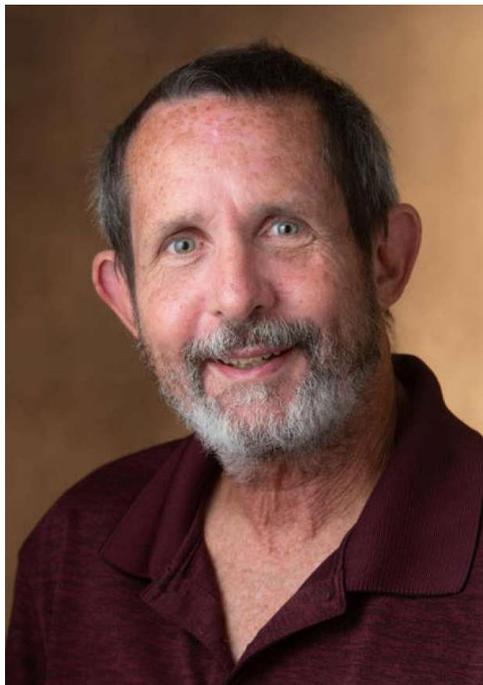


SEGUE: SIUE's O'Brien receives award for scholarship in bioethics, eugenics within disabled populations

Recognized for efforts in bioethics, eugenics within disabled populations

Madeline Deardorff; For the Intelligencer; Thursday, March 7, 2019



O'Brien

EDWARDSVILLE — On this week's episode of Segue, the weekly radio show that explores the lives and work of the people of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, co-host Greg Budzban, PhD, College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) dean, interviews Gerald "Jerry" O'Brien, professor in the Department of Social Work. This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. this Sunday, March 10, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.

A native St. Louisan, O'Brien earned a bachelor's in social work from the University of Missouri-St. Louis in 1982. Upon earning his MSW from the University of Missouri in Columbia, he worked as director of the Springfield Development Center in Illinois. He later achieved a doctorate from the University of Illinois

Urbana-Champaign in 1997.

O'Brien joined the SIUE faculty in 1998 and earned tenure in 2004. The professor was the chair of the Department of Social Work from 2015-2018. Primarily, his research focuses on the use of eugenics and persons with disabilities, the history of social justice and injustice, metaphor analysis, and disability policy.

Earlier this year, O'Brien became the recipient of the College's 2019 William and Margaret Going Endowed Professorship Award. The distinguished award honors faculty who fundamentally connect their scholarship to their teaching and transform students' lives.

"The Going Award is given to a faculty member who embodies the teacher-scholar model," Budzban says. "Your work and application did a great job in displaying your dedication to that model."

“Upon reading your award application, I noticed you connected your work in disability studies to the eugenics movement. I had no idea how extensive the eugenics movement was in this country during the early 20th century,”

“People [may not] know that there was an American eugenics movement in the United States that came before the Nazis,” O’Brien explains. “Many perceive the movement as radical, but it had widespread support from sitting presidents and in states throughout the country.”

According to O’Brien, over 30 states developed forced sterilization laws during that time. As many as 70,000 people were forcibly sterilized, and German eugenicists prior to Hitler’s regime found themselves worried about the American movement.

“Germans believed America was working to create the stronger race and forced them to create their own policies,” O’Brien says.

“With official sanction, was forced sterilization the primary mode of this eugenics movement in the United States?” Budzban asks.

“For the most part,” O’Brien responds. “Most states had some type of program. For instance, Illinois had involuntary institutionalization laws that forced individuals who tested as ‘morons’ into institutions.

“Another major aspect of this movement was immigration reform. Eugenics played a role in supporting the 1920s’ restrictive immigration policies, which primarily affected nations that were seen as ethnically undesirable. Unfortunately, this included countries with heavy Jewish populations. The U.S. was largely closed off to Jewish immigrants.”

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was supportive of welcoming Jewish refugees, particularly children, into the United States, a contentious point between her and husband, President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Much of the southern United States had policies that condoned the forced sterilization of African Americans who were part of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children federal assistance program or received similar benefits. Unfortunately, most states found these sterilization programs as beneficial.

“Flash forward to the present day, your Going Award application related the eugenics movement to the Human Genome Project,” Budzban says. “This desire to eradicate disease is not all bad, of course. There are dangers to this type of research.”

“Indeed,” O’Brien mentions. “Writers in the disabilities movement worry that too much emphasis has been placed on cures and not enough focus will be put on accommodating those with disabilities.”

A large part of O’Brien’s professional experience prior to becoming an educator focused primarily on how society perceives disabilities and treats people with disabilities. After earning a

bachelor's in 1982, he worked as a house parent with St. Louis Arc, a professional organization that empowers people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to lead better lives.

“Initially, I was very scared and anxious about entering the position,” O’Brien says. “Once I started the job, I loved it and was very comfortable with the people I worked with. I wanted to understand why I came in with those hesitations and fear to work with those folks.”

“There have been some positive strides within the disabilities movement,” Budzban says. “What do you feel our current response is to people with disabilities?”

“Many people with disabilities have found themselves uncomfortable with some of the new terminology and embraced some previously used terms. However, they care much more about how we treat them than how we talk about them.

“There is a perception that we treat disabled persons better now because we are more enlightened, but better treatment and better accessibility is due to the fact that America is a fairly wealthy country. I also fear that when we experience tragic events within our country, people will look to those with disabilities as one of the most viable scapegoat groups.”

As the Going Award winner, O’Brien will present a public lecture in fall 2019. He will discuss the relationship between historical eugenics and contemporary bioethics with a disability perspective. He plans to develop partnerships with local disability agencies and involve members of the local disability community in his presentation.

To hear Budzban and O’Brien’s entire conversation, tune in to Segue at 9 a.m. on Sunday, March 10, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.