

Professor shares a fascination for influenza

by Vanessa Virbitsky - Thursday, February 21, 2008

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/527/professor-shares-a-fascination-for-influenza/>

In the midst of flu season, not many people will claim to have a passion for the flu like Teri Shors, a microbiology professor at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

It was both this enthusiasm for her field and for teaching that inspired Shors to develop a collaborative research design on the 1918 influenza epidemic, which killed more Americans than all of this century's wars combined.

According to "Influenza 1918," a video that Shors shows to all of her virology classes, more than 11,000 Philadelphians alone died in October 1918.

"With these individuals, their lungs filled up with blood and fluid – up to six times their normal size, and they were dead within two days," Shors said. "And what was unusual was it wasn't just the very young or very old. It was healthy 20- to 40-year-olds in the prime of their life."

This relatively unknown World War I tragedy indiscriminately devastated towns throughout the world, and Oshkosh was no exception.

"It's not talked about much at all in history books because no one wanted to talk about it," Shors said. "It was so horrible – people were dying and no one knew how to help."

This led Shors to ask herself, "I wonder what exactly happened in Oshkosh? How were we affected, how was this community affected?"

In 2001, Shors asked these same questions to UW Oshkosh professors of psychology and anthropology Susan McFadden and Beth Prine respectively.

"At first I thought I was just being morbid," Shors said of her interest in studying the flu. "But when I brought it up to Susan, she said she actually knew of survivors or relatives of survivors in the area."

By pooling together their academic curiosity, Shors, McFadden and Prine teamed up to get UW Oshkosh students knee deep in the biological, historical and anthropological records of 1918 Oshkosh.

After going to the county courthouse and examining death certificates from the time period, Shors had her students randomly select an afflicted individual and uncover their story.

"From soldiers, to teachers – all types of people were affected," Shors said. "All we had to go off of was the 1918 newspaper, not many records were kept."

While Shors' virology students studied the patterns of infection via transportation routes and water

system pathways, psychology students interviewed survivors or relatives of survivors to get a feel of what it was like to see your neighbors and family members disappear, and anthropology students conducted a cemetery search.

The tri-class collaboration produced the most thorough investigation of the influenza epidemic in Oshkosh to date.

Results of this study are documented on Shors' Web site which can be viewed by clicking [here](#). Artifacts, zoning maps and other illustrations of the study are on display in the Halsey Science Center.

Artifacts from the 2001 study will also be on display in the Neville Public Museum's [The Traitor State: Wisconsin in World War I](#) exhibit in Green Bay until Aug. 17. Shors will be the exhibit's featured speaker April 30.