The College of Humanities Newsletter

From the desk of Humanities dean Elizabeth A. Say

I write this message for the Newsletter on Inauguration Day, January 20. The significance of this day reminds me of our responsibility—as teachers and students—to invest our knowledge and talents in making our society a more humane and compassionate one. Stories in this issue will give you hope in the future to which CSUN contributes. You will read about our commitment to feed the poor, to protect the weak, to champion diversity, and to educate for a better future. You will also be reminded of the contributions of those we have lost—who shared our values and our mission to “Act as responsible global citizens committed to principles of freedom, equality, justice, and participatory democracy.”

WRRC Launches Pantry for Students in Need

Submitted by Jackie Sayers

Early in fall 2016, CSUN’s Women's Research & Resource Center opened a food pantry, accessible to all who present a valid CSUN student ID. Students concerned about privacy are assured that all requests and receipt of assistance will remain anonymous. The food pantry was spearheaded by WRRC director Shira Brown and students Orion Block and Nancy Avelino. Aware that food insecurity is an invisible challenge many CSUN students face, they entered a project planning phase one year ago. This was before the California State University released a study this June, commissioned by Chancellor Timothy P. White, finding that 25% of students across the 23-campus system struggle with food insecurity, while 10% report that they are homeless. With the extent of the crisis starkly revealed, the WRRC dedicated all available resources in summer 2016 to space planning and brainstorming ideas about how and where to solicit support and donations of goods.

The WRRC Food Pantry, located within the center, provides non-perishable food and personal hygiene products. Food and products are accessed by students from across campus and are in constant need. Donations have been received so far from the San Fernando Valley Rescue Mission, the West Hills Neighborhood Council, CSUN Housing, and CSUN faculty, staff, and students.

Support and donations of food and toiletries are always gladly accepted. Departments and classes interested in organizing donation drives for the pantry are welcome and will receive full support from WRRC staff. Please contact Shira Brown at shira.brown@csun.edu or (818)-677-2780.

On behalf of WRRC staff and CSUN students in need, thank you for your support!
Four trailblazing women were honored at the 12th biennial Phenomenal Woman Awards on October 22, held at California State University, Northridge’s Valley Performing Arts Center. Presented by CSUN’s Department of Gender & Women’s Studies in collaboration with the Women’s Research and Resource Center (WRRC), the event is dedicated to enhancing campus and community understanding of women’s issues and concerns. Founded in 1995 to “celebrate women who have made outstanding contributions to our community,” the awards reception also raises funds for the Department of Gender & Women’s Studies and the WRRC in support of student scholarships, student and faculty research, and campus special events. Each of the honorees—actress and activist Amy Brenneman; attorney, writer, and activist Mehrangiz Kar; muralist Kristy Sandoval; and food justice organizer Neelam Sharma—were celebrated for their hard work and contributions to community and society.

Amy Brenneman, best known for her acting career and activism in women’s rights, says she is first and foremost a mother. When asked what prompted her to speak out in favor of women’s reproductive rights, she shared her own experiences. “At 21, I got an abortion. I saw the laws going backwards and wanted to change things so that other young women, young women like my daughter, would not have less reproductive rights over their bodies.”

Brenneman also supports and has taught at the CHIME Institute, a K-8 school where children of all abilities learn in inclusive environments. She says her involvement with CHIME, a partner with CSUN in educator training, is “a stimulating experience

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and an opportunity to interact with diverse communities of children.” Brenneman also founded the Cornerstone Theater Company, based in downtown Los Angeles and dedicated to bringing diverse communities together. She enjoys facilitating opportunities for people from all backgrounds and neighborhoods to experience solidarity through acting.

Kristy Sandoval is recognized for her beautiful murals and their ability to give voice to communities. Sandoval offers words of encouragement to all women. “Don’t let the fact that you’re a woman discourage you,” she said on accepting her Phenomenal Woman Award. “Do what you want in any career. If that’s your true calling, you will be able to make a living.” Sandoval also talked about her motivations and struggles as an artist. She woke up one morning, she said, and decided that she wanted to paint a mural, to “change the white walls of [her] home.” She started calling around and found people who could help her make that desire a reality, and that was the beginning of her career as an artist. Sandoval’s work now resonates throughout communities both in and outside of the United States, though in the beginning she struggled to earn enough to live on. She acknowledges the difficulty artists face in making their career a career, but she was determined to “show, teach, and be an example [to all] that this is possible.” Art is a universal language, she says, and next she intends to experiment with sculpting and sustainable and functional art.

Neelam Sharma, known for her groundbreaking efforts to ensure that residents of “food desert” communities have access to healthy foods at affordable prices, started out just trying to feed her own children wholesome food. As she struggled to do so she realized that many other families in South Central Los Angeles faced the same problem, so Sharma decided to do something about it. In her Phenomenal Woman Award acceptance speech, Sharma stressed the need to do away with “first-world, third-world terms, or nonsense.” She says that so-called third-world conditions exist in pockets throughout South Central Los Angeles where people don’t have access to healthy food and other basic needs. Sharma continues to work on alleviating these problems while also embarking on other projects—most recently the building of a community wellness center. In accepting her award, Sharma noted that there were no men on stage and said that didn’t indicate a lack of great men who are dedicated to social justice, but said that what makes a woman truly phenomenal is her ability to take on enormous tasks beyond ordinary household challenges while also being a great mother, a great wife, and a great daughter.

Mehrangiz Kar, a visiting professor at CSUN, spoke of her unceasing fight to protect women’s and men’s rights in Iran. An active member of the press and a practicing attorney in Iran both before and after the Islamic Revolution, Kar was relentlessly criticized, harassed, and even jailed for what the Iranian government saw as her insubordination and violation of Sharia—also known as Islamic law. When asked to comment on the misunderstanding and controversy surrounding the concept of Sharia, Kar says, “Sharia is one way of understanding or interpreting Islam, but it is not a text, nor is it necessarily rooted within a text.” She wants to emphasize this point because she feels that among the greatest misconceptions about Sharia are that it cannot be changed and that it is essential to practicing Islam. It is Kar’s belief that people can and should define justice and Sharia according to the changing climes of their societies.

Despite the persecution that she and her family endured, Kar continues to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves. She says she “received correspondence from men who were in prison, had been flogged, the [wounds in] their backs infested, pleading with me to help them.” Kar was motivated to find a way to practice law and argue their cases within the confines of the Islamist regime. “Being able to be useful and effective under Islamic rule in Iran, this was important,” she
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said. Kar believes that before any form of human rights activism can take place, one must first have social freedom: the ability of men and women to interact without fear of punishment, as well as a woman's right to choose whether to take the veil. These were among the first rights to be revoked after Iran's Islamic Revolution, making it nearly impossible for the people to engage in activism. Kar says there is no substitute for one's home, and the loss of hers continues to affect her, but she remains positive.

All four of the honorees come from different backgrounds and have lived distinct lives, but they are unified by the fact that they were ordinary people with extraordinary aspirations and they had the courage to make their dreams a reality.

CSUN Hosts Professional Development for Armenian Educators

Submitted by Vahram Shemmassian

The Board of Regents of Prelacy Armenian Schools—a federation of PK-12 schools founded and sustained in promoting Armenian values and preservation of the heritage, language, culture, tradition, history, and religion of Armenian people—held its Annual Professional Development Day conference at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), on October 15. This was the second consecutive year that CSUN’s Armenian Studies Program co-sponsored and hosted the daylong conference.

Workshops were attended by some 400 educators and administrators from Armenian day schools throughout California, some as far away as San Francisco and Fresno. The keynote speaker during the breakfast and opening session was California Assembly member Adrin Nazarian. As a product of one of the schools represented at the conference, he thanked all present for their commitment to educating the future generation of leaders. He encouraged them all to be active participants in the political process as examples for their students.

Among the experts who presented that day were two faculty members from the CSUN Armenian Studies Program. Dr. Vahram Shemmassian, director of the Armenian Studies Program, led two sessions on “Teaching Armenian Culture in an Interdisciplinary and Relevant Approach.” Dr. Hasmig Baran, a part-time faculty member in the program, conducted two sessions on “Motivation and Student Engagement.”

The funding for the co-sponsorship was made possible by a grant from the TF Educational Foundation. Organized to promote Armenian principles and heritage, TF Educational Foundation also awarded $250,000 in 2015 to CSUN’s Armenian Studies Program to promote teaching excellence by and for Armenian students throughout the region.
Pathways to the Professoriate

Submitted by Heidi Schumacher

This spring, the College of Humanities is welcoming 10 student fellows into the HSI Pathways to the Professoriate program. These outstanding students will be mentored over the next 18 months in preparation for applying to Ph.D. programs in the humanities and related disciplines. Each student fellow plans to be a professor and aspires to help transform the landscape of the humanities. History major Elizabeth Calzada says, “This fellowship is a dream come true, and I’m immensely excited to start this life-changing experience with my peers.”

While Latinos make up 20% of the U.S. population ages 18-44, they currently make up only 4.1% of the professoriate in the humanities. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has awarded a $5.1 million grant to the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions in the belief that the country has a compelling interest in ensuring the participation of people of all backgrounds in the humanities. This grant will be used to establish a pipeline from CSUN and two additional Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) to doctoral programs. HSI is a Department of Education designation for universities with Hispanic student populations of 25% or more. With this pipeline in place, more Latina/o students will be able to attend doctoral programs with sights set on becoming professors.

As an HSI partner in the program CSUN will host a cohort of 10 student fellows annually, with a total of three cohorts funded by the grant. Each will receive mentoring, preparation for the GRE test (used in determining graduate admissions), and financial assistance with graduate school application fees; will attend a six-week summer seminar to prepare for graduate school success; and will be connected with students and faculty at the other participating HSI campuses. They will also connect with faculty at the five graduate schools associated with the program: University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Davis; New York University; Northwestern University; and the University of Pennsylvania.

After an extensive application and interview process, the first 10 HSI Pathways/Mellon Student Fellows was selected. The cohort is made up of CSUN juniors from a variety of majors (Anthropology, Chicana/o Studies, Deaf Studies, English, History, Linguistics, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Theatre) and minors (Anthropology, Geography, Queer Studies, and Urban Studies & Planning). Elizabeth Hernandez, who plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Theatre or Performance Studies, says, “I am incredibly excited to begin this journey and see where a Ph.D. in Theatre Arts will lead me. I am deeply honored to be a part of such an amazing program and cannot express my gratitude enough for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” Each student will work with a faculty mentor: Linda Alvarez (Central American Studies), Xochitl Alvizo (Religious Studies), Moshoula Capous-Desyllas (Sociology), Xochitl Flores-Marcial (Chicana/o Studies), Melisa Galván (Chicana/o Studies), Frances Gateward (Cinema and Television Arts), Santosh Khadka (English),

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David Medeiros (Linguistics), John Paul Nuño (History), and Mario Ontiveros (Art). “This is an amazing opportunity for our students,” says mentor Melisa Galván. “We are all very excited to be getting things off the ground. Having taken part in the interview process, it was extremely gratifying to have the chance to engage with such motivated and ambitious CSUN students. I for one feel extremely fortunate for the opportunity to help in some way see these students’ dreams to fruition.”

Engaging Students, Strengthening Communities

In Fall 2016 the College of Humanities launched a new interdisciplinary minor in Civic and Community Engagement. The program is designed for students who wish to apply what they learn at CSUN toward making positive changes in their communities and the world. Students who complete the minor will create their own course of study centering on a particular theme or discipline. Some students may choose to meet these requirements by completing courses in a designated General Education Path, such as “Health and Wellness,” “Principles of Sustainability,” or “Social Justice.” Other students will create their own theme in consultation with the program’s director, Religious Studies professor Amanda Baugh.

In addition to the courses in a particular theme or discipline, all students in the minor will complete two required service-learning courses that are designed to help them apply their classroom learning to real-world situations. Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Service learning is considered a high-impact learning experience that can positively impact students’ academic engagement and achievement, civic attitudes and behaviors, and personal skills.

In the first required service-learning course, CCE 200: Introduction to Civic and Community Engagement, students will learn about the rewards, opportunities, and challenges of collaborating with community service partners. Through reading assignments, class discussions, and encounters with local community service agencies, students will examine the notion of social responsibility, experience differing models of social engagement, and reflect on community engagement in their own lives. They also will complete at least 20 hours of service learning.

Civic and Community Engagement students also will take a capstone course in which they complete a major collaborative project with a community partner. The course will allow for deeper learning and reflection on the various skills and concepts required for successful community service. Working with the instructor, fellow students, and their community partners, students will enhance their skills at identifying the opportunities, obstacles, and resources that are important for success. The program in Civic and Community Engagement provides skills for students to successfully integrate their academic and professional interests with their desire to create healthy, humane, successful, and sustainable communities. The desire is that they will find community service rewarding and that they will become active and engaged citizens while at CSUN—and for the rest of their lives.

For more information on the program, please contact CCE@csun.edu
A Legacy of Volunteerism and Support for CSUN

Earl Greinetz's involvement with California State University, Northridge, began over a decade ago with his volunteer work on the Jewish Studies Program Advisory Board. Though he grew up in Colorado and earned his law degree at the University of Denver, Earl, along with his late wife, Toba, were longtime San Fernando Valley residents and eager boosters of its cultural institutions. A proud parent of a CSUN alumna, Earl was delighted to discover a Jewish Studies Program of such significance at the Valley's only four-year public university. He quickly became a staunch advocate for the program and never tired of communicating its value among greater Los Angeles communities. Students in the course “Service Learning in the Jewish Community” benefited from Earl's prolific connections with Jewish social service organizations, where he helped to arrange many meaningful volunteer opportunities.

Through his lifetime generosity to the Jewish Studies Program—as well as the Valley Performing Arts Center and the CSUN Student Orchestra—Greinetz has affected the lives of countless CSUN students, and he has designated a legacy gift to ensure that future Jewish Studies scholars, Jewish community advocates, virtuoso musicians, and students from other backgrounds and disciplines will continue to reap the benefits of his involvement.

Greinetz was a special man who warmed the hearts of all who crossed his path. In 2014 the College of Humanities presented its annual Volunteer Service Award to Earl, highlighting his conscientious support, volunteer advocacy, and visionary leadership among hundreds of fellow benefactors who helped to develop and sustain CSUN’s Jewish Studies Program. Earl is survived by three children, 10 grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

Admired Colleague, Beloved Friend

It was with great sadness that we learned of John McGraw's sudden and unexpected passing, July 20, in his home in Sedona, Arizona. He was 41.

McGraw was a much loved colleague and friend who will be greatly missed. He was an avid scholar in a relatively new approach to the study of religion known as “the cognitive science of religion.” At the time of his death, he was celebrating the end of his first year as an assistant professor at California State University, Northridge, in the Department of Religious Studies. He also taught courses in Central American Studies. McGraw has left a legacy of great work, especially as a Maya ritual specialist.

McGraw was admired and respected as an accomplished academic by his colleagues and students. He will also be remembered for his inspiring personal qualities, which are sincerely too many to list here, but that include his passion for life, kindness, tolerance, and compassion. In his first year at CSUN, I never heard John complain once. When I asked how he managed to never say anything negative, he told me that life was a gift and he was thankful for each day, that he had food, more money than he thought he needed, and was being paid to do something he would pay to do.

To say that McGraw loved life is an understatement. Indeed, in his last post on social media he shared 12 inspirational quotes from the Dalai Lama on how to live a good life. It is fair to say that he lived a good life. In his legacy, we will strive to do the same.
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The Mission of the College of Humanities is to create a community of learners who...

Explore and value the diversities of cultures, thought, perspectives, literatures and languages of humanity;

Critically reflect on and analyze multiple dimensions of human identity and experience;

Contribute to scholarship and creative production and innovation; and

Act as responsible global citizens committed to principles of freedom, equality, justice and participatory democracy.

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