

# Going Award Lecture

Associate Professor Jessica DeSpain

Department of English Language and Literature



**November 29, 2018 - Friends Corner of Lovejoy Library**

Join us for a reception with light refreshments and a digital storytelling gallery at 6 p.m. followed by Dr. DeSpain's lecture at 7 p.m.

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
**EDWARDSVILLE**  
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

We construct our sense of self through threads of narrative. Our tellings of the first time we rode a bike, broke a curfew, moved to a new place, or watched a loved one decline punctuate our lives. Yet, it has become increasingly difficult to communicate stories of ourselves and to listen to and empathize with the stories of others. In her lecture, Dr. DeSpain will discuss her work in the field of age studies, which emphasizes how narratives both personal and cultural inform our perspective on stages of life and the responsibility we bear for those younger and older than ourselves and for generations to come. Several digital stories will be on display during the reception.

## **"Maybe Life is Only Stories:" SIUE's DeSpain Talks of Bridging Generational Divides through Digital Storytelling**

December 6, 2018, 8:45 AM

Judgments are often cast on who or what comprises the traits of a certain generation. But what if we rid ourselves of generalizations and pervasive stereotypes through the simple act of listening?

What if instead of perpetuating negative assumptions, we engaged in conversation and shared stories to gain a bit more clarity?

The scholarly work of SIUE's Jessica DeSpain, PhD, is asking and answering such questions by coordinating intergenerational conversations and sharing them via digital storytelling.

She is principal investigator of a \$100,000

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Access Grant that is expanding the "Conversation Toward a Brighter Future" program, in partnership with the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation, SIUE's Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship (IRIS) Center, and the Madison County Regional Office of Education.

DeSpain is an associate professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' (CAS) Department of English Language and Literature and co-director of SIUE's IRIS Center. As the recipient of the 2018 William and Margaret Going Endowed Professorship Award, DeSpain presented a public lecture entitled "Maybe Life is Only Stories," on Thursday, Nov. 29.

"Intergenerational communication is fraught with misunderstandings," DeSpain said, "because the young and old have come of age during different historical periods with varying cultural norms and communication styles. By building digital narratives about what it means to be a particular age, both locally and cross-culturally, the project includes students and the community in a conversation about how we can value differences and speak across generational divides."



The Going Award is the College of Arts and Sciences' most distinguished award.

"This award is expressly for faculty who are at the forefront of their field in scholarship, but who find innovative ways to bring that scholarship into the classroom to enrich their students," said CAS Dean Greg Budzban, PhD. "Dr. DeSpain's work with intergenerational conversation is wonderful. It's enriching, and it brings the humanities alive in a way, using digital technology."

Prior to DeSpain's presentation, attendees viewed a digital storytelling gallery created by students in her Honors 250 course. Each of her students was assigned a different stage of life and tasked with sharing their interviewee's story through a variety of visual, literary and audio activities, including scriptwriting, interviewing, video production and digital visualization.

"This viewing of our work really magnifies what we all created," said Noah Pyles, of Macomb, a sophomore Honors 250 student and biochemistry major. "The stage of life I was assigned was death. It was interesting to consider how different generations view death."



"I was assigned young adulthood," added sophomore electrical engineering major Anjuli Kampwerth, of Highland. "Dr. DeSpain was energetic and positive in every way throughout this project. It's cool to see how each of our individual projects came together."

"Because of my work in IRIS, which emphasizes the intersection of student engagement and community involvement, I've come to think of myself as a public humanities scholar," DeSpain noted. "Yes, I spend a lot of time doing conventional tasks like writing and research. But, I also design experiences and events that engage broader audiences in humanistic inquiry."

"Though we need intergenerational communication more than ever, it is increasingly difficult to share stories of ourselves, and to listen to and empathize with the stories of others across the chasm of age," she added. "One of the things we've learned through the development of this project is that you can talk about issues related to age, and it gives you the opportunity to talk about other markers of identity like race, class and gender without confronting them head on."

DeSpain explained how her work in the digital and public humanities seeks to address a shift in attitudes regarding colleges and universities.

"In Honors 250, we frequently talked about the impossibility of changing national polarization with a few digital stories," DeSpain said. "I'm not naïve enough to think we could do that. But, when we start with the local and the every day, when we challenge the separation between university and community, I do think we can make a difference."

**Photos:** Jessica DeSpain, PhD, presents the 2018 Going Lecture in the Friends' Corner of Lovejoy Library.

Attendees listen to and watch digital stories produced by students in Jessica DeSpain's Honors 250 course.



## CAS Presents Distinguished Going Award to Jessica DeSpain

February 12, 2018, 9:25 AM

While her scholarly interests have evolved through her academic career, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Jessica DeSpain's commitment to work rooted in service and storytelling has not. DeSpain, PhD, is a respected teacher, colleague and community member who learns by doing and ignites in others a desire to get involved and make a difference.

In recognition of her excellence in teaching and scholarship, the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) has presented its 2018 William and Margaret Going Endowed Professorship Award to DeSpain, an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, and co-director of SIUE's Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship (IRIS) Center.

The Going Award is the College's most distinguished award and is bestowed upon faculty who have produced outstanding scholarship and have connected that scholarship in fundamental ways to their teaching and transformed students' lives.



"Dr. DeSpain's excellent scholarship in the digital humanities, woven seamlessly into her teaching and student mentoring, provides an outstanding example of a true teacher-scholar," said CAS Dean Greg Budzban, PhD. "As co founder and director of the IRIS Center, her work in sustaining the digital humanities through external grant activity provides funding support that extends beyond her own department and creative activity."

From transatlantic book history to digital storytelling, DeSpain leads and contributes to multiple digital humanities projects with funding from such external agencies as the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

One of her latest endeavors in partnership with the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation involves the children, parents, and grandparents of Madison County in the creation of digital stories to help them reflect on the value and meaning of relationships that span generations.



Many of her courses also consider issues related to food access and sustainability, and she integrates her commitment to local organizations like the [Goshen Market Foundation](#) into her teaching. "I am a strong proponent for service learning," DeSpain said. "I want to disrupt the stereotype that academics, especially humanities academics, just sit in a room, read books and think. I am always considering how we can interact in the world publically, to demonstrate that we have important things to contribute to society beyond our campus. Academics like myself want to participate in worldly conversations in ways that make us a collaborative force, as opposed to the top-down, ivory tower model."

"Digital storytelling has become my central focus, because people don't feel empowered to tell their stories," she added. "They don't realize that through their own narrative they can learn about themselves, and what informs how they think about the world and the people around them. We're also not always good about listening to people's stories and are quick to make judgments."

"Digital storytelling puts the person telling the story in front, in order to let them think about what their own narratives mean and to try to understand emotions in new ways. Technology is a facilitator of that."

Students play a vital role in DeSpain's work as they inform and contribute to her innovative ideas. Since her SIUE arrival in 2008, she has continuously mentored and collaborated with undergraduate and graduate students. Participants in the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program have gained experience in their work with DeSpain on *The Wide, Wide World* digital edition.

"Working in close-knit, mentor-based, team environments with my students influences how I think about my work," she explained. "Students should not only be in the center of it, but also have a voice as producers of it."

"Many of the students I work with are English majors, who may not feel as comfortable with technology," DeSpain continued. "The IRIS Center and my digital storytelling focus reframe the situation. Instead of teaching students how to use the computer, we begin with content that interests them and presents a problem that needs solving. This has made them more willing to reach out and interact with technology in ways that they wouldn't otherwise, because they're passionate about the content."

With support from DeSpain, co-founder Kristine Hildebrandt, PhD, associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, and project manager Katie Knowles, the IRIS Center has expanded its multi-modal approach and grown its community engagement not only locally, but also on an international scale.

"The IRIS Center has a complementary goal of increasing access to technology and engaging in the humanities," DeSpain said. "When we began the Center in 2009, we wanted to create a space for faculty and students to share ideas, and we knew we needed a vision that matched SIUE as an institution. Recently, we have come to realize how central the community is to that vision, and we are excited to begin new projects that engage people of all ages in using technology to share their stories with one another."

As part of her receipt of the Going Award, DeSpain will present a public lecture entitled "Life Courses" in fall 2018. She plans to present in a gallery space where she will share stories that students and community members have been working on through her digital storytelling projects.

**Photo:** SIUE College of Arts and Sciences Going Award recipient Jessica DeSpain, PhD, associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature and co-director of the IRIS Center.

Dr. Jessica DeSpain (second from right) sits in the SIUE IRIS Center with student researchers and colleagues (L-R) Michaela Justus, Katie Knowles, Sarah Burt, Allyson Taylor and Ben Ostermeier.