

Kathryn Bentley

Segue • SIUE

Friday, June 8, 2018

SIUE's Bentley Contributes to Flourishing Arts Scene, Builds Black Studies Program

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville plays a pivotal role in strengthening the regional economy partially through contributing to a flourishing artistic presence in the Metro East.



This week's episode of Segue, the University's premier radio show on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound features College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Dean Greg Budzban, PhD, and Kathryn Bentley, MFA, associate professor in the Department of Theater and Dance and director of the Black Studies program.

This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. Sunday, June 10.

Bentley has a long history at SIUE, earning a bachelor's in theater and dance. She studied for a while in Chicago, completed an internship with the Black Repertory Theater in St. Louis, and then moved to New York for 10 years. After returning to St. Louis in 2000, her mentor, Bill Grivna, encouraged her to pursue graduate school. She completed her master's in fine arts (directing) in 2004, and secured an appointment as an adjunct instructor at SIUE.

In New York, she worked with several community theater groups. Bentley acted in a number of local plays and did some commercials to pay the bills. Bentley participated in regional theater work, including appearing in a couple of August Wilson plays. Bentley met Wilson and networked through Wilson and his friends. Bentley ended up in Harlem doing arts management and developing theater curricula for Blackberry Productions. Bentley directed SIUE's production of Wilson's "*Gem of the Ocean*" in 2017. Bentley spent a year with the students laying historical and artistic groundwork in preparation. The students involved were thrilled with the production. Budzban commented on the brilliance of Wilson's work, and the beginnings of contemporary recognition of his genius.

Bentley has worked closely with the Black Theatre Workshop (BTW) since 2004. The inspiration was to bring non-traditional voices to the stage. The BTW presents a major performance annually, some original and others from established playwrights.

Support from the College of Arts and Sciences' Targeted Funding Initiative (TFI) allowed the BTW to host SIUE alumni Joel King and Curtis Lewis in this spring. Both are established producers who work with local groups and productions at the national level. They participated as "special guest performers."

The TFI program, created by Budzban, offers a way to continuously innovate and find novel ways of doing things. It utilizes funding acquired through the College's Winter Session courses and is supplemented with other internal CAS funds.

Thanks to the TFI grant, Bentley was able to bring the Black theater experience to 53 students at the SIUE East St. Louis Charter High School (CHS) through a TFI residency. The eight-week residency included a "near-peer" mentorship model where theater performance students Justin Truman and Michael Watkins assisted Bentley.

Budzban emphasized that such interventions are excellent means of integrating the Charter School into SIUE's larger community. "This is the kind of program that helps Charter School students identify with SIUE, and to visualize themselves at the University as students and participants," he said.

Bentley hopes to bring the same spirit of inclusion and collaboration to the Black Studies program, noting the richness of its interdisciplinary approach is great for the campus and the greater community.

Bentley is interested in continuing the development of a new "cohort modeled" Black Studies course, a reciprocal process of "give and take". Sandra Weissinger, PhD, assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice studies, developed the initial course design with former Black Studies Director Prince Wells III. All incoming students enrolled in the minor will take this as an introductory course. The hope is to provide both a focus and a sense of the essence of the Black Studies minor. Bentley is committed to involving the students' voices in shaping the program.

Bentley also plans to engage the Black Studies students and faculty in a brown bag book club this fall, beginning with the book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, by Resmaa Menakem.

Tune in on Sunday at 9 a.m. on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound to hear the conversation between Budzban and Bentley in its entirety.

By Vicki Daggett, SIUE College of Arts & Sciences