

Editor: Catherine Colmerauer *SUNY Fredonia*

## April Means Earth Day: What the English Department is Doing to Help



*Dr. Christina Jarvis, a pivotal force in implementing the 2009 Earth Day Teach-In.*

Rethink, React, Restore - the alliterating sound of these three words will permeate throughout the SUNY Fredonia campus this April. Playing off the old adage, "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle," 2009's Earth Day celebration took on a form of its own through SUNY Fredonia's unique blend of educational mediums - painting a colorful canvas of environmental awareness and appreciation through interdisciplinary integration and integrity.

"We wanted to get back to the grassroots origins of the first Earth Day in 1970," said Dr. Christina Jarvis, whose home resides in Fenton Hall, but whose heart truly lies with a greater appreciation for our Mother Earth and all who inhabit it. "That's why we were drawing on local talent, student energy, and collective planning (for this year's events)."

While this isn't the English department's first year participating in the growing popularity of Earth Day, according to Jarvis, "this year's participation is more extensive and formalized." Members of the English honor society, Sigma Tau Delta, Writer's Ring, along with several faculty members were involved in organizing and publicizing several of this year's events.

"Language arts, specifically literature, has played a role in environmentalism before it was an official movement," said Professor Dustin Parson's whose

work revolves largely around contemporary American fiction, as well as American Studies. "There is a great tradition of the environmentalism in American literature, but in contemporary literature we have many spectacular poets and essayists that have made it their career mission to blend the need for environmental change with the need for literary expression. It plays a large role in the exposure environmental concerns get in the culture at large."

Making connections between National Poetry Month and Earth Day, the department aims to bridge a literary voice to environmental concerns by giving SUNY Fredonia's finest writers a chance to express their environmental appreciations and apprehensions orally.

The main event featured by the English department was a poetry reading on Wednesday, April 22nd, at 6:00 p.m. in the All Purpose Room of the William's Center. Featured readers, including esteemed poets and faculty members Aimee Nezhukumatathil and James Stevens, read original work as well as the work of famous environmental authors.

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## Earth Day Events, Continued

As Parsons suggests, "writers have a unique opportunity to be the voice for a movement, to give it life not just through volume but also through creativity, exploration, and experimentation." Wednesday evening's reading applied environmental concerns to the bigger human condition through verse to help gather the attention of those who are moved by such acts.

While it may be assumed that the study of English and the language arts revolves heavily around that of literary theory and criticism, the English department's participation in Earth Day 2009 suggests much more than that. Aside from theory and criticism, when speaking of environmental issues, practice and activism are two central concepts that the department strives to promote.

Prior to the reading, at 5:00 p.m. esteemed naturalist of the English Education department, Dr. Terry Mosher led a seminar on Building Sustainable Classrooms. Mosher, along with other area school teachers brought elements of the natural world alive as they share different strategies they have used to bring natural phenomena into their classrooms, as well as into the lives on America's future. When thinking of activism and promoting change, Innately instilling a sense of environmental appreciation and awareness is crucial if we wish to continue to shape an environmentally active and appreciative community. Here, pre-service teacher's had the opportunity to examine the different ways to incorporate environmental themes into their daily classroom routines. Readings of Frost's and Heaney's poetry made this event one not to miss.

While many of these events were held within closed walls, as Earth Week came to a close, Mother Nature herself opened her doors to the Fredonia campus and community, giving all who attended an opportunity step away from campus and explore the aesthetics of the "real" Western New York. Two sets of nature walks at the College Lodge, led by Dr. Mosher and Wayne

Yughans took place on Friday, April 24. Staying

*Photo Right:*

Professor Aimee Nezhukumatathil reads her poetry. She and Professor James Stevens were the featured poets for the Earth Day Teach-In Poetry Reading.



true to sustainable efforts, vans departed from the campus' Park and Ride lot at noon and 1:30 p.m.

Whether its "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle," or "Rethink, React, Restore," the prefix "re" certainly was a central aspect of 2009's Earth Day celebrations. As Jarvis stated, it is time to "bring back" grass-roots activism and collective change. While the language arts might not normally be the first thing that pops into one's mind when thinking of the environment, it is important to remember that we are all in this together - While the farmer may plant the seeds, true growth cannot happen without the essence of the sun, fertile grounds, and the welcoming of the rain.

*For more information on Earth Day 2009, visit [www.fredonia.edu/gogreen](http://www.fredonia.edu/gogreen) or contact Dr. Christina Jarvis at [jarvisc@fredonia.edu](mailto:jarvisc@fredonia.edu)*

By: Kayla Maclachlan

## Sigma Tau Delta's Annual Bedtime Stories is a Hit

On March 30th, SUNY Fredonia's English National Honors Society, Sigma Tau Delta, hosted its annual Bedtime Stories event. Children, students, and faculty members alike gathered in McEwen Hall to hear professors of the English Department read aloud their favorite bedtime story.

This year, the night was made even more special because the event was kicked off by none other than President Hefner himself. The President set the mood by reading a heart-warming tale about a little bear who was afraid to fall asleep in the dark.

Also reading for the event was Professor Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Profes-

sor Melissa Wendell, and Dr. Ann Siegle-Drege.

This event is a way for Sigma Tau Delta to give back to the community of Fredonia and Dunkirk. Every year the Honors Society invites the children of Wheelock Preschool to come join in the festivities. When a member of Sigma Tau Delta thanked the mother of a Wheelock student for coming, the mother replied, "When my son heard about the event, he was so excited. I had no choice but to come."

The night was a fun way to de-stress and share some laughs. A lavish spread of refreshments were provided by Sigma Tau Delta with the help of the Faculty Student Association.

Perhaps Dr. Emily VanDette, co-advisor of Sigma Tau Delta,



Dr. Ann Siegle-Drege reads to eager listeners.

best sums of the night: "Bedtime Stories was a welcome and refreshing break from routines for everyone involved and a wonderful moment of some of Fredonia's finest students reaching out to the community."

By: Catherine Colmerauer



Mary Sitzenstatter, Peace Corps Volunteer.

## Alumni News and Updates

The English Department wishes to stay connected with students beyond graduation. We are proud to acknowledge what alumni have been working on, and love to share their success with others. If you are an alumni, please contact [Adrienne.mccormick@fredonia.edu](mailto:Adrienne.mccormick@fredonia.edu), and let us know what you have been up to. We would love to share your story in our newsletter!

- Russ Leo, Class of 2001, will complete his Phd. At Duke University in May 2009, and has received a three year post-doctoral fellowship at Princeton University.
- Mary Sitzenstatter, Class of 2003, is a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, West Africa. Mary works with English teachers and teaches English.
- Sean Kirst, Class of 1989, has just won the Ernie Pyle Award for his work as a journalist for the *Post-Standard*. ( For more, see interview with Kirst on page 6.)

## Author Karen Russell Visits SUNY Fredonia

On April 15, 2009, SUNY Fredonia was honored to host author Karen Russell as she led eager students and faculty in a craft talk and a reading from her award-winning collection of short stories: *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. Completing her debut collection of short stories at 25 years of age, the fledging author was chosen as one of *Granta's* Best Young American Novelists.

At her craft talk in Fenton Hall, Russell talked about how to infuse magical and fantastical elements into writing. She stressed that, in order to accomplish this successfully, one must also instill a sense of normalcy within the story to keep the reader grounded. Russell admitted that she draws inspiration from authors such as Franz Kafka, Italo Calvino, George Saunders, and Flannery O'Connor.

Russell set her audience at ease with her friendly and humble dispo-



*"I wanted to do the magic that was done unto me by other authors."*

*-Karen Russell*

sition. When asked by a student about how Russell came to be a writer, Russell modestly joked that she became a writer out of default. "It was the only thing I was good at," she chuckled. "I was an anxious kid who was bad at sports." Russell's fans were tickled to discover that the author was every bit as humorous in person as she is in her stories. When she read from the title story of *St. Lucy's*, the audience roared with laughter as she growled out the voices of her wolfish characters.

Russell admits that she has been an avid reader since childhood. It is this passion for reading that help to inspire her to write. "I really wanted to do the magic than was done unto me by other authors," Russell explained. Russell received her MFA at Columbia, where she currently teaches writing.

## SUNY Fredonia Now Offers Writing Minor

Do you love to write poetry or short stories? Beginning in Fall 2009 students will be able to pursue their interests in the creative writing field and get credit for it! There will be a smorgasbord of classes to choose from including: an introduction to creative writing, poetry writing, fiction writing, literary publishing, and many more.

The former chair of the English Department, Dr. McVick-

er, hashed out the foundation of the minor and formed a sub-committee of professors who were interested in bringing this idea to reality. This committee led by the current chair of the department Dr. McCormick, included Professors Natalie Gerber, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Dustin Parsons and instructor Sarah Gerkenmeyer. They all worked very hard in creating this minor and deserve great thanks.

This minor gives students opportunities to apply their writing in a functional setting where their individual talents will be used and reflected upon. In a short interview with Professor Nezhukumatathil, the poetry professor involved, the topic of opportunity was heavy with excitement:

Q: What influence does this minor have on the English Department? Do you think it brings a

different group of people to the department?

A: I think it encourages students who have an aptitude and interest in writing—which ideally, all English majors already have, but this allows for a more concentrated focus on the art and craft of writing and helps foster a writing community even more.

When asked what her thoughts were on the value of creative writing and the significance of this minor, she replied:

“The workshops in the minor are dynamic—they change from

semester to semester to highlight the vibrant and changing contemporary literature scene. The professors are actively publishing writers and instructors. They have published books, their work appears regularly in great literary journals, and they participate in national writing conferences and workshops. So if you take a writing workshop in the minor, you are immediately connected with the current trends and styles and movements in American writing. And because we have a terrific Mary Louise White Visiting Writers Program, you’ll have a chance to meet

and work with nationally known writers to our campus, people like Naomi Shihab Nye, Steve Almond, Denise Duhamel, Patrick Rosal, Benjamin Percy, and Edwidge Danticat.”

Thanks to motivated and inspirational professors, such as Professor Nezhukumathil, the Fredonia’s English Department is breaking old boundaries and getting creative. With the establishment and anticipated success of the new Writing Minor, it is hoped that in the near future there will be a Writing Major for the impassioned writers of SUNY Fredonia.

By: Christa Schreckengost

## English Department hosts class in NYC

For the first time ever, the English Department is offering the “Page and Stage: NYC Drama” Course, ENGL 399, taught by Dr. Ann Siegle-Drege. Dr. Siegle-Drege is a professor of Contemporary and Modern Drama, as well as a professor of Drama and Film.

Throughout her teaching career, one of Dr. Siegle-Drege’s biggest regrets is that her students could not see the assigned plays in live performances.

“New York City is a wonderful resource that is so close to us,” Siegle-Drege explains. “So often I have thought that it would be a great experience to take a drama class there.”

When SUNY Fredonia introduced its May Term, Dr. Siegle-Drege seized the opportunity to make her dream become a

reality.

Dr. Siegle-Drege liked the idea of teaching a May term class because it would not interfere with students wishing to enroll in Summer I or Summer II Sessions.

From Monday May 18–Thursday May 21, Dr. Siegle-Drege will teach a crash course on three renowned plays: Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and Tracy Lett’s *August: Osage County*.

The class will convene on Monday at SUNY Fredonia for major course preparation and discussion of the three plays.

On Tuesday morning they will catch a train to NYC, where they will spend 3 days and 2 nights in a Guesthouse off Union Square. Here, they will

hold class discussions, but the students will also have plenty of time to tour the city, especially the theater district.

One of the highlights of the trip will be experiencing the stellar cast of *Waiting for Godot*, which stars Nathan Lane, John Goodman, Bill Irwin, and John Glover.

“Page and Stage: NYC Drama” is a four day, 1.5 credit course. The brevity of the trip is designed to make the class an affordable opportunity to students.

There are still a couple of slots available for the course, so those who are interested should contact Dr. Siegle-Drege as soon as possible. The English Department hopes to offer this course again next year.

By: Catherine Colmerauer

## One-on-One with National Journalism Awardee

The English Department newsletter recently had the opportunity to speak with Sean Kirst, SUNY Fredonia alumni Class of '89. Now a journalist for *The Post-Standard*, Kirst was recently honored with the national Ernie Pyle Award for his work in human interest stories. This prestigious award is quite an achievement, and the English Departmental Newsletter offers its congratulations. Below is a Q&A with Kirst and the editor of the newsletter.



*Photo provided by Syracuse Post – Standard, taken by Dick Blume.*

### **Q: What do you love about journalism?**

A: The reason I got into it in the first place was the opportunity - or the hope, at least - of bringing a voice to people who don't always have a voice. When I stop feeling that way, it will be time to get out of the business. It is a wonderful profession on countless levels: Day in and day out, I get the chance to meet thoughtful and fascinating people - some famous, most not - who always remind me to sharpen and broaden my own outlook on the world. Besides all that, the job brings a wonderful sense of freedom, even as it demands a sense of responsibility. I've never stopped feeling lucky to be a columnist.

### **Q: As a teenager, you worked for the *Dunkirk Observer*. Did you ever write for our campus newspaper?**

A: Sure. For a while, as a freshman, I was sports editor for *The Leader*. Even then, I was figuring out that I didn't really want to end up in sports. By my senior year, I was writing an occasional column or essay. *The Leader* gave me a lot of leeway in playing around with styles and forms. Some of it worked. Some of it didn't. But I was young, and that's how you learn.

### **Q: Did you always plan on a career in Journalism, or were there other paths that sparked your interest during your time at SUNY Fredonia?**

A: I always knew I wanted to write. I played with the idea of being a teacher - teaching is a well-loved passion in my family - but I didn't think I'd be that good at it. At one point, I might have thought about majoring in his-

tory. In the end, I was always pulled back toward writing.

### **Q: Is there any advice you wish you had while your were majoring in English at Fredonia that you can pass onto current students?**

A: Advice can be a dangerous game. Individuals are individuals. But I'll tell you what worked for me.

The first one is simple. If I could do it again, I'd learn Spanish. There have been countless times when I could have used Spanish as a journalist, and I think the music and logic of the language would have helped me as a writer. That's one. Another piece of advice is to find great writers you're passionate about, get away from the computer, and read. Have the patience to read. Spelling, rhythm, grammar ... a lot of that is imprinted knowledge. Reading is an act of patience and humility. And writing is all about humility.

Here is the dangerous advice: The best move I ever made was to get away from writing and journalism for a while in my early 20s. I went to work, through necessity, at a residential center for teens in trouble with the law and got an education beyond words. It was hard work, and it was life-changing. It destroyed some illusions, but strengthened some ideals. To me, you can't write about the world without seeing a little bit of the world - as a person who lives there.

Nothing was as valuable as real life, and real work, and banging around with real people in a situation where I couldn't use the newsroom as a sanctuary. But that's just me.

**Q: Do you have any favorite Fredonia memories?**

A: I have wonderful memories of quiet summer mornings at Reed Library, when I'd do research on Sam Clemens and his family ties to Dunkirk and Fredonia. Or of the chicken wings at BJs. Or of hanging around the old Union, shooting 'straight pool' for hours with some of my buddies. Or of playing pickup hoops at Dods Hall over winter break. Or of the many great professors and instructors in the English Department. I went back recently after many decades, and Fenton Hall still had the same smell. I can't describe it. But it was home.

I loved Fredonia. I still wear a Fredonia windbreaker on spring days. For me, it was everything college is supposed to be: a sanctuary, filled with people who cared about me but were never afraid to challenge me. I did plenty of silly things, but I was lucky enough to do them in a place where I could recover. I look around me, and my entire life was profoundly affected by Fredonia. Believe me, when I go to Washington to pick up this award, they'll know where I went to school.

By: Catherine Colmerauer

*“I look around me, and my entire life was profoundly affected by Fredonia. I loved Fredonia. For me, it was everything a college is supposed to be.”*  
Sean Kirst

## Writer's Ring Involved in Community Service

This semester, Writer's Ring, the creative writing club on campus, has decided to extend its borders and volunteer within the local community. This May, club members are volunteering at Forestville Elementary School.

The elementary school has an after-school program to help students who are struggling in the areas of reading and writing. At the culmination of the program, the students are treated to a reward for all their hard work: a day with the Writer's Ring volun-

teers. Members from Writer's Ring will assist the children with their own creative endeavors. They will offer writing prompts, read stories to the children, and provide advice and encouragement to the fledgling writers. It will be an enjoyable day for all to remember.

The president of Writer's Ring, Nicole Gates, is enthusiastic with the new direction that the club has taken.

“I think that it is a really great opportunity for Writer's Ring,” said Gates. “We are

extremely happy to be able to be part of introducing creative writing to young students and hope to do it again in the future.”

This project was largely spearheaded by Junior English and Biology Major, Joshua Matecki.

Writer's Ring hopes to continue to volunteer within the local school system next year.

By: Catherine Colmerauer and Joshua Matecki

## Students Awarded at Annual English Department Ceremony

The Students for 2009 English Department Awards have been chosen. There were a record-breaking number of applicants this year, and the Department thanks all who entered. Below are the list winners.

- **Mary Louise White Poetry Award** - First Place: Elizabeth Holtan. Honorable Mentions: Samantha Stryker, Michael Morris
- **Mary Louise White Fiction Award** - First Place: Alexander Durringer. Honorable Mentions: Robert Frisk, Catherine Colmerauer, Elizabeth Holtan
- **Mary Louise White Creative Writing Award (Poetry Collection)** - First Place: Elizabeth Holtan. Honorable Mentions: Alexandra Lugo, Stephanie McCraw, Jillian Ziemianski
- **Undergraduate Writing Beyond the First Year** - First Place: Jenny Jade Albert. Honorable Mention: Catherine Colmerauer
- **Laura Foster Award**- First Place: Robert Frisk
- **Henry Salerno Scholarship** - First Place: Lindsay Coffta
- **Freshman Writing Award** - First Place: Angela Barney
- **Courts Award** - First Place: Kristin Niemi
- **Cresence Ehmke Graham Winners:** Amanda Dziewa, Jennifer Bigelow, Kayla Maclachlan, Helen Keefe, Lindsay Coffta, Elizabeth Koehler
- **Maytum Strong Winners:** Danika Johnson, Dan Lewandowski, Shane Osgood, Jessica Schaffer
- **COE Excellence in Student Teaching Winners:** Gabe Bermingham, Jason Mellen, Marnie Baker, Jenell Carapella
- **General Excellence Award for an Outstanding Graduate Student** - First Place: Sarah Schwab. Second Place: Sarah Emert
- **Graduate Research Award** - First Place: Sarah Dunlap. Second Place (tied): Sarah Emert, Justin Hobby
- **Award for Outstanding Teacher Work Sample** - First Place: Matthew Brysinski. Second Place (tied): Eric Anderson, Laura Guenther

Congratulations to the winners of the 2009 English Department Awards. Award winners will be recognized at the English Department Awards Ceremony on Friday May 8th.

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