

Creative writing MFA sparks passion

Segue

At Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, one of the institution's long-term goals includes developing enhanced curricula to support students' learning.

In 2017, the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and Department of English Language announced it would begin offering a master's of fine arts in creative writing, allowing graduate students the opportunity to pursue careers as poets or fiction writers in academia or in other writing-related fields. At the beginning of the fall 2018 term, the MFA program welcomed its first class of students.

On this week's episode of *Segue*, SIUE's premier radio show, co-host Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, speaks with Josh Kryah, PhD, and Tiana Clark, associate professors in the Department of English Language and Literature. The trio shares an introspective conversation about the professors' journey to campus and the power behind the written word.

This episode of *Segue* will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 30, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

A St. Louis native, Kryah received his master's from the University of Iowa and doctorate from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. He was a faculty member at UNLV and George Mason University. He was also a writer and poet in residence at Lynchburg College and the University of Mississippi prior to joining SIUE.

"I was away from the area for many years, but I always knew I wanted to come back, espe-

cially now that I have a young family," Kryah says. "I'd known about SIUE, and poets Eugene Redmond and Allison Funk as teachers, and I actually knew them as a young person doing poetry readings in St. Louis."

"Tiana, you're brand new to our campus!" Budzban exclaims. "Talk about what brought you here."

Clark grew up in Nashville and southern California. She graduated with a bachelor's in arts in Africana and women's studies from Tennessee State University before pursuing an MFA at Vanderbilt University.

"I was finishing my last semester at Vanderbilt when I received an amazing email from Josh who told me that the Department loved my work and what I was doing," Clark says. "I was also recommended by Allison Joseph, a great poet at SIU Carbondale. Josh reached out, asked if I wanted to visit campus and asked if I potentially wanted a job here."

"I was so unbelievably fortunate. As we all know, it can be difficult to get a job in creative writing. I received that email, came for the campus visit and had a wonderful time! I fell in love with the students right away."

"We were excited for you to come on board, but before joining us, you were awarded a year-long fellowship position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. How was that experience?" Budzban inquires.



Tiana Clark

"Very cold!" Clark reminisces. "It was amazing. I was very fortunate. It is a very prestigious fellowship and they only take five writers a year. I am grateful that you allowed me to take that year for that program. It was sort of a reconnaissance mission where I found out what made an MFA program work at the ground level, and I got more experience teaching under my belt."

Clark also found time to finish writing her book, "I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood," during her time in Wisconsin. The University of Pittsburgh Press published the poetry book on Sept. 18.

Over time, some of the world's greatest poets and writers have masterfully expressed what many find difficult to explain, particularly when it comes to the political and social struggles throughout history.



Joshua Kryah

"Today, we're living in an interesting political and sociological climate," Budzban reflects. "I will argue that some things feel chaotic. In your minds, what does poetry and creative writing do to speak to our experience?"

"One of my favorite quotes is from June Jordan, who says, 'Poetry is a political act, because it involves telling the truth,'" Clark mentions. "In the current political climate when truth is constantly being attacked, poems have the capability to speak to the type of emotional truth that might be truer than the actual truth. It is quite powerful for me as a poet and also for students who might find themselves in a state of disorientation."

"Poetry is very urgent and necessary in this current climate. This new age and digital renaissance allows poems to be

passed so quickly, so students scrolling through the slop of social media might see a poem slip through, and it might make them feel alive, open, alert to the world and awake to something they haven't thought about."

"Ideas of social and cultural chaos have always been around in my life, but they always seem to rise and fall," Kryah mentions. "We're definitely hitting a large wave. With poets like Tiana writing today, we are definitely seeing a push of poets expressing themselves."

"Poetry doesn't have to be some idyllic place that is taken away from the world. It uses the world as a forum to discuss the issues at play. There is a lot of poetry that directly engages with what is happening right now, in this particular moment, and that should be encouraging to current or potential students. Poetry also does not have to be a rarified form that is so far off, scary or only for smart or elite people. It comes down to the level of expression, the language you are able to use ... we've only scratched the surface."

To hear more of Budzban, Kryah and Clark's conversation, including more about the new program, evaluating how we use metaphors to explain the world, and expressing vulnerability through the written word, tune into this week's episode of *Segue* at 9 a.m. Sunday, Sept. 30 on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

By Madelaine Deardeuff, SIUE Marketing & Communications