

SEGUE: Historian to be inducted into SIUE Alumni Hall of Fame

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On this week's episode of Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's weekly radio program exploring the lives and work of the people on campus and beyond, Chancellor Randy Pembroke interviews Shirley Portwood, PhD, professor emerita in the Department of Historical Studies and former SIU Board of Trustees member.

This episode of Segue airs at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 22. Listeners can tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound or siue.edu/wsie.

Portwood earned both her bachelor's and master's in history from SIUE before earning a second master's and PhD in history at Washington University in St. Louis. Her teaching career began in 1972 at St. Louis Community College in Forest Park. She returned to SIUE in 1980, spending most of her career as a faculty member in the Department of Historical Studies.

"That's an amazing career, and I look forward to talking to you about that," says Pembroke. "You'll be inducted into the SIUE Alumni Hall of Fame soon, and I want to congratulate you and ask what it means to you to be recognized in that way."

"It is such an honor," says Portwood. "I was delighted to receive the news, because it was from people whom I have known for many years that recognized things that I've done over the years. That was a special pleasure."

"When we first met, I remember you talked about some of your writings and your book about your family history," Pembroke mentions. "Can you tell us a little bit about the book and what motivated you to write it?"

"My family is a family of storytellers," explains Portwood. "My father was a wonderful storyteller, and I started telling some of his stories to my grandchildren. They liked them so much that they asked me to write them down to share at show-and-tell."

Portwood began writing *Tell Us a Story: An African American Family in the Heartland* while fulfilling her grandchildren's request. After the book was published in 2000, a colleague suggested she add the book to her curriculum. Although initially hesitant, Portwood found that sharing her own stories inspired her students to share more about their own family history.

"We ended up with such fascinating stories," says Portwood. "I remember walking down the hallway and finding students sharing their stories. I'd sit down and listen to students, who didn't normally talk to each other, share their experiences."

"Can you tell our listeners a little bit about the different courses you've taught?" asks Pembroke.

"I taught African American history, American women's history, social history, cultural history, basic U.S. Constitution and many other courses," Portwood responds. "The courses that I enjoyed the most were the ones where I could get students involved in talking, and I increasingly tried to get them to share their own family histories."

Portwood's teaching has earned multiple awards including the SIUE Teaching Excellence Award, Sojourner Truth Award, Women of Distinction Award, and Martin Luther King Jr. Humanitarian Award. After retiring as emeritus professor in 2007, Portwood continued to serve by sitting on the SIU Board of Trustees from 2013 through 2019.

"During your 30 years of teaching at SIUE, what was the biggest change in higher education or your teaching field?" asks Pembroke.

"In my own discipline, I noticed that the professors I had mainly lectured and might occasionally have a discussion, but that didn't happen often," Portwood responds. "Now, more professors engage with the primary sources and other sources by having more discussions with students in class."

"If someone was considering a career in higher education what would you say to them?" asks Pembroke.

"Go for it," says Portwood. "I started out my teaching career as a teaching assistant here. I was told by my colleagues that I wouldn't enjoy it, but on the first day, I loved it. I knew it was the career for me, and that did not change in 40 years."

Portwood will be inducted to SIUE's Alumni Hall of Fame along with seven other alumni at the "A Night Among the Stars" ceremony on Friday, Sept. 27 in the Morris University Center (MUC). For more information about the event, please visit siue.edu/alumni/hall-of-fame.

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