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College Focus: Living History

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Successful teachers make subject matter come alive for students. Kansas State University’s College of Education and its specially produced documentaries are helping teachers do just that for a variety of education-related topics.

The college’s documentary about a turbulent period in Kansas history is helping teachers show students how escaped slaves risked their lives to gain freedom with the help of Wabaunsee County, Kansas, abolitionists. “Dawn of Day: Stories from the Underground Railroad” was released in May 2016, and free lesson plans and DVDs of the 53-minute documentary are available for teachers. The film is also available online along with others the college has produced since 2012 thanks to the efforts of Rusty Earl, the college’s video producer.

Earl enjoys the challenges and rewards of the filmmaking process. “When you dig into people’s history and find out what they sacrificed, you get to know them. I like to show the best side of human beings,” he said.

Earl has displayed the best of humanity several times, and his efforts have brought national and international attention to the college. A 15-minute film called “Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project” chronicled how three Kansas students used a school project to learn and tell the story of an unsung hero in Poland who helped save more than 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942. The video has been viewed more than 60,000 times, and has played on KTWU, a public television station in Topeka, Kansas.

K-State’s College of Education, with Earl, also developed a video series called “A Walk in My Shoes” to build awareness about students’ diversity, challenges and opportunities. The first two videos in the series were about international and military-connected students. The third, a 2014 piece about first-generation students, was featured as a blog post by first Lady Michelle Obama and has been seen by students and staff at more than 100 universities and junior colleges, partially because of promotion from NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising (see Page 34). A new film about social justice in education premiered in October 2016.

Backyard history

“Dawn of Day” differs from the other documentaries produced by the College of Education because of the level of historical research it required. “So much research has been done and can still be done,” Earl said. “New discoveries are being made. We were only recently able to say there was an underground railroad stop near Manhattan, Kansas.”

After separating fact from fiction and doing more research than for any other project, Earl and his team decided to concentrate on Wabaunsee County. The film dramatizes the flight of an escaped slave and shows actual locations where slaves were sheltered. Local experts discuss landmarks, historical documents, family history and the overall effort of those who risked working or traveling on the Underground Railroad.

One of those experts is Richard Pitts, director of the Wonder Workshop Children’s Museum, a Manhattan nonprofit that offers exhibits and programs to the public as well as camps and after-school programs for kids. Years of working with local youth have shown Pitts that knowledge of heritage and local history is lacking.

“This is a story that needs to be told over and over again because it shows that we have always worked together in one way or another. It’s not polarizing — it’s something that brings people together,” Pitts said.

Brad Burenheide, associate professor of curriculum and instruction, agreed. “The documentary is a great example of what local and public historians can do to impact society’s understanding of history and the events that matter,” Burenheide said.

Burenheide is featured in the film. At one point, Pitts asks Burenheide why it’s important to study the Underground Railroad. “My answer is that it offers an episode in history that shows we can do right. Humanity can do the right thing, even in the most dire of circumstances,” Burenheide said.

LIVING HISTORY

Kansas’ largest teacher preparation college using original documentaries to aid classroom teachers, benefit students

By Sarah Caldwell Hancock
He also is excited about engaging teachers and students to explore their own areas, and Pets hopes that more people will start looking in their own backyards or find among heroes in their towns.

“History not only shows us what we are, but inspires us to do the work to make this world better,” Pets said. “I hope that this new focus will inspire others to engage with history and their own communities.”

More than marketing
The College of Education expresses a breadth and depth of information through the documentaries that conventional marketing brochures can’t convey.

Burenheide said community members have approached him about the “Days of Day” documentary, which aired on KSU’s public television station. “They say, ‘What else do you do in the college?’ It’s creative, unique and intriguing,” he said.

“History is important,” said Debbie Mercer, dean of the College of Education, which is the largest teacher preparation program in Kansas. “We don’t want part of our history to be forgotten or assumed that children are going to automatically know or pick up on what we think is important. We need to be very purposeful in what we share and what we teach them.”

Along with more “Walk in My Shoes” films, plans are in the works for another ambitious documentary that follows several first-year teachers in schools across Kansas. The new teachers will keep video diaries that capture their daily challenges and successes.

“The response to our documentaries has been overwhelmingly positive, and I believe that is because we are addressing more of importance and we are doing so thoughtfully and respectfully,” Mercer said. “Rusty is a unique talent in that he can tie the art and science of videography and the art and science of teaching together.”

“The videos bring validity to the great community work our faculty do,” Earl said. “They also show that we care more about our students and that we are doing so thoughtfully and respectfully.”

“History not only shows us our past, but inspires us and shows us our potential. People have done extraordinary things with limited resources,” Pets said. “History helps us realize whose shoulders we’re standing on. We all contributed to this America that we hold so dear.”

“I am personally excited to work at the Crisis Center, where I once volunteered, because I feel like it got me started,” Stith said. “I was making domestic violence services in an office with data, but going out to work with victims and helping support groups for victims of violence gave me so much insight and credibility.”

Stith said that her research, training and experience as a marriage and family therapist gave her a foundation to continue working to help families.

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Serving those who serve:
Stith’s research on intimate partner violence helps military address issue

By Taylor Manges

Kansas State University distinguished professor Sandra Stith partners with the College of Human Ecology’s motto: “In a world focused on things, we focus first on people.”

The professor of marriage and family therapy is developing programs and tools to understand and treat intimate partner violence.

Working with the Department of Defense, Stith and her colleagues have developed a 15-item intimate Partner Physical Injury risk assessment tool to assess the likelihood that an individual who has had an alleged incident of intimate partner violence will have a subsequent incident.

They tested a 16-item tool that included factors that increase partner violence risk such as culture and factors commonly experienced by military personnel — including deployment, post-traumatic stress disorder, frequent moves or isolation — to identify 15 items that most significantly predicted a subsequent incident.

Results of their research indicate that the 15-item tool is highly accurate in predicting a subsequent incident. The tool is currently being disseminated and mandated across all branches of service to enhance intimate partner risk assessment and management within the military.

The project’s second phase is examining if different treatment programs help lower an individual’s risk of a subsequent incident, which also will determine what kind of treatment or what length of treatment is most beneficial in reducing risk.

“Currently, some bases design their own treatment programs, which makes it difficult to determine what kind of treatment or what length of treatment is most beneficial in reducing risk,” Stith said. “We might have some data to help decide if resources should be using a more standardized approach.”

Stith credits the strong university-community relationship for providing opportunities for her interest to volunteer and make a difference while obtaining her master’s degree and doctorate in Kansas State University.

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