

Regional

Geography more than just maps and capitals

Many people have a cartoonish view that geographers are people who spend their time memorizing the capitals of states and countries. While they certainly possess this knowledge, this common view is far from a complete picture of the work of today's geographers. A case in point is Susan Hume, an associate professor in the department of geography at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

□ A native of Indianapolis, Ind., she obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees in geography from Indiana University at Bloomington and her doctorate in geography from the University of Oregon. Although she started as a biology major in college, she moved towards geography because it crosses both the natural and social sciences.

"I was really struggling with that because I started thinking that I couldn't imagine just focusing on one thing," she said. "I love to be able to reach across disciplines." Her first major international experience was to a country few people have even heard of: Malawi.

"Malawi is in Southern Africa. It is about the size of the state of Tennessee. It is a long narrow country, so if you took Tennessee and flipped it on its end that is what the country is like," Hume explained. "When I was an exchange student there in my senior year as an undergraduate, the United Nations ranked it as the sixth poorest country in the world and it is still a very poor country. Yet it is such an exquisitely beautiful place.

"I found the people to be very open and hospitable. It was so common to ride a public bus someplace and strike up a conversation with the person next to me and by the end of the ride they were inviting me home to dinner to meet their family."

Her experience in Malawi led her to become interested in studying the experience of Africans in the United States.

"I have focused on different populations," she said. "I spent some time in the city of Portland, Ore., at a refugee resettlement center. I talked to people who had been forced to leave their countries for various reasons. They had a different set of struggles. They weren't sure initially of where they would end up and they were accepted by



Picture courtesy of Julie Schrage

(left to right) Laura Waterworth, Dawn Hyman, Matthew Eduakwa, Mike McCafferty, and Dr. Susan Hume.

the U.S. government to resettle in Portland. Oftentimes they hadn't studied English before they arrived." She said that many of the people were educated and had job skills, but they weren't considered the equivalent to training in the United States, keeping many out of the job market.

"It was interesting and frustrating at times to see the struggle they were going through," Hume said. "A woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who had to flee during

political uprisings there had been an attorney and spoke three languages, but not English. So she struggled to learn to speak English. She knew that she couldn't be an attorney again because she was raising children and she felt like she needed to do whatever she could to get a job and support her children and get them off to college. So she was actually working on becoming a paralegal." Hume said she feels sadness for people who have to take a step back in their own careers in order

to help their families survive.

She has also studied African university students who come to the United States. "I try to show that the kind of reception people get when they wind up in the United States really influences their experience and how they perceive themselves," she said. "I interviewed students in Eugene, Ore., which is a very white place. And while the university has many students from East Asia, they only had something like 45 students all together

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from the African continent." She interviewed a young man from Benin in West Africa, who said he was the only person from that country at the university.

"As a result, what I saw from those students is that they tend to create an African community just so they can feel a connection to home even though they are interacting with people from different parts of the African continent who, culturally and in so many ways, are very different," she said. "Yet they created a community because they still felt like they had more in common with those people."

Hume is now researching Bosnians living in south St. Louis. "St. Louis has the largest Bosnian population in the United States," she said. "The Bosnians first came in larger numbers in the 1990s as refugees. Just a few thousand were resettled in the 90s and early 2000s. They started opening up businesses and they have been incredibly successful, particularly along Gravois Ave. in south St. Louis." Because of their success in St. Louis, Hume said that a new phenomenon has emerged – secondary migration.

"As an ethnic geographer I am really interested in this phenomenon," Hume said. "That is where we have Bosnians who had settled in other parts of the United States, not been as successful in those host communities, and have now migrated a second time to south St. Louis. It was a part of the city that had seen better times, yet they have been able to open up a lot of shops and restaurants and they have bought houses. And now it is interesting to see 20 years later how they are buying houses and moving into the suburbs. So it's the same pattern in immigration that we have seen for a hundred years."

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