

February 2012



## DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH NEWSLETTER

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## FEBRUARY 2012

# Professor Judith Oster: A Jubilation



"Judy Oster is a one-of-a-kind teacher and mentor— tough and tender, irreplaceable and unforgettable. I was a lost CWRU undergrad when I met her back in 1991; she helped me get back on track with my studies and encouraged me to go on to graduate school. She understood my struggle to be an English major, against the wishes of strict Asian immigrant parents. Judy's class 'The Immigrant Experience' changed my life." **Lisa Chiu ('93)**



"Judy is the only person I have ever seen who can teach a 75-person class (the old English 200) as if it were a class of 12. I picture her doing this every time I have to speak in front of a crowd." **Brad Ricca ('03)**



"For Judy, there was never an excuse for interrupting scholarship—ours or hers. One night she discussed my paper draft over the phone while finishing her dinner at the family table." **Bonnie Shaker ('98)**



For more student memories, see [here](#). In the next issue of this newsletter, there will be an article about Professor Oster.

## Cracking Open the World

*by Donna Jarrell ('99)*

I'd like to tell you that going to India was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, but I'd be lying, which isn't exactly good form for a woman studying to enter ordained ministry. In fact, India never crossed my mind until I learned the seminary I attend requires each of its Divinity students to engage in a cross-cultural immersion experience.

The purpose of the experience is not mission-oriented, but rather intended to crack open the world of a would-be minister, to push on the assumptions created by the limitations of our American experience, particularly our Christian experience, and to expand our capacity to recognize and celebrate difference. For instance, when Christians teach liberation theology—that Jesus had a tender spot for the poor and oppressed—we as Americans have a fairly limited idea of what it means to be poor and oppressed. Cross-cultural immersion cracks that shell wide open.

Our leaders wanted us to avoid developing any preconceptions about India, so planning for our trip was limited to the likes of YouTube instructions for using Indian toilets, or squats. Knowing, however, that my personal spiritual director had spent a year and a half in India working with people who live among the trash heaps, I reported to her the plans of my impending trip in hopes of a useful revelation or two. Instead, she simply responded, "India assaults your senses." Though she opened her mouth several times to add another comment, she always fell back to repeating the phrase, "India assaults your senses," and nodding solemnly.

And so it does.

Cold bucket showers in bathrooms without tubs or stalls. Red and orange and yellow foods eaten with fingers, dripping faces, burning tongues. Dark bellies. Bare feet. Cows in the streets. Relentless honking. Trash heaps. Litter litter everywhere. Ghandi. Scampering monkeys, scratching and picking. Rice paddies. Octopus arms. Elephant faces. Towering temples. Red dots. Roads without lanes. Cities without traffic lights. Toilets without paper. Bathrooms without toilets. Jasmine. Sarees. Dalits sweeping streets. Waterfalls. Mountains. Children begging. Holy trees.

Christian stars. Ceiling fans. Feral dogs.

Everyone smiles.

I loved India. I was heart-broken by India and inspired by India. I was mesmerized and repulsed by India. I was cracked wide open by India. The southern India greeting, "Vanakkam," is spoken as one brings praying palms to one's chest. There is no bowing that accompanies the gesture. Its meaning is "the god in me worships the god in you." India: Vanakkam.

*Donna Jarrell is a 1999 graduate of CWRU (English and Psychology). She earned an MFA in creative writing from the Ohio State University in 2002 and co-edited two nationally distributed anthologies, What Are You Looking At? and Scoot Over, Skinny. She is a writer, teacher, and occasional chaplain.*

## FACULTY NOTES

**Michael Clune** lectured on "Symbol to Sound" as part of the Wallace Stevens and the New York School panel at the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture.

**Rob Spadoni** will deliver the lecture "Film Atmosphere and Narrative" at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference in March.

**Thrity Umrigar's** novel, *The World We Found* was published on January 3rd.

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# Thomas Sayers Ellis Reading

## *In Memory of Freddy Ward*



This February, Thomas Sayers Ellis was warmly welcomed on his return to CWRU to read from his new book *Skin, Inc.: Identity Repair Poems* (Graywolf 2010). The reading, which was well-attended by department members, former students, and poetry lovers, was both a festive literary occasion and a memorial to Frederica Ward, our long-time and beloved department assistant who died in September 2010.

Reading such poems as "My Meter is Percussive," "Oreo," and "Godzilla's Avocado" (which was commissioned by public radio's *The Splendid Table*), Thomas gave an

electrifying performance, singing one poem—"The Pronoun-Vowel Reparations Song," and sharing excerpts from his long poem about Michael Jackson, "Gone Pop." Thomas interspersed his reading with remarks about his work: "my favorite construction is a sort of language poem—a rhythm of syllables with a political substratum."

Thomas also reminisced about his time in Cleveland. When he first came to CWRU, he didn't drive, so Freddy drove him home after class. Thomas remembered Freddy fondly as a staunch support, one of his first friends here, and a fellow appreciator of the funkadelic.

A valued member of the English department for more than 17 years and a Case Western Reserve staff member for more than 20, Freddy is remembered by students, alumni, faculty and staff as patient, caring and generous—a woman whose smile and calming spirit held the department together like a "social glue."

The department is raising funds in her honor to endow a scholarship that will provide support for African American undergraduates in the College of Arts and Sciences. To make a gift, call [216.368.3549](tel:216.368.3549) or visit [giving.cwru.edu](http://giving.cwru.edu). For online donations, please select "other" and write "Frederica Ward Fund" in the special instructions field.



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## Interview with David Rutledge (’97)

### *New Orleans Trilogy*

**CWRU:** Could you talk a little bit about this project? I understand that *Where We Know: New Orleans as Home* is the second book in a planned trilogy. What did you originally envision?

Rutledge: As Hurricane Katrina grew to a terrifying size and approached the Gulf Coast, I—a six-year resident of the French Quarter of New Orleans—evacuated to Houston; then, after I sat in a hotel room in Houston and watched the levees of my chosen home town fail on television, I flew to be with family in Seattle, not knowing how long I would be there or how much had been lost.

My brother is the founder of [Chin Music Press](http://ChinMusicPress.com), an independent press based in Seattle that has a concentration on Japanese books. At that time, though, he proposed that we put together a book of some sort in response to the disaster. We did not know how this would work out, how we could put together a successful book under such distressful circumstances. We simply felt the need to respond, as we watched people waiting days for water or wading through city streets in desperation

or being scattered about the country and labeled “refugees.”

The result was our first New Orleans anthology. The result was, in fact, magical: somehow New Orleans writers responded from around the country—wherever they happened to be as the city flooded and sat, filled with water, for weeks. There were some friends who responded, some colleagues, some folks who we had never met before. All of them came together to make *Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans?* So, to answer the question directly: we originally envisioned a response, a passionate response to the devastation of New Orleans. Beyond that, the book—both books, in fact—grew from the ground up, from the streets of New Orleans up.

After our book release party at the Saturn Bar in the ninth ward of New Orleans in February of 2006, one of the first literary events in the city after the flood, we knew we had achieved success. Never did I imagine so many people thanking me—thanking all of us—for putting together a book. That first book captured something of the experience of the hurricane and the flood; it also helped the cultural recovery of the city.

The interview continues [here](#).



## ALUMNI NEWS

**Margo Chervony** ('09) is in the company of actors presenting *A Girl's Guide to Coffee*, a new play by Eric Coble at the Actor's Summit in Akron.

**Ronald Wendling** ('70) retired from the English Department at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia in 2006. Since then he's taught nineteenth-century British literature courses in the undergraduate program and an autobiography class in the the graduate program in Writing Studies. He published an essay on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Meaning of Modernity in *Carlyle Studies Annual* (2009) and co-edited essays on the American novelist John Gardner for the *CEA Critic*. He's also at work on a memoir of his father that he hopes to publish in the next several years.

**Lolette Kuby** ('70) has been invite to participate in the Virginia Festival of the Book, March 21-25, in Charlottesville regarding her novel *Writing Personals*. She has also just finished her second book on self-healing, *Spirituality and Health: Morality, Happiness, and Self-healing*.

After 30 years, **Greg Young** ('77) retired as a Child Abuse Administrator with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. He was responsible for all physical abuse and neglect cases, and some sexual abuse cases, on the far south side of Chicago and in Chicago's south suburbs.

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# English Graduate Student Association

*by Ray Horton*

Beginning this semester, CWRU's English graduate students have a new way to enhance their experience in the program. In conjunction with the Graduate Student Senate, they have formed the English Graduate Student Association, which will provide support for graduate students—both current and prospective—as they

advance in their studies. In January, the EGSA approved its constitution and bylaws. Last week, the Graduate Student Senate accepted its petition for university recognition.

While the EGSA is currently in its beginning stages, it has already begun to demonstrate its effectiveness as a platform for student engagement within the department. First, it has consolidated the student officer and committee positions, bringing GSS representatives, faculty representatives, graduate committee representatives, and social committee representatives together within a single, organized association. Second, it has created two new committees, dedicated to community outreach and to recruitment, which will add new and valuable opportunities for students to get involved in department activities. Third, it has initiated a monthly meeting, affording every graduate student in the department an opportunity to propose ideas, share concerns, and learn more about the endeavors of their colleagues.

The EGSA's committees have already started to plan a number of promising events for the rest of the semester. On March 3rd, the events committee will be hosting a masquerade ball in Guilford Parlor. Tickets for this event can be purchased for \$20 in the English department office. Additionally, the community outreach committee has been hosting a book drive for Cleveland city school children, and the recruitment committee has been organizing a weekend to welcome and introduce applicants who have been accepted into the program for the upcoming academic year.

Now that the EGSA is officially recognized by GSS, it will be eligible to receive funding from the university to support further growth and development. By giving students new opportunities to share and compare their research, to build social and professional relationships, to serve the wider community, and to welcome prospective students during campus visits, the EGSA aims to build a culture of encouragement, advocacy, and awareness among graduate students throughout their time at CWRU.

If you would like more information, please contact the EGSA president, Ray Horton, or the EGSA secretary, Monica Orlando.

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## Jim Sheeler Speaks at February Colloquium



On February 17th, the English Colloquium featured Jim Sheeler's presentation "After

*Final Salute.*" Jim spoke about the process of writing and the necessity of gaining the trust of people who had experienced such terrible loss. In part, his work discovers and honors "the power of the ordinary person's words."

be sure to add [SXD290@case.edu](mailto:SXD290@case.edu) to your address book to make sure these messages make it to your inbox.

