Department, which begins its 40th year this fall, reached this important stage long ago.

We face new challenges, however, due to the serious implications of the California state budget disaster. Students are now paying 30% more in fees, at the same time that faculty have received a 9.23% pay cut and are subject to state-mandated furloughs. These disruptions are profound. Classes are fewer and more crowded, and funding has been cut for many types of important academic activities.

What will not change is our faculty's love of history – of teaching, researching, writing, and this academic endeavor that we have all chosen as our life's work. We welcome a huge class of 79 new history majors. Our students continue to excel; please see the article within on The Forum, the outstanding new history journal established, written, and edited by our own students.

It has been wonderful to share with you over the last year some of the many accomplishments of our students and faculty, and to hear from many of our alumni, supporters, and friends who have received these newsletters. As we reach the age of forty together and continue to strengthen the Cal Poly History community, please keep in touch.

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Alumni Spotlight: Meghan Strutner (’08)

Meghan Strutner graduated with Honors from Cal Poly in June 2008 with a major in History and minors in Psychology and Global Politics. This summer she began teaching in New Orleans, LA in the Teach for America program.

Last year I was admitted to Teach for America out of a record 35,178 applications for 4,100 slots. Of these applicants, 11% were Ivy League graduates. While very competitive, I truly feel that Cal Poly prepared me for this rigorous endeavor.

I am working at a charter school called ARISE Academy. ARISE is located in the 9th Ward. During Hurricane Katrina, around 500 people congregated there to escape the flood waters that inundated the rest of the surrounding area. ARISE is a new school in an old building. My school (pre-K through 2nd grade) only occupies the bottom floor. The upper two floors are Charles Drew Elementary, which serves grades 3 - 8; it is an entirely separate school with a separate administration and faculty. The rather awkward arrangement exists because ARISE is what is called a "Transformation School" which means that we are slowly taking over the entire building and phasing out the existing school.

Some people have asked why ARISE did not just take the entire school over at once; the short answer is that it would have been too overwhelming. Charles Drew Elementary is considered academically failing. On last year’s School Performance Scores, Charles Drew received a score of 40.8; 60 or lower is considered failing. It is the third lowest school in the entire Recovery School District. To get into Charles Drew, one has to go through metal detectors. Last year the fire alarm was pulled nearly every day, sometimes twice, and this year, students have stuffed paper towels in the sinks upstairs to clog the drains and then turned on the water so that they flood. The majority of the damage from the flooding occurs on the bottom floor, in the office and my room unfortunately. This has occurred twice this year already.

Meghan Strutner (’08), her students at ARISE Academy in New Orleans, and their pumpkin “Porcupine.”

Because ARISE only occupies the bottom floor of the building and is a brand new charter school, we currently do not have a library available for our students. We were fortunate to have some books donated but regretfully, there were not many that were appropriate for my preschoolers. Coming into this program, I was very focused on literacy. Students in low income communities, my students, hear just 1/3 of the number of words that students in high income communities do. This dearth of language sets them back tremendously - even by the age of four. In an attempt to remedy this disparity, I have tried to read four books a day, teach them their A-B-C’s, their colors, and incorporate words that they might not have heard into our everyday conversations. Furthermore, I have made part of their nightly homework assignment to have an adult read to them for 20 minutes. I didn’t expect, however, to receive more than one note explaining that students were unable to complete the homework because they did not have books at home.

Growing up, I was always around books. They were everywhere in my house and my parents were always keen to read them to me. Becoming a teacher, I mistakenly assumed that students would have access to some books. I simply was unprepared to hear that some had absolutely none. Despite my lack of books here and my students’ lack of books, I did not give up on my literacy focus. Instead, I responded to this severe dearth of a basic academic necessity by writing letters to friends and family back at home to see if anyone had extra books that they could donate to my class. The response has been, and continues to be, overwhelming. To date, I have had over 500 books donated to my classroom alone. My classroom library is now overflowing with wonderful books and I have developed a checkout system where students can borrow books for the evening and bring them back the next day.

The book situation is simply one example of the many challenges we face here in New Orleans. Things such as basic hygiene are certainly an issue and I have more than a few students whose teeth are visibly rotting. Of the 200 students at my school, 100% are on the free or reduced lunch program. We are on an extended school day which means students arrive at 7:45 am and leave at 4:15 pm. Although I usually arrive around 6 am, I normally leave before 6 pm because it is dangerous for me to be there after that time. Yet, beneath all the challenges, the truth remains that I get to spend eight and a half hours with 20 of the most beautiful, cheerful, loving four-year-olds that you have ever met. Slowly
but surely, they are beginning to say “Please” and “Thank You” more frequently; they are asking to “use the restroom” instead of the colloquial New Orleans phrase of “I got to uuuuse it!”; and yes, they are learning, despite the many failings of their teacher.

Throughout my short time in New Orleans, I have repeatedly been reminded of how grateful I am for my time at Cal Poly. Cal Poly’s emphasis on service and their mission to “Learn By Doing” has never been more appropriate. The long hours spent researching at Kennedy Library; the enjoyable hours spent in the classrooms of remarkable professors; and the heroic three hours spent at the end of every quarter taking Dr. Barnes’ and Dr. Snetsinger’s legendary exams have undoubtedly prepared me for where I stand today. This is by far the most difficult thing I have ever done, but I know that I would not be here today if it were not for the incredible dedication, time, and true interest of my professors and other members of the History Department who have supported and continue to support me along the way. I take a part of them to my classroom every day.

New Tenure-Track Faculty: Dr. James Tejani

As the child of immigrants to the United States, I developed an interest in American history early in life. But I chose to pursue a career as a professional historian only very late in college. I attended the University of California, San Diego and started out as a biochemistry major. After taking a life-changing course (to fulfill a general education requirement), I switched my major to History during my junior year and eventually also double majored in Political Science.

In 2009 I completed my Ph.D. from Columbia University. My dissertation, “San Pedro Bay and the Making of an American Pacific, 1846-1917,” examines how local conflicts over land and property in Southern California shaped American expansion and the development of industrial economy and state power on the Pacific coast and at the same time led to the construction of the Port of Los Angeles. My research and teaching interests cut across the history of California, the West, the Pacific, and the American nation, between the US Civil War to the mid twentieth century. I grew up in Long Beach and enjoy surfing and learning to play the trumpet.

Teacher of the Year: Dr. John Snetsinger

This June, Phi Alpha Theta (the History honor society) presented Professor John Snetsinger with the 2008-2009 Teacher of the Year Award. Phi Alpha Theta president Josh Hamon highlighted Dr. Snetsinger’s dedication to student success both in and out of the classroom.

During his presentation, Josh read letters the society had received from students nominating Dr. Snetsinger. One read, in part, “I think that beyond doubt Dr. Snetsinger exemplifies everything an educator and professor should be. He is instantly accessible, approachable, and welcoming, eager to provide help to his students... Dr. Snetsinger's abilities to help his students come from his expansive breadth of knowledge, allowing him to suggest multiple books on varying topics. He also provides his firsthand experiences to educate his students, helping them understand the process for obtaining government materials.”

The letter went on to praise how Dr. Snetsinger’s passion for helping students doesn’t end at the classroom door. The student noted that Dr. Snetsinger “encourages students to look for advancement in graduate programs, consistently alerts his students about professional opportunities in fields related to history, and... never ceases to foster the intellectual and academic growth of his students. Dr. Snetsinger has dedicated his life to his students and it shows in everything he does.”

The department congratulates Professor Snetsinger for his well-deserved award and his nearly four decades of service to Cal Poly.
Phi Alpha Theta: The Forum

Our students have gone from reading peer-reviewed articles to publishing them. Last June the first issue of The Forum, a historical research journal produced by Cal Poly History students, rolled off the presses. In its inaugural issue, The Forum included six essays and two book reviews, all written by undergraduate and graduate students.

The Forum editorial board included seven students and was led by co-editors-in-chief seniors Katie Chludzinski and Keith Goodwin. The journal is published in association with Phi Alpha Theta and under the guidance of faculty member Dr. Tom Trice. Even the publication design was the work of a Cal Poly student, graphic communications major Danielle Steussy.

The department is extremely proud of our students’ work to show how history majors “learn by doing.” In the process they have produced an impressive and professional journal. We all look forward to the next volume of The Forum.

To view The Forum online, go to: http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/forum/

Recent Faculty Publications


Kathy Cairns, Hard Time at Tehachapi: California’s First Women’s Prison (University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

Kathy Cairns, “Writing for Their Lives: The Clarion and Inmates at the California Institution for Women, Tehachapi!” Western Legal History (Spring/Summer 2009).


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Recent Faculty Publications, continued


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