

Regional

DeGarmo can explain the nuclear threat

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis, the closest we have come to the annihilation of civilization as we know it. This year we are witnessing the nuclear catastrophe in Japan, and we continue to be concerned about nuclear material falling into the hands of terrorists.

These are all big problems. To better understand them, they need to be put into context. Few people are better prepared to do that than Denise DeGarmo, an associate professor and chair of the department of political science at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

DeGarmo was born in Syracuse, N.Y., and obtained her bachelor's degree in political science at State University of New York in Buffalo and her doctorate in international relations and comparative politics from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

Her interest in the politics surrounding nuclear weapons and energy is due to her father's involvement with ballistic and anti-ballistic missile systems during the Cold War.

"I wasn't aware of what my father did until later in life," said DeGarmo. "He was a cold-warrior. That led me to do some soul searching. I soon learned that a lot of the attitudes we have regarding weapons of mass destruction come from individuals that made weapons of that kind."

Her father was involved in the Cuban missile crisis and received threats — most likely from Soviet agents — during that time. "I remember large black cars following us to school," DeGarmo said. "I remember telling that to our parents only to be told that it was for our own protection."

DeGarmo has studied how the Kennedy Administration dealt with that crisis and she thinks that JFK showed a great deal of restraint by looking for alternative mea-

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

sures that allowed both the Soviets and the Cubans to come out from the crisis with some honor.

"In all the courses on international relations, we spend time on nuclear weapons and the Cuban missile crisis, and students show a great deal of interest in it," DeGarmo said. "I ask them to look at the Cuban and American perspectives on it. We are certainly lucky not ending in a confrontation.

"Students are surprised when I tell them that there are still 30,000 nuclear warheads that could be used at any time and 15,000 that could be put into use in between 15 and 30 minutes. I also show them the targeting maps and tell them that if we were to eliminate the B-1 bomber program we would have enough money to allow all of the college students to study for free. Yet, some think we need each one of those weapons," DeGarmo said, adding that she is not very hopeful that we have really learned lessons from the past.

"We will not get rid of all nuclear weapons," she said. "It is in the human psyche. We will buy weapons before spending money on education or health. States want to get nuclear weapons, and if not, then they will go for chemical or biological ones."

Interestingly, the St. Louis area has a long history dealing with radioactive waste. "I found out about this while working in Vieques, Puerto Rico," DeGarmo said. "I learned that nuclear waste was being sent to St. Louis. This area was the chief producer of uranium metal for the first sustained atomic reaction in Chicago in 1942 and was the leading producing site of uranium through



Denise DeGarmo on a recent visit to the Arecibo observatory in Puerto Rico. Photo courtesy of Carroll Lamar.

1968."

She said she is concerned that we have still not developed the appropriate technology and policies to deal with nuclear waste,

whether coming from nuclear weapons or from nuclear power plants. She said she believes that what recently happened in Japan shows that we are not really prepared

to deal with nuclear accidents, even in the nation considered the best prepared in the world to deal with earthquakes.

DeGarmo recently took a group of students to see the very first plutonium ever made at Argonne National Laboratory near Chicago. It was produced during the first atomic sustained reaction in December 1942.

"It was one of the most enjoyable moments I had as a teacher, because you can really see what happened," said DeGarmo. "The students were very excited.

They had the epiphany of seeing how things developed and to think what it would be like if we did not have these weapons."

She also teaches courses on terrorism and is concerned by the low level of understanding of the issue by Americans.

"Americans are not well informed. We are America-centered. Other countries have dealt with it for a long time. We take it very personal, nationalistic.

"The fact of the matter is that the original tea parties were terrorists. You need to open their minds and challenge their assumptions," said DeGarmo about Americans. "That challenges our notion of who Americans are."

DeGarmo sees other threats on the horizon such as cyber terrorism.

"It is a real threat," she said. "Even the most innocent of us could find a hole navigating the Web site of the Department of Defense.

"We need to be more attentive to what we place on the Internet. Identity theft has taught us that there is some information that should not be there."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard at 9 a.m. Sundays on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.