

"Maybe Life is Only Stories:" SIUE's DeSpain talks bridging generational divides through digital storytelling

by Megan Wieser

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EDWARDSVILLE - Judgments are often cast on who or what comprises the traits of a certain generation. But what if we rid ourselves of generalizations and pervasive stereotypes through the simple act of listening?

What if instead of perpetuating negative assumptions, we engaged in conversation and shared stories to gain a bit more clarity?

The scholarly work of SIUE's Jessica DeSpain, PhD, is asking and answering such questions by coordinating intergenerational conversations and sharing them via digital storytelling.

She is principal investigator of a \$100,000 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Access Grant that is expanding the "Conversation Toward a Brighter Future" program, in partnership with the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation, SIUE's Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship (IRIS) Center, and the Madison County Regional Office of Education.

DeSpain is an associate professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' (CAS) Department of English Language and Literature and co-director of SIUE's IRIS Center. As the recipient of the 2018 William and Margaret Going Endowed Professorship Award, DeSpain presented a public lecture entitled "Maybe Life is Only Stories," on Thursday, Nov. 29.

"Intergenerational communication is fraught with misunderstandings," DeSpain said, "because the young and old have come of age during different historical periods with varying cultural norms and communication styles. By building digital narratives about what it means to be a particular age, both locally and cross-culturally, the project includes students and the community in a conversation about how we can value differences and speak across generational divides."

The Going Award is the College of Arts and Sciences' most distinguished award.

"This award is expressly for faculty who are at the forefront of their field in scholarship, but who find innovative ways to bring that scholarship into the classroom to enrich their students," said CAS Dean Greg Budzban, PhD. "Dr. DeSpain's work with intergenerational conversation is wonderful. It's enriching, and it brings the humanities alive in a way, using digital technology."

Prior to DeSpain's presentation, attendees viewed a digital storytelling gallery created by students in her Honors 250 course. Each of her students was assigned a different stage of life and tasked with sharing their interviewee's story through a variety of visual, literary and audio activities, including scriptwriting, interviewing, video production and digital visualization.

"This viewing of our work really magnifies what we all created," said Noah Pyles, of Macomb, a sophomore Honors 250 student and biochemistry major. "The stage of life I

was assigned was death. It was interesting to consider how different generations view death.”

“I was assigned young adulthood,” added sophomore electrical engineering major Anjuli Kampwerth, of Highland. “Dr. DeSpain was energetic and positive in every way throughout this project. It’s cool to see how each of our individual projects came together.”

“Because of my work in IRIS, which emphasizes the intersection of student engagement and community involvement, I’ve come to think of myself as a public humanities scholar,” DeSpain noted. “Yes, I spend a lot of time doing conventional tasks like writing and research. But, I also design experiences and events that engage broader audiences in humanistic inquiry.”

“Though we need intergenerational communication more than ever, it is increasingly difficult to share stories of ourselves, and to listen to and empathize with the stories of others across the chasm of age,” she added. “One of the things we’ve learned through the development of this project is that you can talk about issues related to age, and it gives you the opportunity to talk about other markers of identity like race, class and gender without confronting them head on.”

DeSpain explained how her work in the digital and public humanities seeks to address a shift in attitudes regarding colleges and universities.

“In Honors 250, we frequently talked about the impossibility of changing national polarization with a few digital stories,” DeSpain said. “I’m not naïve enough to think we could do that. But, when we start with the local and the every day, when we challenge the separation between university and community, I do think we can make a difference.”

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