



# Graduate Humanities

students and faculty collaboratively exploring the arts, history, culture, and literature in an open experimental multidisciplinary environment

Volume 37 Issue 1 Spring 2014 Marshall University Graduate Humanities Program

Everyone has a story to tell . . .

For the last five issues, we've interviewed graduates, faculty members, and one self-appointed groupie of the program to learn about their experiences with the humanities – their abiding interest and earnest passion for the arts, science, singing, songwriting, teaching and writing...these briefest of interviews, 1,000 words or so, merely initiated a conversation about what life means to those who've made it through the Master's level of competency and beyond.

So for this issue, we thought to give some current students air time to tell their stories about how they found their way into the Graduate Humanities Program. Jay Thomas and Brenna Craig both took Michael Workman's "Coal Mine Life, Work & Culture" class last semester and are now taking the Appalachian Literature class (along with me...hard to keep old grads away) taught by Cat Pleska.

– Trish Hatfield ('08)  
Program Assistant

## Something's going to happen

### Interview with Jay Thomas



*Jay Thomas. Born and raised in South Charleston, West Virginia. As an older student, Jay earns a WVU business degree in 1983, attends restaurant culinary school in Washington, D.C. and works for the Marriott Hotel. He returns home to West Virginia to raise his young family and open two restaurants – Bruno's and Blues BBQ & Catering. In 2008, he returns to graduate school. His passion for literature is never far from his desire to serve delicious food and craft beer.*

#### **Jay, tell us about the juxtaposition of being a businessman and a graduate student in the Humanities?**

While taking business classes at WVU, I had a wonderful professor, Dr. Sophia Blaydes. I took her basic English 101 and then I took 3 - 4 of her literature classes and developed a passion for literature. I love reading great writing.

Once I settled down back here, I really wanted to study literature on a higher level and that's why I got into the Humanities Program. It had nothing to do with trying to get a job later on. That would be nice as I start getting less physical in my restaurant work; but the enrichment and the possibilities and doors that open from studying this curriculum is amazing. Just meeting people from different walks of life... I don't know how many classes I had as an undergrad that bored me to tears; but there's never been a class yet in the Program that I haven't passionately looked forward to and had a good time. It's broadened my scope of life and people...► SEE THOMAS, PAGE 4

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# We had to make up our own mind

## Interview with Brenna Craig

*Brenna Craig. Born and raised in West Virginia. "I'm like a gypsy," she says. "I keep a lot of stuff in my car and I like to go from city to city. I never settle in one place. Why should we? There's a lot to see."*

### How did you find your way into the Humanities Program?

I graduated from Concord University in May 2011 with a history and philosophy degree. I moved back home to see how things would pan out and then I couldn't find a job with my bachelors. A friend was enrolled in a Master's program at Marshall and he really liked the classes so I thought I'd take a look at a few Master's programs. The Humanities website drew me in. I enrolled in the spring of 2012 to see what it was like, and now it's the spring of 2013. I've been taking three classes every semester plus summer classes. I figure if you get out of the school habit before you finish your degree, it's hard to go back. I should be graduating in a couple of months – if I complete everything on time.

### So besides writing your final project, you're still taking classes?

Well, I wanted to take the Appalachian Literature course...then

Eric told me that the Glenwood Foundation was providing tuition assistance to students who complete the Glenwood and History of Charleston class with good grades...it was such a deal, to have this class at half-price.

### You're taking two extra classes now?

Three. I'm also taking Eric's course on gender and cultural change... (laughter)...I couldn't help myself. They are all interesting subjects. I had to take all three. So right now I'm reading three books: *Crapalachia*; *Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins*; and *Charleston Then and Now*...(laughter)...a little all over the place.

### Tell us more about your background.

I had trouble adjusting in high school, so I read a lot. I worked hard and wanted to go to college to get away from this area of the state. Maybe ten of my high-school classmates now have a bachelor's degree. I don't know a single one who has a master's or doctorate. Most of them have gone into the

military. Our greatest asset is our people and our artisan tradition...I'd love for West Virginia to have it's own Berea. I'm a crafter. I make tie-dies. I weave, although I don't own a loom now. I do card weaving, knitting, crochet. I currently sell my crafts, and I barely break even.



My mom's family was from Crumb in Mingo, and Mom was born in Williamson. That's traditional coal mining country. My dad's father was an engineer for ConRail. His job was to check the tracks for transporting coal from here to Indiana. Both sides of my

family worked for coal and didn't realize it. And that bothers me somehow. For instance, right now, and this is funny, kind of, my mother's family's graveyard is falling in on itself, because it's built on top of an old coal mine...This was before they had regulations that you couldn't dig a coal mine underneath a cemetery. So now they go to visit graves and they're gone, they've completely fallen into the coal shafts below. Now the mines are closed but...it can be a little traumatizing to go see your families gravestones and they have completely disappeared.

► SEE CRAIG, PAGE 5

## This rumpiled land is my first love Musing by Cat Pleska, writer / faculty member

I'm enjoying teaching a class about Appalachian literature this spring. We study the literary works of those from this region who—whatever their opinion—make it clear no one is neutral about this remarkable place. In fact, despite my occasional grumblings and wishes West Virginia or Appalachia was this or that, this rumpiled land is my first love. I feel a deep connection to my welcoming hills and its spirited, friendly people.

This is still a land rich with stories, tales and legends. The literature we read allows us to share experiences that creates a strong bond and deepens our sense of personal history in one place. For those not from here, we welcome them to read our literature to know where we've been and who and what we come from: Appalachia. A given name that we have claimed as our own, defining it to mean a terrible beauty. ■

## Summer 2014 Seminars ♦ May 19 - August 11, 2014

See [www.marshall.edu/humn](http://www.marshall.edu/humn) – for more information and seminar classroom assignments.

**CULS 610 – Seminar in Appalachian Culture (Luke Eric Lassiter); Summer 1 (May 19 – August 11) online T–Course with three live meetings on Tuesday, May 20, 6-9 PM; Tuesday, June 17, 6-9 PM; and Tuesday, July 22, 6- 9 PM.** This course is an exploration of selected aspects of Appalachian culture (e.g., art, music, folklore, history, literature), emphasizing regional issues from an interdisciplinary perspective.

**HUMN 650 – Special Topics (Independent Studies arranged between instructor and student –contact Director to arrange course)** For students who need to conduct independent research and / or read-ing in a specific topic in the humanities, the Program will offer independent studies in those topics as funds allow. Contact the Director for more information. Examples of Special Topics might include: • Film Criticism •

Museum Studies • Studies in Appalachian Music • Studies in Poetry • Language and Communication.

**HUMN 680 – Independent Research Symposium (Dr. Lassiter), Arranged.** A pro-seminar required of all Humanities degree students who are beginning the thesis or final project. Arranged with the Program Director.

## Fall 2014 Seminars ♦ August 25 - December 12, 2014

See [www.marshall.edu/humn](http://www.marshall.edu/humn) – for more information and seminar classroom assignments.

**A&S 600 Directed Reading Seminar – Selected Topics: Reading American Landscapes (Arijit Sen), electronic/Skype meetings on Thursday, August 28, 7-9:50 p.m.; Thursday, October 2, 7-9:50 p.m.; and Thursday, November 13. CLASS LIMIT: 3. By permission of the Director only.** Places and landscapes frame and influence our actions and identities. Yet we rarely examine the ways we interpret and read the material world around us. Do we ever stop to ask why a gas station looks the way it does? Do we critically examine why a bank building gets built only in certain locations? Do we think that we behave in scripted ways inside a 7-11 store? The goal of this reading seminar is not only to examine "ways of reading" the built world; but also to interrogate how our individual reading practices frame the way we understand, interpret, and act in this world. *Dr. Arijit Sen is an Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, where he teaches architectural design urbanism and cultural landscapes. He is the co-coordinator of the Buildings Cultures Landscapes doctoral program initiative between the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Milwaukee. His research interests include physical and cultural landscapes of immigration in the United States.*

**CULS 612 Time & Place in Appalachia (Bob Maslowski), Tuesday, 7 – 9:50 p.m.** This interdisciplinary course orients students to the importance of geography, topography, and geology to the history and development of the Appalachian region. *Dr. Robert Maslowski, retired Archeologist for the Huntington District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, possesses extensive knowledge of Appalachian archeology, culture, and history. He was executive producer of three award winning films, Ghosts of Green Bottom, Red Salt & Reynolds, and Secrets of the Valley. His numerous publications have appeared in venues such as World Archaeology, National Geographic Society Research Reports, Pennsylvania Archaeologist, Wonderful West Virginia, and West Virginia Archeologist (which he also serves as Editor).*

**HUMN 602 Historical Studies (Luke Eric Lassiter), Wednesdays, 7 – 9:50 p.m.** Core course acquaints students with problems of historical knowledge, changes in the interpretation of history, nature of historical forces, and methods of historical research. Open to non-degree students. *Dr. Lassiter is director of the Graduate Humanities Program and professor of humanities and anthropology*

**HUMN 604 Expository Writing for Research (Cat Pleska), T, 7 – 9:50 p.m.** This core writing course develops proficiency in writing for research. Open to non-degree students. *Cat Pleska teaches writing at West Virginia State University, where she is also the Director of the WVSU Writing Center. She earned her MFA in creative nonfiction writing at Goucher College in Baltimore and is an essayist for West Virginia Public Radio.*

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## ► Jay Thomas from page 1

studying different cultures, it's taught me how to write. Before, writing was just rudimentary for me, but from Fran Simone, I learned structure and a way to present things in a very nurturing way. It's been wonderful.

### How does the Humanities support you as a business owner?

Well, here's one example: we had a miner's tribute concert on December 6. And that's really the first time I've had an event that combined what I was doing in school with my business. This was my final project for Michael Workman's coal mine life, work, and culture class. It was called, "Music from the Mountains: A Tribute Concert for the WV Miners." We didn't charge any money. We asked people for donations and raised over \$400 for the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame which enriches a lot of people's lives. We had five different local acts. Before the music started, I gave a little preamble about coal mining based on what I learned in class...I think people learned a lot.

It helped my business a little bit; but more than that, I'd like to do more of that. I have a venue here at Bruno's where I think we can do a lot of things, not necessarily musical; but get speakers here to talk about about very vital issues. I'd like to see open forums with a subject, for example, on the contamination of our water supply: Why did it happen? What's your perspective?...We'd have a couple of experts talk and have people open up in a controlled environment where you don't get somebody ranting and raving but do it in a logical, information-based way...not just to fortify people's own opinions but to be exposed to other opinions, to broaden minds a little, like the Humanities program has done for me.

### So what would it be like if we did not have the Humanities?

We never discover the truth but we get closer to it in some weird way...(laughter)...In the Introduction to the Graduate Study in the Humanities class, I'd ask Dr. Lassiter, "What's the truth?" And he would answer, "I don't really know. But we're talking about what could be the truth, or an element of it...Or is there really a truth?" ...And I like that now. I understand what he's talking about. It took me a long time to get my mind around that – I wanted some concrete answers about

right and wrong, and as we now know, there aren't that many of them. (laughter again.)

**Now I don't just hear something and take it for the truth. I ask, "Who's the source?" "What's the context?" "What's the other side say?"**

### And you're comfortable with not having concrete answers?

Very much so. I was extremely uncomfortable with it at first. That's what I'm talking about when I say how it's helped me. Now I don't just hear something and take it for the truth. I ask, "Who's the source?" "What's the context?" "What's the other side say?"

### Any final comments?

Well, since I don't really have a goal for taking classes, *per se*, I just know that at the end of this something is going to happen for me...I enjoy these classes so much...through the knowledge I gained and enrichment, I have a passion to try to help this state. I had an idea about why people should get into the Humanities – the amount of research and how we learn to gather research in these classes I think would be superior to what the government in West Virginia is doing to gather information. For example, and this killed me, the Governor (or his assistant) had a little forum about diversifying the economy. They talked around and around it. And the assistant to the Governor said, "We talk about diversifying all the time." This guy from the audience got up and asked for three examples of what it was they talked about to diversify the economy. And he didn't have an answer! The assistant that was leading the forum didn't have an answer. I thought, OK, this is a great chance for us (Humanities students) to talk with people, gather research, see what other states, other countries have done...I think we could really tear it up. We'd be a great service to the state with our research skills. Our biggest problem is keeping people here and getting employed in something that matters. We all care here, and there's something to do here. ■

*"Growing up [in Appalachia] is what made me a writer – staying here is what keeps me the kind of writer I want to be."*

Denise Giardina, WV author/activist

## Recent Graduates

### Lauren Goodwin '13

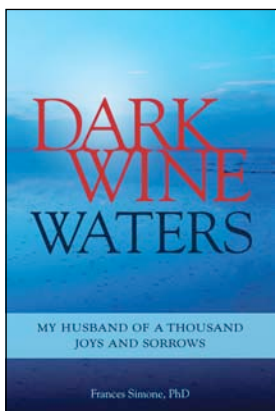
Lauren's thesis/project was "A Snapshot of Rural Healthcare in West Virginia." (Cultural Studies) "I have found that since completing the program certain subjects have piqued my interests, so the program essentially encouraged what I hope will be a lifetime of learning."

### Carolyn Quinlan '13

Carolyn's thesis/project was "1953: Saint Albans Little League Takes to the Field." (Cultural/Historical Studies) Carolyn is Sr. Administrative Secretary for the Graduate Humanities Program.



Lauren Goodwin Carolyn Quinlan



Coming in July!

## Dr. Fran Simone's Memoir

*Dark Wine Waters: A Husband of a Thousand Joys and Sorrows*, will be published by Central Recovery Press, July, 2014. It deals with the tragic ending of a marriage challenged by addiction.

Dr. Simone, retired MU faculty and graduate professor of the Graduate Humanities Program, will be leading a **book/discussion series on selected memoirs** at the Kanawha County Library which begins on March 24th, 2014. The theme is journeys. Information will also be posted at the Kanawha County Library website.

Starting March 24

## ► Brenna Craig from page 2

West Virginia doesn't have many native West Virginians to speak for them. Outsiders come in and they run our government, outsiders come in and they run our corporations. West Virginians don't speak up for themselves. And I feel it's because we don't have an educated populace. History is written from the perspective of the winner. Whoever wins the war or the land, writes the history. Coal has written our history. But, right now, anyone can write our history because of the Internet. Everyone can access it so it's crucial that we pay attention. That's part of what we discovered in the Coal mining

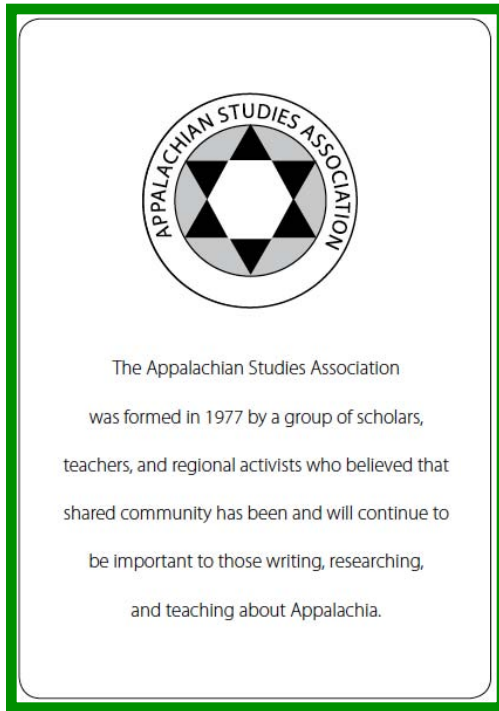
**The main reason I took the coal mining class was because it was taught by a coal miner who also had his Ph.D in history.**

class, that all these layers influence what we don't realize. For my project in the History of Coal course, I attended the Mountain Justice Fall Summit 2013, to see what activism looks like in our state. Two days of lectures and workshops...the group that really struck home was Coal River Mountain Watch. Because they go into impoverished communities and ask, "What can we do to help?" More than just talk, it's action, trying to help people directly with projects like community gardens,

economic diversity, sludge safety issues, training citizens to speak out for clean air and water...I'm very much into this social justice. The main reason I took the coal mining class was because it was taught by a coal miner who also had his Ph.D in history. He seemed like the perfect person to learn from, because you get to see both sides. And it was wonderful because he wasn't opinionated either way – he gave us the facts. He didn't try to sway us one way or another. He told us that we had to make up our own minds, now that we had enough information to understand coal. That's why I like the Humanities program, and keep taking classes. It gives me an opportunity three days a week to meet other people and have a discussion about ideas. ■



## 37th Annual Appalachian Studies Conference



### **New Appalachia: Known Realities and Imagined Possibilities**

March 28-30, 2014

Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia

Registration onsite or online at  
[appalachianstudies.org/annualconference](http://appalachianstudies.org/annualconference)

### **CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS**

In addition to a keynote presentation by renowned Appalachian writer Silas House, the conference will feature a series of three “New Appalachia” plenary sessions. The mixed-genre, interdisciplinary sessions will draw on everything from history and literature to music and storytelling. The aim is to deepen our understanding of Appalachia and of our human experience more broadly, by engaging with ideas—and with each other—in lively, innovative ways.



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