



SuburbanTimes

Community

War, Trauma and the Humanities

GSU course explores how military members and their families experience war and trauma

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Photo Credit: Dan Davis

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ST COMMUNITY

Course Explores How Military Members Experience Trauma

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By Lisette Gushiniere

How do you combine concepts about war, trauma and the humanities and turn them into an eight-week long college course? Faculty at Governors State University (GSU) located in University Park, IL think they have that all figured out.

Thanks to a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), GSU is able to offer a new course entitled, War, Trauma, and the Humanities. NEH selected the GSU project—one of 15 nationally—and is providing \$100,000 to fund the course.

While the course broadly explores the ways in which members of the military, and their families, experience trauma, student veterans will bring a unique perspective to the class.

The grant covers the cost to train five student veterans who will be embedded in the classroom, drawing on their own experiences to lead group discussions on poetry, films, memoirs, oral histories—even soldiers' letters during a unit that focuses on women in combat.

A British literature scholar and the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, Dr. Rosemary Erickson Johnsen was the perfect recruit to co-design the course.

Johnsen co-wrote the Dialogues on the Experience of War grant in conjunction with Dr. Andrae Marak, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

"Everyone in the course will learn more about war experience through the literature, films, outside speakers. We'll also learn important context, such as historical information about WW1. The student-veteran discussion facilitators will be voices of experience, helping all of us make broad connections. Everyone will also enhance their skills in analysis, discussion, and writing," Johnsen stated.

An end-of-semester town hall meeting and spring roundtable discussion are part of the inaugural project Johnsen is team-teaching with Marak.

The humanities—the study of the human experience

through literature, art, music, and other cultural expressions—have long been used as a means of understanding and expressing feelings about war.

From Homer's reflections on the Trojan War to Warsan Shire's poetic portrayal of today's refugees, people have long used the arts as an outlet for the complex feelings brought about by war.

"One of the great things about studying the humanities is that the knowledge you gain, and the skills you develop, go with you out into the world," Johnsen said.

"The humanities—literature, art, theatre—have always offered vital insight on the human experience, and engaging difficult subjects like the trauma that comes with war is where the humanities really shine," she continued.

The course also compliments GSU's demographic where the university attracts a majority of older students, according to collegefactual.com.

Johnsen, who has been on the faculty at GSU for over ten years, sees veterans as an "important subset," of the overall student community.

"GSU's mostly non-traditional students bring a lot to their studies: perseverance, commitment to education, and rich life experience. These make teaching literary study at GSU rewarding," she said.

Johnsen has published extensively on the inter-war period between World War I and World War II in Great Britain, and her piece on the practice of "gaslighting" was recently published in the Los Angeles Review of Books, according to a GSU press release. She is a scholar primarily of crime fiction, though, with a particular interest in "contemporary representations of urban spaces and the increasingly complex border between the genre and literary fiction."

She also has an expertise in women's literature and is an affiliated faculty member with the GSU Gender and Sexuality program. A third-generation Michigan State University graduate, Johnsen earned her Ph.D. there and has been teaching, researching, and serving at GSU since 2006. In 2015, she won the prestigious Faculty Excellence Award for

her work in all three areas.

When commenting on her experience and how it compliments the course she said, "I understand the need for and the value of programs like this. My father did two tours in Vietnam, and he does not talk about it. End of discussion. So what begins to converge is what I know about it personally and my academic and teaching background," she said.

Rosemary Erickson Johnsen, Ph.D. Photo Credit: Dan Davis



ST POLITISCOPE

THE CONVERSATION

What makes Kim Jong Un tick?

By Stephen Benedict Dyson

Kim Jong Un is a "smart cookie," President Donald Trump said earlier this year of North Korea's leader.

"He's 27 years old," Trump mused. "His father dies, [he] took over a regime. So say what you want but that is not easy."

Kim, who has assassinated his internal rivals using anti-aircraft guns and chemical weapons, seeks to develop a nuclear missile that can reach the United States. These actions may provoke a "major,



Stephen Benedict Dyson

major conflict" with the U.S., Trump has said: "I hope he's rational."

In my research on political leaders, I've found that different people have differ-

ent definitions of rationality. The core question – "What is my best move?" – is often answered by a leader's idiosyncratic beliefs, rather than by an immediately obvious logic of the situation as seen by external observers.

The history of dealing with inscrutable foreign leaders is

instructive: From Hitler to Saddam to Khrushchev, understanding the other is the most urgent challenge of national security decision-making for the U.S.

To influence Kim's behavior, we must ask: What is his particular vantage point?

Lessons of the past
In the spring of 1943, the director of the first centralized U.S. intelligence agency, Colonel William "Wild Bill" Donovan, sought help in understanding Hitler. Donovan wanted to give President Franklin D. Roosevelt a sense of "the things that make him tick."

Donovan called Walter C. Langer, a psychoanalyst helping with the war effort, in for a meeting: "What do you make of Hitler? If Hitler is running the show, what kind of a person is he? What are his ambitions?"

Langer combined the scant intelligence on Hitler with insights from Freudian psychoanalysis into a study on Hitler. He accurately predicted that Hitler would commit suicide rather than be captured by Allied forces. But his insight was largely irrelevant to the military strategy for defeating Germany. The

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