

Meet the Prof: Michelle Kuhl

by Faculty Advocacy Committee - Wednesday, October 06, 2010

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/6283/meet-the-prof-michelle-kuhl/>

The following faculty Q&A was submitted by the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Faculty Advocacy Committee, a committee of the Faculty Senate. Michelle Mouton, associate professor of history, wrote the introduction.

Michelle Kuhl joined the history department with a passionate interest in history, race and gender that intersected her teaching and her research. At the center of her research agenda is a book nearing completion on lynching in the deep South. Since she arrived in Oshkosh, Michelle has also proven herself as a tremendously dedicated teacher of 19th century America, U.S. women's history and African American studies. She holds her students to very high standards but challenges them with ever-changing, creative assignments.

Last summer, she won a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to incorporate more regional history into her introductory courses. Michelle is a strong and dedicated part of both the women's studies program and the African American studies program. Michelle also co-founded a group that spent two summers analyzing the challenges of balancing work and parenting. The group built bridges across the disciplines and has helped to raise awareness of the difficulties parents face.

How did you find your way to UW Oshkosh?

I found my dream job here, where I could teach my favorite subjects: 19th century U.S. history, women's history and African American history. I'd never lived in the Midwest before, but I knew I liked living in small towns. When I interviewed on campus, I thought everything a perfect fit for me: I'd get to teach my favorite classes, the history department faculty seemed great, the town seemed charming.

I went back to Dallas and looked at my toddler, who was wearing a pair of Oshkosh overalls, and I thought: "If I don't get this job, I'll be so upset I'll have to throw out all her Oshkosh B'Gosh clothes." Luckily, I did get the job, and my kid got to keep her clothes.

Why did you choose to go into your field?

In a haphazard manner. In high school I was more oriented towards science and math and chose a college (N.C. State — Go Wolfpack!) with that trajectory in mind. But then my sophomore year, I took a women's history class that changed my life. Really, the entire world looked differently to me. I started taking more history classes but still was not sure. Finally, my junior year my advisor pointed out I had more history credits than anything else, so I declared the major.

After I graduated, I was a little aimless. I rode a Greyhound bus from North Carolina to Texas and back. I worked as a catering manager. I went to the beach a lot. Finally, I decided I really missed history and wanted to go to graduate school. The rest is ... oh never mind.

What is your favorite thing about UW Oshkosh?

The history department. My colleagues have mastered a healthy balance between work and life. They are all respected in their fields yet also maintain a strong connection to family and community. I can turn to any one of my colleagues for a scholarly question, advice on teaching or just a sociable chat. Department meetings are marked by amiable conversation rather than rancorous argument.

What is the professional accomplishment of which you are most proud?

In the past year one of my essays was selected to be in an edited collection to kick off Rochester University Press's new series on Gender and Race. All the contributors went to a conference at Rochester in the spring and presented their work. I was honored to be among such a dynamic and cutting-edge group of scholars. Plus there was good food, free wine, and stimulating discussions.

What leadership or service activities are you involved in?

I work with both the African American studies program and the women's studies program. Both programs reflect my personal passions. I grew up in North Carolina in the midst of racial tensions over school integration and rode the school bus with teenage boys who joined the KKK. But I did not understand what was going on around me.

Once on my way to fifth grade, a mom came out of her house and pointed a shotgun at our schoolbus. Trying to understand the tangled pathology of racism has become a lifelong interest, and I am committed to extending this quest to other students. I feel privileged to be able to work with both the AAS and the WS programs to help UW Oshkosh students sort out and challenge the racism and sexism around them.

What is the most common misperception about what you do?

People think that since I'm a historian, I watch the History Channel. I don't. Sometimes students come into class all jazzed up about something they saw on the History Channel and are shocked when I tell them I didn't see it. They seem embarrassed for me, like they caught me without my homework.

What is the most exciting project you are working on right now?

Right now I'm working on an article about how African Americans in the late 19th century compared their own situation to Native Americans. Many people thought a race war between whites and blacks would break out in the South. I'm fascinated by the indication that some black leaders saw the Plains Indian wars as a cautionary tale and wanted to avoid the same fate.

How does what you research help you to be an effective teacher?

My main area of research is on racial violence, particularly lynch mobs. I never really thought about the connection to teaching. I guess maybe I'm always grateful that the classroom is a place for peaceful disagreement. We can have scholarly debates that are intense and even upsetting, but they remain respectful and peaceful. Mob violence happens when people are not willing to resolve their differences through peaceful channels. In my own small way, I try to use classroom discussions and debates to model

how to air disagreements peacefully.

Describe some ways your department serves Northeastern Wisconsin.

High scores in trivia games. No really, the usefulness of historical studies is hard to quantify. If you are an engineer, you can point to bridges you've designed; if you're a nurse, you can count the patients you've cared for. History has a more diffuse impact.

Thanks to the history department, thousands of students every year understand a little bit more about the world they live in. Thanks to the active scholarship of history faculty, we have new books, articles and public lectures about Nazi family policy, Oshkosh in the Great Depression, humor in the 1950s and many other issues. Hopefully all the students who have passed through our classes know something about how people build civilizations, nations, and cultures, and how those institutions both rise and fall.

Instead of accepting the world around them as inevitable and natural, they'll realize the world constantly changes, and it changes because people with visions shape the world according to these visions. Maybe our students will roll up their sleeves and work to remake the world according to their vision.

Tell us about your family.

I have a spicy, red-headed Texas partner and two daughters, who are exceptionally above average in every way, except perhaps their ability to keep their room neat. My older daughter likes playing tag, guitar and rolling her eyes at me. My younger daughter will only wear dresses and just mastered the tricycle. When people meet my kids for the first time, they invariably say, "They're so cute! They look just like their dad!"

What are your hobbies?

Before I had kids, I played bridge, ran, swam, went country dancing, kept a big fish tank and had lots of house plants. Now I play Dora the Explorer, run after kids on the playground, splash in the shallow end, dance to Dan Zanes, and feed and water the children.

- [Read more faculty profiles](#)

Faculty, staff and students are encouraged to contribute calendar items, campus announcements and other good news to UW Oshkosh Today.

- [Publish your own announcement.](#)
- [Make a story suggestion.](#)
- [E-mail the editors.](#)