

Conversations Toward a Brighter Future Program Bridges Community Through Shared Stories

by Megan Weiser
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EDWARDSVILLE - A room full of creatively shared stories, featured through a variety of mediums, brought a sense of community to those involved in the Conversations Toward a Brighter Future 2.0 program. A Summit featuring the creations of 62 students from eight participating local high schools was held Tuesday, May 7, at the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities (MJCH).

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) awarded Southern Illinois University Edwardsville a two-year \$100,000 Humanities Access Grant for the creation of the interdisciplinary curriculum focused on digital storytelling. Conversation Toward a Brighter Future is an expansion of an earlier program founded at the MJCH Foundation, and is led by SIUE's Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship (IRIS) Center in partnership with the Madison County Regional Office of Education.

"Our May summit highlighted the work students produced as part of the program throughout the year, with final productions including podcasts, storytelling videos and digital archives through the Smithsonian Learning Lab," explained Project Director Jessica DeSpain, PhD, co-director of the SIUE IRIS Center and associate professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' (CAS) Department of English Language and Literature.

Participating high schools included Highland, Civic Memorial, Collinsville, Roxana, Granite City, Triad, Edwardsville and Madison.

"One of the best aspects of the summit was that students got to see first-hand how the teachers and students have adapted the program to their schools," DeSpain noted. "They talked to and learned from one another about their work, and had the opportunity to interact with students from neighboring communities. They learned about one another's lives and listened to the stories that matter to them."

Two students from Edwardsville High School became so excited about the program that they started their own podcast: The Chronicles of Izzy and Ellie.

"Our teacher, Miss Mudge, assigned our honors sophomore world literature class digital projects, including a personal narrative, a story based off an interview and a story reflecting a hero's journey," said sophomore Elannore Bester. "As a class, we were given a lot of creative liberty to fulfill the requirements. Rather than a structured podcast, Isabelle and I started a podcast with a more laid-back style. Each week, we agree on a topic to discuss and have fun with it. We mostly discuss our personal

opinions and experiences, such as our dreams, struggles with stepping outside our comfort zones, and even our favorite band.”

As a result of the program’s implementation in Edwardsville, Bester’s teacher, Lauren Mudge, collaborated with another teacher to write a successful grant application to establish a podcasting studio at the high school.

Perhaps the program’s most impactful result for Bester has been the realization of the important role she plays in the community.

“Before, I never really thought about my role as a community member, but recently I have found myself wondering what difference my peers and I can make,” she said. “It also hit home that everyone has their own story to be told, and that truly no one is more important or interesting than anybody else.”

In Madison, the C.H.E.S.T. Podcast and accompanying video series have been a success, according to DeSpain. And, in Highland, a video feature on the Baumann Farm offered students a chance to share the history of a local family and its homestead.

DeSpain plans to host a fall summit where the program will host a human library with regional volunteers acting as human library books that students can “check out” to learn about their lives.

The program is slated to end in spring 2020 with a community-wide gallery of student work.

Founded in 2010, with a mission to support faculty and student research in the digital humanities, the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville College of Arts and Sciences’ Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship (IRIS) Center is invested in connecting to, working with, and helping to document, the people, places, practices and histories of the region as well as a broader international community. Since the Center’s founding, students and faculty have: traveled to Nepal to aid in the recording of endangered languages in order to build a digital atlas alongside native speakers; worked with the colorfully designed physical copies of 19th century books as they built a comparative edition of one of the century’s most popular novels; recorded the language practices and attitudes of lifelong residents of St. Louis’s Metro East to better understand regional dialect variation; built an encyclopedia of Madison County history in partnership with local cultural institutions; and designed an educational outreach program for middle school students in East St. Louis to build a website about the history and culture of their city. The Center generally serves 50 students and faculty a semester through the Digital Humanities and Social Sciences minor, research opportunities for undergraduates and internships.

