



## DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

# NEWSLETTER

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## Message from the Department Chair

### Professor Katherine Ellison



Dr. Katherine Ellison,  
Department Chair

The first Department of English Newsletter arrived in your mailboxes, in print, 11 years ago in 2014. Chair Chris De Santis created this publication to remind you that no matter when you graduated or retired, and how far you may live from Normal, Illinois, you are still part of our department. The newsletter reminds us all, too, that as the hands of the clock move forward, and our nation, state, and campus face major changes, our department keeps evolving and adapting. Yet, we also sustain our core pedagogical and scholarly values and our commitment to the English Studies model. English

*Studies gives us* that adaptability. De Santis wrote in 2014, following a professional development trip with department leaders, that “it became clear that our department is thriving at a time in which many departments are struggling, some at the point of crisis” and “our commitment to English Studies in all its variety and complexity has put us well ahead of departments still struggling with turf wars and undervalued sub-disciplines of English.”

There have been years when we have questioned whether this model still works for us. Disciplines change. New topics catch our fancy. This past year, though, we have found great strength in standing shoulder to shoulder across our 10 disciplines. Our faculty helped lead the United Faculty of Illinois State University (UFISU), unionizing our tenure-track faculty. ISU and UFISU reached an agreement on a contract this past spring, and we are currently integrating those changes into our practices and our culture. For example, we are creating our first Workload Policy. Our graduate students are leaders in the Graduate Student Workers Union as well. They also won a significant contract the year before last. Our talents translate as real change out in the world and on the Quad.

We do not have over 50 tenure-line faculty as we once did (counting me, we have 30 this fall), but as we are finishing Strategic Planning and beginning our eight-year Program Review, we have found that the different ways we approach questioning and problem solving, from the social sciences of theoretical and applied linguistics to creative writing, are even more necessary for today's students. We

used to ask, “How can we communicate the value of our skills to potential majors?” The world has revealed the answers: our students learn to read critically, sort fact from fiction from outright lies, persuade with nuance and grace, and create in ways that inspire others. Our faculty, staff, majors, and alumni are good people, striving to do good in the world, and they know our department is a refuge for them. And despite what you hear about social media and gaming sucking the life out of this new generation, they want these skills—and they are critically and creatively using social media and games in ways that mesmerize me. During Redbird Days and Open Houses, prospective students and their parents are impressed by the range of classes students can take in our English major compared to others in the Midwest, and they also like that they can specialize in unique sequences.

We hold steady again this year at about 370 undergraduate majors. We have fewer graduate students this year due to the budget cut that reduced the number of assistantships we can offer, but we hope that this is a temporary challenge. The University is developing a new budget model, and we do not yet know what that will look like for our department. We are skeptically optimistic, as English Studies scholars always are.

We have reason to be optimistic: This fall we welcomed tenure-track faculty member Dr. Rachael Wolney, our new director of English Education, who made the move from the great state of Washington. Wolney received her Ph.D. from Washington State University with a Certificate in the Digital Humanities and scholarly and teaching focus on socially just pedagogies, disability studies, community engagement, and children's and young adult literature.

She joins a community that has been incredibly productive so far in 2025! To give you just a few examples, last year faculty won seven College and University awards total. Congratulations to Dr. Barbi Smyser-Fauble, Brooklyn Vogel, Dr. Tara Lyons, Dr. Derek Sparby, Dr. Kris Lewis, and Dr. Ela Przybylo and also to Impact Award winners Dr. Shelby Boehm, Heidi Bowman, Dr. Lisa Dooley, Dr. Jeremy Hurley, Abby Uphoff and Dr. Amy Robillard. Recently, we were informed that Drs. Kris Lewis, Maggie Morris Davis, Tara Lyons, Autumn West, Shelby Boehm, and Amy Robillard have won teaching, service, research, and creative activity awards at the college level and will now compete for the University awards. In July, Professor Gabe Gudding received the Harold Morton Landon Prize for best translated book from the Academy of American Poets,

for Gunnar Wærness's *Friends with Everyone*. Dr. Amy Robillard published "See the House Explode" in *Writers: Craft and Context*. Dr. Kris Lewis co-authored "A Pedagogical Analysis of How Unprefixed Verbs of Motion are Materials for Beginner Russian Language Learners" with graduate student Elena Petrova. Dr. Steve Halle's co•im•press, a small book publisher run from the Publications Unit that provides student training, published Chloe Garcia Roerts's *Fire Eater: A Translator's Theology*, which was then a finalist for the 2025 Community of Literary Magazines and Presses Firecracker Award for Creative Nonfiction. Dr. Chris Breu published several articles and participated in a Post 45 Contemporaries Podcast, and his book *The Infrastructural Unconscious: Atavism, Prometheanism, Mapping, Mutation* has been accepted by Fordham University Press. Dr. Du-riel Harris's *Obsidian: Literature & the Arts in the African Diaspora* received a 2025 Amazon Literary Partnership Award to support the upcoming VRY PRSNT BLK: The Black Artist as Moral Witnessing issue. Faculty Emeritus Sally Parry keeps publishing as well, with two new articles and two reprints out in 2025.

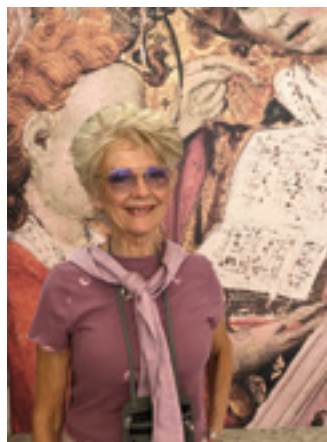
Graduate students Aisha (Sheilla) Nelson and Saima Afreen both exhibited artwork at the Rachel Cooper Gallery, hosted by the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program, and Edcel J. Cintron-Gonzalez, Laura Sweeney, Akbar Hosain, Tate Lewis-Carroll, and others published this year as well. At our April Awards Ceremony, we gave 18 awards to 24 worthy recipients, and we celebrated the generosity of Ellen Morgan, who was with us that night, Lucia Getsi, Cindy Ross Ringer, Julia Visor, Lois Lenski, Victoria Harris, Sally Parry, and Roberta Seelinger Trites. At May commencement, 65 of our undergraduate majors graduated, and 11 graduate students finished their degrees.

Our alumni and donors continue to lift us up in these difficult times. Dr. Kip and Ann Strasma have created the Graduate Student Professional Development Fund, which will provide \$3,000 a year for four years to support graduate students who are conducting any professional development related to the program, including but not limited to travel expenses, conference registration fees, costs associated with research needs, etc. We are so thankful for this financial assistance for our graduate students. A sincere thank you to the Strasmas! Scroll further to learn more about them in this newsletter.

Finally, our retired faculty member and dear colleague, Dr. Julie Jung, said goodbye in a heartfelt event at Ewing Manor. Dr. Jung joined ISU faculty in 1999 and worked beside us for 26 years. She won numerous teaching and research awards, including the 2005 W. Ross Winterowd Award for most outstanding book in composition theory. One of her recent collections is *Feminist Rhetorical Science Studies: Human Bodies, Posthumanist Worlds*. She studies feminist and disability rhetoric, posthumanist rhetoric, and the rhetoric of math, among other topics. She taught so many classes for us, from the Introduction to English Studies and Senior Seminar and the introductory Rhetorical Theory course to Technical Writing to Ph.D. seminars. Let's wish her all the best of luck in her next chapter!

Thank you, all, for your ongoing support for our department. Be sure to join our social media if you have not done so already, to receive notices of accomplishments and other cool news. Here is a link tree! [Linktr.ee/EnglishDepartment.ISU](http://Linktr.ee/EnglishDepartment.ISU).

## Building a Nation of Storytellers: A Dr. Lucia Getsi Feature



Dr. Getsi on a trip to Portugal "trying to merge with the fresco."

When Dr. Lucia Getsi first arrived at Illinois State University to accept an assistant professor position in 1973, she walked into an entirely new world; a Southern woman from her roots, she had never even stepped foot in Illinois before. But she arrived ready and determined to teach African-American Literature, a then new addition to ISU's English curriculum, women's literature, and cognitive poetics, a solid pedagogical foundation that quickly cemented her as a vital member of the English department's faculty.

From there, Dr. Getsi's career at ISU would span 33 years. She taught 47 ("Or 45," she says, "those are the two numbers I have in my head") different courses; she took over as editor of the *Spoon River Poetry Review* in 1986, a huge force in establishing the university's Publications Unit and centering ISU as a hub for poetry in the academic world; she spent two decades directing and co-directing the graduate Creative Writing Department. Currently spending her retirement in McCormick, South Carolina, in a home that she dreamed and designed from the ground up, she spoke with us about how this impressive career took shape and her hopes for poets and publishers at ISU in the future.

First and foremost: the South, she says, is "its own nation of storytellers." Shortly after she was born in Nashville, Tennessee, her father was drafted to serve in World War II. During this period of waiting for her father to come back from war, and even after his return, Getsi turned to storytelling for almost everything; making sense of the world, for entertainment, or even just having something to do. She spent many sleepless nights in childhood pouring over the stories told in poems, igniting a lifelong love of the artform. Her love of poetry was further fostered in elementary school during a time when reading and writing were highly prioritized in the education system; "No one," she says, "made it through the fourth grade without reading at a very high level . . . There was a huge emphasis on poetry at the time. That was the way you learned English."

But English and poetry were not the only loves of Getsi's life. When she first went to college, she was a triple-major in English, math, and physics and told herself that she would never have to choose between the three. However, the widespread prejudice of the time proved a fierce barrier between Getsi and her love of the sciences. After winning statewide math awards and maintaining the highest average in mathematics in college, she was invited to join a small group of college students from across the state to visit several prominent laboratories and learn from experts in the field, including mock interviewing for positions in the industry. The only woman in a group of nine students, during one of these mock interviews, Getsi faced the brutal misogyny in the mathematics industry head-on:

"The man at the desk did not get up. He sort of reared back in his chair, put one foot up and the other foot on top of it, laced his

fingers behind his neck, stared at me, and started laughing. This is 1964. And I looked at him and I said, 'Why are you laughing?' And he said, 'you're a girl!' I said, 'yes?' And he said, 'what are you doing here?' And I said, 'I'm here for the same reason these other guys are here. You're supposed to interview me as though I am applying for the job.' He says, 'you wanna be a secretary? Because that's all we got.' ...I said, 'No, I'm going to NASA. I'm going to build the spaceship that I fly to the moon.' And he's laughing, and he said, 'No, you're not.'"

And unfortunately, that's not the only story Getsi can tell about the trials she faced in college while pursuing all three areas of her interest. In science, Getsi took an animal sciences course that involved field work with pigs and horned cattle. While telling about one particularly harrowing instance in the class, Getsi's inheritance of the Southern storytelling legacy shone brightly; picture me listening to the following story through the phone, eyes wide, pen flying across my notebook, having to remember to tell myself to breathe, and then suddenly laughing with the easy humor Getsi seamlessly injects into her tale.

"We were dehorning cattle in this massive holding barn. [The only other woman in the class] and I were working together to do this, and all of a sudden, it got really quiet. And I looked at her, and I said, 'Something's gonna happen. Just be ready. I can feel it.' And [the guys] had made their way to the edges of the room; we were in the center. And they stampeded the cattle. And these cattle had horns.

... And, what I said to her was, 'holy \*\*\*\*! We're \*\*\*\*\* gonna die! Get on their backs!' And guess what? We made it [out], and in class the next day, the teacher said, '[Lucia]. You used profanity yesterday. I told you at the beginning of the class that anybody saying a profane word in my class gets an immediate reduction in grade.' And he looked me straight in the eye, and he said, 'You have an A now? Uh-uh. You have a B.' And that was the only B I made in college!"

Despite the challenges she faced, Getsi soared in her education, finally culminating with her Ph.D. from Ohio University. After graduating, Getsi was recruited to teach English at Illinois State during an MLA Conference in New York. Getsi's classes, she tells me, were not classes at all; rather, they felt like labs, incorporating her science and math background to create an experimental, participatory learning environment. Getsi positioned herself not as the lecturer, but rather as a fellow participant, allowing students to feel completely immersed with her in the learning process. She never assigned anything, she says, that she didn't first try herself. In her poetry courses, she prized this experimental mentality; "We learned forms and then broke the backs of the forms," she says, "and made new forms. From the 33 years, I've had 200 students publish books of poems—maybe 300."

In 1986, she took over as editor of the *Spoon River Poetry Review*, Illinois State's nonprofit poetry journal that has reached thousands of poets all over the world. She describes the initial transfer as equally "exhilarating" and difficult; around the same time, her daughter was battling Guillain-Barré Syndrome in the hospital, a personal tragedy that Getsi associates with the early years of running the magazine. In addition, technical limitations of the time made producing the magazine a difficult task. Getsi produced her first issue as editor herself by typing the entire thing on her home computer. For the second, she and Tara Reeser, a graduate assistant at the time, had to wait until nighttime hours to use the depart-

ment's only available computer. But her perseverance and dedication to the magazine paid off, and the *Spoon River Poetry Review* is a wildly successful and shining example of the strength of the department's Publication Unit today. Upon retirement, Getsi gave leadership of the magazine back to the University, where Dr. Steve Halle currently serves as editor. Her legacy at the magazine lives on through the Lucia Getsi Literary Reading Series, an annual event that draws award-winning poets to read for the community here in Bloomington-Normal.



Dr. Getsi in Portugal posing with a statue

Recently, Getsi founded the Ventures in Poetics Publishing fund, her legacy gift for poets and publishers here at Illinois State. The award is designed to "provide fundamental support for both new and existing affiliated publications, projects, and programs that shape and advance the interconnected fields of poetry, poetics, and publishing" (ISU English Department). When asked about her motivation behind creating the fund, Getsi paused. Sobering slightly, she told me her wish for the fund and for the publication unit:

"We are on the edge of poetry disappearing from the face of the Earth. I just decided that finally, I need to put my money where my mouth has always been because I think these things are crucial. Everything can disappear very quickly; I mean, memory is always a very unstable thing, but where it has persisted, it has persisted through language, and language has given us our science and our history. I want these language forms out there, and I also want this incredible joy of just simply turning pages and reading ... I love books. I like being able to pick them up and think. I like to be able to take my pen and write a note or underline a word. I really believe in publication, and I believe that the publication unit has the capability of making something quite incredible of itself, and it's already doing that."

After speaking with Dr. Getsi, it's clear that, like her participatory classrooms, she and Illinois State have grown together through mutual, dedicated collaboration. Her impact on the University and the English department have left a lasting legacy not only through the Ventures in Poetics Fund but also through numerous doors that she began opening the moment she arrived at Illinois State in 1973. Thanks to her lifelong commitment to fostering poetry and literature, Illinois State is a home for poets, publishers, and fellow booklovers today.



Dr. Getsi in Portugal by the coast

Dr. Lucia Getsi currently resides in South Carolina but can usually be found around campus during the Lucia Getsi Literary Reading Series in the spring.



## Distinguished & Rising Alumni Spotlights

Each year, the ISU English Department recognizes one or more alumni with the Distinguished Alumni Award and the Rising Alumni Award. These awards are an acknowledgement of the recipients' significant accomplishments in the field of English studies and beyond, as well as a testament to their personal strengths as leaders, innovators, and community members. We sat down with this year's recipients to learn a little bit more about their careers, their time at ISU, and what this recognition means to them.

### Distinguished Alum: Dr. Mike Cadden



Dr. Mike Cadden

Dr. Mike Cadden is a scholar of children's literature who graduated from Illinois State with his Doctor of Arts in English in 1996. He is currently Professor Emeritus at Missouri Western State University after teaching for 25 years, and he recently retired from a position in the Provost's Office at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. Over the course of his distinguished career, he received numerous accolades and honors, including the Governor's Award for Teaching Excellence at MWSU.

***Tell me a little about where you grew up. Where are you from, and how did you find your way to ISU?***

Well, I grew up on Long Island. I went to college down at Virginia Tech, kind of followed my older brother down there to study journalism. And after about a year, I decided I wanted to be an elementary school teacher. So, I changed my major to elementary education and realized, 'Hey, I have to be here another year to student teach, I could probably get another major in,' so I added English; it was kind of accidental. I had a class with J.D. Stahl, who was a professor at Virginia Tech and a big name in children's literature, and he got me really interested in the combination of the elementary ed world and the literature world through children's literature. When the time came to look at doctoral programs, Illinois State really stood out as one of the very few places you could go [for English]. I was really attracted to ISU because it was an English program, not an education program.

***Did any particular class/professor/staff member at ISU have a lasting impact on you?***

Roberta Seelinger Trites was teaching at Illinois State [at the time], and she was also a Twain scholar. And I thought, well, I'm going to go to Illinois State, and I'm going to do a dissertation on Twain and children's literature. And I got there and changed my mind, much to her chagrin. So, I walked into her office one day and said, "Roberta, you know I love Twain, but everybody's written about Twain. There's a thousand dissertations on Twain. I have this other author I'm really interested in. Not much has been written about her personally." And Roberta, to her credit, was a great sport, shifted gears and started reading Ursula K. Le Guin.

***How has your time at ISU affected your pedagogy at other institutions, like Missouri Western?***

[At Illinois State], the kind of Ph.D. program was a [Doctor of Arts] program, and the DA program lasted until I graduated in 1996. That's right when that changed. And the difference was, the DA program was always built as a pedagogically minded degree. It was a research degree, but it foregrounded pedagogy. We had a pedagogy seminar. We had to have a pedagogical element to our dissertation, like a chapter connecting pedagogy with our subject matter. And we had to do a teaching internship; many of us were graduate teaching assistants, but one semester had to be an internship connecting to our major and talking through pedagogy. So, when you asked how ISU affected my pedagogy, well, enormously! I took my experience teaching literature and composition at ISU and to Missouri Western and modified it, because Missouri Western is an open-door institution, so, you have a lot of developmental students, a lot of folks who are first-generation, non-traditional students. Illinois State definitely taught me different ways of approaching different students.

***What does it mean to you to be a "distinguished alum"?***

I had to re-read that email a couple times saying, "What is this? Are they asking me for money? No, wait a minute. This is something else!" It's one thing to be well-thought of by your institution, and another thing to be well-thought of by your colleagues out in the world, but you know, it's really quite another to be recognized by your alma mater. To be considered "distinguished" in any way by the program that shaped you is a real validation of your work, but also their work. You know, it sort of means you measured up to the parents and you didn't let them down.

### Distinguished Alum: Melda Beaty



Melda Beaty

Melda Beaty is an award-winning playwright and educator who graduated from Illinois State with a Master of Arts degree in English. Her bountiful playwrighting accolades include the 2022 National Black Theatre Festival's Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin Rolling World Premiere Award for her play "Coconut Cake." In 2025, her play "Thirty" won both the Fade to Black Festival (Houston, TX) and was a 2022 finalist in Definition Theatre's Amplify II Series (Chicago). She also serves as a

member of the Board of Directors for the August Wilson Society and a contributing editor for *Black Masks* magazine. She currently serves as an assistant professor of English at Olive-Harvey Community College.

***Tell me about your time at ISU; what did you study/research?***

This is going to sound crazy, but I often don't know what I'm getting into or going to do, fully. I have an interest, you know, and I'll get into something, but the manifestation of it doesn't really reveal itself until I'm fully immersed in it. So, going to ISU, all I knew was that I was getting a master's degree in some sort of writing; I didn't know what exactly. But I started taking all types of courses, like, I took a gender studies course. I took a drama course. I took a

teaching writing at a community college course. French. I enjoyed the variety of courses that allowed me to explore and figure out what it is that I was going to study.

***How has your time at ISU affected your pedagogy at other institutions, like Olive-Harvey Community College?***

While at ISU, under my graduate assistantship, I taught English courses. I remember teaching courses that were five days a week under the HPS, High Potential Student, program. So, I would teach those primarily. A lot of those students were minority students, and I was focused on their learning and learning style. The focus was on portfolio writing. The pedagogy was basically that the writing process is evaluated over a period and then that process is displayed and analyzed, holistically, from beginning to end, so you get to see the students' progress...you see the growth from draft to revision. Throughout my teaching career, when I was allowed academic freedom to design the course like I wanted, I would always have a portfolio. At Olive-Harvey, I don't use portfolio style writing as much, but my students still experience a recursive writing process.

***As a playwright, do you have any hopes for the future of playwriting in the English department at ISU?***

It's interesting that we're talking about the role of playwriting in an English department. When I was at ISU, I took a dramatic arts course. The professor was Dr. McBride. I remember he took us to a play. It was a field trip if you will. He organized the trip for us to go up to Chicago and see a play. The play was this real crazy thing, like cheerleaders and grandmothers or something. One of those funky names. It was just different, but it got my attention. It helped me to see distinctive styles of writing and theatre. And so, I think there is a space for playwriting in English, maybe more of that, more of the study of the literature and the written text combined with the seeing of plays and the producing of plays. Olive-Harvey is on the southeast side of Chicago. A lot of my students in that community don't go to see theatre. But [I took my students] and they left the theatre just talking and, you know, the comments and the outpouring of discussion and the liveliness it inspired, it was like, OK, this is something that is needed.

***What does it mean to you to be a "distinguished alum"?***

It's definitely an honor. When I got the text—well, not a text—a DM through my Instagram, I was a little skeptical. Because it came through Instagram. But I followed up, and the person replied and asked me would I be willing to be a distinguished alum. When I think of these types of awards, I think of people who have won Nobel Peace Prizes or Pulitzers and awards like that. That's just where my mind goes. You know, they've done something so great, you would name a building after them. So, that's why it threw me a bit. But I am truly, truly honored, and incredibly grateful and, if nothing else, it affirms that someone sees me. What this says to me is that ISU sees me and they appreciate what I'm doing.

## **Rising Alum: Brianna Kaleel**



Brianna Kaleel

Brianna Kaleel is an arts advocate and researcher who graduated with two bachelor's degrees, one in English and one in Studio Art Photography, and one minor degree in Art History from Illinois State University in 2019. Post-graduation, she's worked in some of the country's most notable art and photography hubs, including National Geographic, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Arts Alliance of Illinois. She also has a Master of Science degree from Northwestern University in Leadership for Creative Enterprises.

***How did you find your way to ISU?***

I grew up in a small town in Illinois called Mendota, right by Starved Rock State Park. I grew up in the woods; I grew up in nature. I was always interested in English and the arts. They're the two loves of my life, and my aunt was a PE teacher who went to school at ISU. She was telling me about her experience and how much of an amazing time she had, so I thought, OK, let me visit the campus and see. So, I visited the campus, and I absolutely fell in love. I fell in love with the opportunity there.

***Tell me about your time at ISU; what did you study/research?***

My first bachelor's degree was English studies, and then I really wanted something with art, so I added on the arts degree. And then I took so many history classes that I ended up getting a minor in it, too. I took so many [English] classes with [Brian Rejack]. I loved having him as a teacher. He had such a unique way of teaching where he incorporated different subjects into learning English. For example, he's a huge gamer. So, one assignment we had, I remember this so vividly, in our Romanticism class, learning about the Romantic era, we had to play *Assassin's Creed* to learn more about the history. It was such a cool way to learn about the history of the era and why people wrote the way they did.

***How has your time at ISU affected your life in other areas, like photography?***

Passion. Like, the passion from the professors and staff got into my system, and it's never going to leave. If you're passionate about something, other people are passionate for you, and that also turns into activism. So, for me, I'm a photographer, but that [activism] led me to get my master's at Northwestern University where I studied leadership for creative enterprises, where I learned the business side of the arts, basically becoming an entrepreneur for the arts. It also led me to advocate during the pandemic to increase funding for arts non-profit organizations. We were able to raise funding for arts nonprofits from \$1.7 to \$7.6 million during the pandemic because a lot of [them] were on the verge of closing, and that was a huge opportunity for me to experience that passion and how much I value the arts.

***What does it mean to you to be a "rising alum"?***

When you first sent me that question, I was like, oh my gosh. Well, I'm going on the right track. Just having that recognition of, hey, you're doing a good job, we see how much work you're putting

into not only yourself, but how much you've done in your career since you've graduated. It's good to know that people are thinking about me, and my name's being mentioned in rooms I'm not in, which is such a huge honor and makes me feel so amazed. [I'm] really, really appreciative that my school is still thinking about me and checking in and everything.

## Andrew Purnell Jr. Trailblazer Award

The Andrew Purnell Jr. Trailblazer Award is a university-wide award which “recognizes the Illinois State University Alumni trailblazers, groundbreakers, innovators, and pioneers who have devoted their time and effort in servant leadership to courageously make a positive change” (Illinois State University Alumni). Named in honor of Andrew Purnell Jr., an ISU alum who established the ISU Black Colleagues Association and dedicated himself to the betterment of accessibility for Black students to ISU, the award recognizes alumni who similarly dedicate their lives to serving their communities. One of this year's recipients, Dr. Ericka Wills, hails from our own ISU English Department, and we met with her to discuss her own trailblazing efforts.

### Dr. Ericka Wills



Dr. Ericka Wills is pictured here at the award's dinner with her mom Cheryl and her son Wylie. Not pictured is Dr. Wills' daughter Willow

Dr. Ericka Wills, currently an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School for Workers, has deep roots in McLean County. She's a seventh-generation resident on one side of her family and ninth generation on the other. As she moved through her childhood and early adulthood in the community, she carried her family's history with her around the world and back. Initially recruited to Illinois Wesleyan, which she began without finishing high school, she studied English at Oxford University and environmental sciences at Columbia

University before finding her way back to Illinois State for an M.S. in 2008 and a Ph.D. in 2015. At ISU, a summer course with Dr. Sally Parry about Illinois writers took students on trips around the state to visit key historical sites in the writers' texts and lives, hooking Wills on English Studies and its potential for real-world impact for good.

“It was this great way of merging the text and these narratives with the real world around you. I just fell in love with the whole English Studies program at ISU.”

It was during her graduate studies that Wills made connections that would inform the rest of her career: the bridge between narratives, whether written, oral, visual, musical, or communally made, and how these first-hand accounts might inspire real advocacy and change. She cites one of the key questions that informed her studies at the time: “[In grad school], I was looking around, and I was asking, ‘If we want to create constructive change to make the world around us a more fair and equitable place, what structures are in place for us to do that?’” The answer she found was the labor movement, one of “the most effective established structures for

creating positive change for working people.” She began collecting both fictional and firsthand accounts of workers' experiences, traveling to worksites and mines across the country to hear from workers and their families in their own communities. By compiling both kinds of narratives, Wills' work evolved to incorporate “thinking of [the different kinds of narratives] as different artistic forms,” working specifically with the workers, families, and unions' accounts to amplify them for a larger audience.

Wills' personal motivation that pulls her toward advocating for workers' rights is one that may be shared by others with deep ties to McLean County. Her grandfather was a victim of the McLean County asbestos tragedy. The United Asbestos and Rubber Company (UNARCO) operated in Bloomington from 1951 to 1972, and during this active period, withheld known information on the dangers of asbestos from workers, forcing them to face toxic conditions and environmental hazards. Many laborers died as a result of deadly asbestos exposure, including Wills' grandfather in his early 50s. Her uncle, who was a toddler at the time of her grandfather's employment at UNARCO, also recently passed away due to secondhand asbestos exposure “from a factory he had never been in,” she said. Witnessing the devastating effects of companies' practices of what she identifies as “industrial homicide” firsthand “very much shaped me as a person,” Wills says, and motivates her daily to continue advocating for and amplifying the voices of workers.

Her passion for preserving workers' narratives and advocacy has led her to a myriad of positions in her career, many of which she holds simultaneously. As a tenure-track assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School for Workers, she's upholding a legacy that began 100 years ago when the program first opened to support women pursuing further education while working in industry. Today, the program continues to educate and support workers all over the continent, allowing Ericka opportunities to educate on the road “across the US, Canada, and Mexico and research at work sites, mines, and union halls.” To honor the program's 100th anniversary this summer, Wills spearheaded the revitalization of the Midwest School for Women Workers, an event affiliated with the United Association for Labor Education (UALE) that hadn't been active for several years but speaks directly to the School for Worker's origin supporting women workers.

***“It was amazing. We had women from all different employment sectors. We had people who worked at the Ford Chicago assembly plant. We had nurse practitioners, we had people who were baristas who had organized with Starbucks, and we had people who were steelworkers in manufacturing. You couldn't imagine a more diverse group in every way, but the one thing that brought them together is they all identified as women workers.”***

Wills also serves as a leader and community-focused educator in several other programs. She helped develop a cross-border training program with the U.S. and Canadian-based United Steelworkers and Los Mineros in Mexico: “We quickly found that workers in the US were being told [by transnational companies that] if you don't take these concessions, we're going to invest in our operations in Mexico, and workers in Mexico were being told if you don't take these concessions, we're going to invest in our operations in the U.S.,” she said. To protect these workers from being further pitted against each other, Wills and her peers created a program that focused on “issues that were impacting [both unions], like free trade



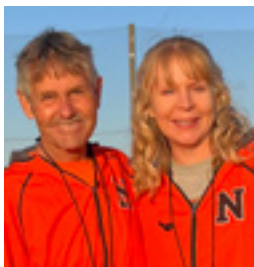
agreements and contract negotiations.” She also partners frequently with EmpowHER, an organization based in Wisconsin that supports women in the building trades looking for additional mentoring and support in a male-dominated employment sector. Wills developed new curricula in partnership with EmpowHER, including a mentoring program that pairs newer women in the field to more established women, fostering a community of mutual support in a field that can be isolating for women workers.

When asked about what it means to be considered a “trailblazer,” Wills was, as she usually is, reverent to those who came before her. “I was able to speak with [Andrew Purnell Jr.’s] family,” she said, “He was an amazing leader who did so much for the rights of African Americans and others in the community. I think that any of us who come after someone like that may be called ‘trailblazer,’ but we’re always just following in the steps of others.” Looking to the future, her hope is just the same as it was when she began focusing on advocacy during her studies at ISU: that, ultimately, the contributions she makes will help make the world a better place.

“We hope that the more people who commit themselves to work for the greater social good, that we won’t have to be trailblazers anymore ... that we’ll have a nicely paved road that people are able to follow and say, ‘I can do work that’s meaningful to my community.’”

Wills is currently writing a book about the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). This includes using oral histories to spotlight the Navajo Nation’s connection to coal mining and the impact of coal phase out in communities and on family structures on the nation. Additionally, she uses firsthand experiences with UMWA strikers and their family during the 2021-2023 labor dispute against Warrior Met coal—a company assembled by vulture investment funds during the U.S. bankruptcy process—to explore the larger collective struggle between workers against Wall Street today. A chapter is currently published and available to read in the *Handbook of Digital Labor* published by Wiley-Blackwell.

## Coaches Tom and Amy Patten: Running with English Education



Coaches Tom and Amy Patten

Illinois State alums Coach Tom Patten and Coach Amy Scott have spent the greater part of their careers running (literally) between two worlds: English education in the high school classroom and coaching high school cross-country. Redbirds through-and-through, the couple has built a lasting legacy as leaders and community members, especially where their coaching is concerned. Tom has been coaching at Normal Community High School since 1984, with Amy starting 10 years later in 1994; between the two, they’ve amassed an impressive collection of state qualifiers, medals, and titles and have made positive impacts on the lives of hundreds of student athletes and their parents. But when we sat down with them, we wanted to spotlight a side of the Patten-Scott coin that isn’t featured as often but has proved just as vital to the students at Normal Community: their careers as English teachers.

Although Coaches Patten and Scott both ultimately made the decision to become English teachers during their undergraduate

studies at ISU, the exact moment they chose that path looked a little different. Tom was a double-major in both History and English and wasn’t sure which he would ultimately pursue for his initial career goal: “I started out thinking I was going into law,” he says, “My dad was a lawyer. But then I worked for my dad one summer and realized, ‘OK, no, I don’t want to do this.’” After sharing a quick laugh over the memory of that less-than-ideal summer in the law office, Tom says that the following school year, he “decided to go into teaching. I think I decided on English, based primarily on the fact that I just enjoyed my English classes so much more than my history classes. Not that I didn’t enjoy them—English was just *there*. There was a lot more going on.”

Amy’s decision was a lot more certain early on. “I always knew I wanted to be a teacher,” she says, “I loved school from the very first day. I loved learning. I just wasn’t sure what I wanted to teach.” Initially torn between English and Math, Amy says that the ultimate decision maker was the humanity at the core of the English discipline. “No offense to math teachers,” she laughs, “but there’s something more human about teaching English. I mean, literature is speaking to us about the meaning of life, and what is the nature of life, and what does it mean to be a good human being. And those things seem more interesting to talk about than sine and cosine.”

Their paths decided, Tom and Amy dove into their studies in English Education at Illinois State. Both agree that their literature classes stood out as easy favorites. Tom recalls that at the time, there were several talented Shakespeare instructors who “really made Shakespeare engaging for me.” He also mentions Dr. Charles Harris, former Department Chair and Professor Emeritus, as a figure who first connected Tom to contemporary literature favorites like Kurt Vonnegut. Amy recalls quite a few notable figures who supported her at ISU, including how Dr. Ruth Fennick, Professor Emeritus, gave her confidence as she began student teaching. “Dr. Fennick made me realize the way my brain works, as far as breaking things down for kids, was fine. That I would be fine. And she was right.” She also enjoyed the courses of Dr. Rodger Tarr, Dr. Bill Morgan, and Dr. Sally Parry, her thesis advisor who “opened up the world” and encouraged her to apply for the Bone Scholar Award. Ultimately, both Tom and Amy achieved both their bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English from Illinois State.

As the mid-1980s dawned for Tom, and later, the mid-1990s for Amy, they both began their careers in English classrooms at Normal Community High School. Just as they design their training programs and activities for the cross-country field, both the coaches have unique pedagogical approaches to their classrooms. As we began talking about what their classrooms might look like from the students’ perspective, Amy noted that she’d actually just been talking with some prospective students about the topic that week. During July, Tom and Amy run a cross-country summer camp from their own house. Meeting with students four mornings a week to go for a run, the coaches keep the team-building dynamic and conditioning of their runners up year-round. Many of the summer camp students sign up for Amy’s honors English courses. While talking with a few incoming freshmen attending the camp, Amy told them about her teaching approach. “I was preparing them for the fact that I’ll seem to go off-topic a lot,” she says, “like I’m telling random stories or jokes, but they almost always connect, and they have a larger purpose.” The reason for Amy’s conversational approach in her teaching is connected to maintaining student engagement: “It’s always been a challenge for students to focus during a whole class

period,” she admits, “But now with cell phones, it’s an even bigger challenge. A couple older, former students in the running group were willing to say yes, I do seem to go off topic a lot, but that it kept them entertained and focused.”

Tom still coaches at the high school but has been retired from teaching for the past 12 years. However, he distinctly recalls the reputation and impact his classes had on the students, a reputation shared, both coaches agree, by Amy’s current classes and, in a way, their dedication to discipline on the cross-country field. “We both really pride ourselves on challenging students and getting them to be better thinkers,” says Tom. “We try to get them to dig deeper into literature and look for things that go beneath the surface and find things happening there that a casual reader is not going to discover.” Amy adds that their approach does challenge the students where they may not have been challenged before: “At Normal Community, you might have had A’s in all your classes, and then would get to our honors level Junior class and that [became] kind of the make-or-break course for a lot of kids.” But the challenges almost always paid off for their students. “They almost always come out the other side feeling like they became better readers and writers and thinkers,” she says, Tom nodding along, “and usually they have very positive things to say about the experience.”

Tom and Amy bring the dedication and desire to challenge students into improvement and growth from the classroom to cross-country. Both agree that there is some level of crossover between their teaching and coaching mindsets for their students. Tom cites an example of how his coaching affects his teaching, and vice versa. “What kids would get in my class was a lot of energy,” he says. “I’m sure that came from [being] a runner and [having] a lot of energy, but I was rarely sitting down when I was teaching.” He remembers that his classroom in Normal Community’s previous building had wall-to-wall blackboards on three sides of the room. By the end of each class period, Tom would have completely filled every available inch of blackboard space, tracing the flow of the conversation in the room and visualizing the learning process of his students. “Kids would come into the classroom for the next class before I cleared off the boards and look at all this stuff and say, ‘This makes absolutely no sense.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, that’s because it’s not a product. It’s a process.’”

Tom’s process-oriented instruction style is evident in his coaching style. While medals and titles are always welcome, his real sense of accomplishment in the sport comes from each student’s overall improvement over the course of their time on the cross-country team. “It’s not just how good the team is and how’s the team doing,” he says. “It’s ‘has each individual somehow grown and developed and become better?’” Amy agrees, adding, “I think one of the things Tom has done a really impressive job with is showing as much interest in the slowest kid on the team as the fastest kid. It’s about individual improvement and having kids see the improvement from working hard, making sure each kid on the team feels valued and feels seen.”

The coaches also spoke a bit about how they’ve been lucky enough to see some of this improvement in themselves over the course of their decades-long, dual-role careers. Just as their coaching has informed their teaching from their students’ perspectives, and vice versa, another effect of years of coaching and teaching in tandem is that their teaching has helped them become better coaches, just as their coaching has helped them become better teachers. Amy shares some of this insight, she says, in a speech she gives to her

freshmen students during their speech unit: “If you’re going to be an English teacher, you’re just always going to have work to do, and you’re always going to have papers to grade, and you’re going to have to sit down and grade every day, even if you don’t feel like it. And that’s part of what being a runner is, going out and getting your run in even if it’s hot, or even when you’re tired, even when you’re sore. So, coaching cross-country, I definitely build on the discipline that teaching has helped me to develop, and vice versa.”

Toward the end of my meeting with the coaches, I was floored by the impact their careers have had on countless students, both on the field and in the classroom. A team as runners and a team as a couple devoted to education, they painted me a picture of dedication, discipline, and perseverance, beginning with their own hard work at ISU and culminating in a lifetime of helping students improve as learners, thinkers, and runners. To close out, I asked one final question, hoping to pinpoint exactly what the goal of their years of experience teaching, coaching, and mentoring meant for their students, and to share with other English teachers hoping to make a positive impact:

***What is the number one new mindset or lesson you hope to impart to your students, either in the classroom or in cross-country?***

“I think, for me,” Tom began, “It is trying to get [the students] to recognize that they have to find ways to really, sincerely, and genuinely enjoy and embrace what they’re pursuing. I’ve had a lot of success getting kids to embrace and enjoy themselves as critical thinkers and that’s really what I wanted to do, make them better people, better citizens, and better neighbors.”

Amy nodded in agreement. “Pursuit of becoming a better writer and of becoming a better runner require a lot of hard work,” she says. “That’s the obvious thing I want them to take away, is putting in that discipline and investment can reap rewards. But kind of less obvious, I think, is the idea of being part of a community when you’re part of an English class. It’s really interesting when you have a class that’s invested in watching how their ideas build off one another to lead to this greater understanding. Ultimately, if you have a cross-country team where everyone is working together well, you’re going to achieve more than you would with a group that just saw themselves as individuals, and I think that the English classroom is the same.”

## **Department Honored to Receive New Graduate Student Professional Development Fund**



Dr. Kip and Ann Strasma

Dr. Kip Strasma and Ann Strasma have been living in Jacksonville, Florida for the past five years. They spend much of their time building community there serving as directors for a community pool. They met at Saint Louis University, married, and began their careers in the Midwest. While Kip pursued his master’s and Ph.D. in English at Illinois State, Ann worked for NBC in Peoria and later, Caterpillar Incorporated for 25 years.



During that time, the Strasmas established deep ties to Bloomington-Normal and Illinois State, a mutually beneficial relationship that Kip credits with much of his success as a graduate student and working professional. To honor the support that Kip received at the University, the Strasmas established the Graduate Student Professional Development Fund.

When the Strasmas came to Normal, Kip began his master's degree in English at Illinois State. He noted the immediate support he received from the faculty at the time. "I started teaching and studying right away," he says, "and it was important then that Dr. [Doug] Hesse instilled in all of us that we would try to get opportunities to present papers at conferences." Ann, who later received an MBA after her undergraduate degrees in communications in English, also stressed the importance of professional development opportunities, like conferences and publication, in recalling her experiences. "Professional development opportunities are essential to allow [graduate students] to really understand and explore areas given time," she says, "and also have that first interaction that they have with peers outside of their own university. From a networking standpoint, that's really essential."

But development opportunities come with a cost. Many conferences require travel expenses, and presentations or publications can eat away at many resources, including time to write and prepare and application fees. All of that on top of graduate students' already-busy schedules full of teaching, editing, writing, or more, and financial barriers can deter graduate students from pursuing these immensely beneficial opportunities. The Strasmas themselves faced this difficulty during their time in graduate school. "We had to work part-time jobs to make ends meet and include these professional development opportunities," Kip says. "That's why it was important for us to move in this direction because there isn't anything like this currently in the English Department for graduate students at Illinois State University. This is specifically directed toward anyone who wants to have a professional development opportunity."

The fund itself is designed as an open, malleable well of support that the Strasmas designed to encapsulate as many development opportunities as possible. "This scholarship opportunity is designed specifically to be inclusive to both sides of the coin," Kip explains. "Write and present, or write and publish. We wanted it to be wide open. We've left it open so anyone in graduate English has an opportunity to request these funds. You don't have to be from a certain county. You don't have to be from a certain state. You don't have to be a certain kind of person or even have a certain kind of degree."

This brand-new fund found its home at Illinois State, Kip says, "[to pay] back the investment that ISU and the professors made in me." Several faculty and staff members influenced Kip's future career during his time in graduate school at Illinois State pursuing both the education and rhet comp fields, an impact that ultimately inspired the giving-back mentality behind the fund. Kip was able to recall several influential figures from ISU, including: Dr. James Kalmbach, "a genius [who] got the best out of my research for my dissertation"; Dr. Doug Hesse, who guided his master's thesis and strongly encouraged professional development; and Dr. Catherine Payton, Dr. Rebecca Saunders, Dr. Ron Strickland, and Dr. Janice Neuleib who inspired his research. These individuals make up just a few of the faculty and staff members who represent the culture and mission of ISU that the Strasmas want to honor through their contribution: "We really wanted to give something back in their honor," he says.

When asked about their hopes for the impact of the fund at

Illinois State, Ann spoke to the potential for growth and development that can come from these opportunities that, through the fund, may now be accessible to students who couldn't have previously taken advantage of them. "[Professional development] is a great opportunity to grow in an educational environment where their peers are, where their professors are," she says. "And, especially as Kip had mentioned, to publish and present—these are very important things that will help them decide what kind of path they want to go into. Do they want to do a research path in the future? Do they want to go on a classroom path? Do they want to do other areas, maybe administration?"

The Strasmas emphasized that the most important aspect of the Graduate Professional Development Fund is that it is expandable through additional donations. "Our real goal is to see if we can encourage others who went through the program when I did to step forward and match our gift," Kip says. "I am hoping that some of my colleagues now at other institutions would learn about this scholarship and want to support it as well." Anyone, including current faculty, students, or alumni, are welcome to donate to the fund and support ISU's graduate students in English as they continue their educational pursuits.

Dr. Kip Strasma currently works as executive producer of Project Management at Florida State College, working to improve college-wide processes that impact students outside of the classroom. Ann Strasma is hard at work planning community activities, working on community boards, and encouraging volunteerism at the community pool.

You can make a contribution to the fund by contacting the department directly or at the following link:

[English.IllinoisState.edu/Make-a-Gift](https://English.IllinoisState.edu/Make-a-Gift).

## **Drs. Steven and Jill Doner Kagle Undergraduate Assistantship Fund**



Dr. Steven Kagle

The Drs. Steven and Jill Doner Kagle Undergraduate Assistantship Fund was established in 2020 by the generous endowment provided by Drs. Steven and Jill Doner Kagle. Dr. Steven Kagle, Professor Emeritus in English at Illinois State, and Dr. Jill Doner, a professor and author in the field of social work, share a mutual dedication to support the English department and its undergraduate students. Together, the couple established the fund in the hopes of meeting multiple goals: to encourage students' interest in literature and culture; to help the department "attract and retain quality students"; and to expand opportunities for undergraduate students to serve as undergraduate teaching assistants (Illinois State University).

Dr. William Thomas McBride, a professor of Film, Drama, and Children's Literature, among others, at Illinois State, has witnessed the fund's impact on his undergraduate students firsthand. In his ENG 124 Film course, the fund has allowed him to bring students on board as undergraduate teaching assistants, or UTAs. The course serves not only to teach students how to analyze traditional film

mediums but also how to interpret media that already contributes to their daily lives in meaningful ways. “Since we’re in front of screens most of our waking hours and interpreting movies of the mind we had while we were asleep,” Dr. McBride explains, “it’s a good idea to see how those who are most effective at producing meaningful content, from TikToks to big budget films, deploy reliable cinematic tools.”

The course, which can range in size each semester to up to over 80 students, serves as a valuable learning opportunity for UTAs. Dr. McBride works with the students to establish their duties, which can include recording attendance, grading a percentage of the assignments, and even leading class discussions or presenting on different films. Getting to work in the classroom is vital to students hoping to pursue an advanced degree or career in the field. “This position affords them valuable experience available only to graduate students,” Dr. McBride says. The UTAs also help Dr. McBride fine-tune his course, as they “open a window for me into the undergraduate experience in general and can provide feedback on the semester’s choice of films, texts, and my teaching of them.” This valuable contribution to the classroom, for both student and professor, is made possible through the Undergraduate Assistantship Fund and its ability to support students as they take on a more active participation in their field, in Dr. McBride’s course, and many others.

Sadly, Dr. Steven Kagle passed away in 2024. He is survived by Jill, his two children, and five grandchildren, as well as the lasting impact of the fund as it makes its work known in the English department at Illinois State.

## Graduate Student Research

Graduate students from all over the world have chosen the ISU English Department as their academic and professional home, in no small part due to the wide array of different specialties the multifaceted faculty offer. We met with Ph.D. and master’s students from five of the English Department’s areas to discuss what they’re learning and how ISU has made a lifelong impact on the course of their studies.

### Children’s Literature

#### Kylee Auten, Ph.D. student



Kylee Auten, Ph.D. Student

“I think I just always go back to that word ‘delight.’ Children’s lit—it means delight to me.”

A second-year Ph.D. candidate focusing on Children’s Literature, Kylee Auten, just like her summation of what Children’s Lit means to her, is just delightful. She enters every campus space (if she’s not already the first one in the room) with a ready smile, a warm hello, and usually a couple of insightful questions that showcase not only her adept experience as a teacher, but

her constant willingness and enthusiasm to learn.

Her positive attitude can likely be credited to her carefully crafted relationship with her field. After working for her local public library in high school, her initial goal was to become a children’s librarian. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to study in undergrad,” she

says, “I was like, maybe I’ll do communications. Maybe I’ll do something kookier than that.” But then, after diving into a couple English classes, specifically an American Lit survey that worked children’s literature into the curriculum, she was hooked. “I just got the bug. I was like, man, I’ve just got to keep writing about this stuff.”

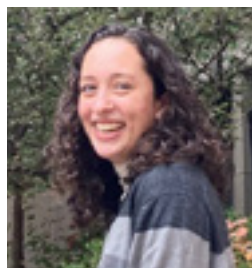
After completing her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English at the University of Louisville, Auten followed the children’s lit train all the way to ISU. During her first year, she developed her research to encapsulate family studies within children’s literature, specifically “how children’s literature presents and constructs family dynamics.” She’s also been studying grief and how grief impacts families within children’s and young adult literature. “I like thinking about relationships and kinship,” she says, “and how people kind of group themselves together along family lines, whether that is along biological lines, thinking about nuclear families, or chosen families that people construct.”

Some of Auten’s favorite moments in children’s literature studies have taken place in Dr. Mary Jeanette Moran’s Storytelling course and Dr. Jeremy Johnston’s YA Lit and Topics in Children’s Lit courses. When talking about the Topics in Children’s Lit course, a grad seminar about politics in children’s and young adult literature, she said, “We were gabbing about books all day, and that is what made me fall in love with being an English major—getting to sit around and exchange ideas with people.”

After she completes her Ph.D. at ISU, Auten hopes to pursue professorship and a place continuing to research and teach in colleges and universities. But she isn’t forgetting her roots, either: “I would also love to go back and work at a university library and get some hands-on work with children’s books again. I think that could be really rewarding work.”

### Literature and Culture

#### Kaitlyn Tibbetts, master’s student



Kaitlyn Tibbetts, M.A. Student

“Lit and culture is compassionate understanding ... Opening my worldview to different perspectives can allow me to recognize something that’s distant [from me].”

Kaitlyn Tibbetts is a master’s candidate studying literature and culture. Whether she’s in the classroom (either teaching composition or studying a wide array of texts and theories in her extensive course load) or practicing the “compassionate understanding” in her above quote with the morning crowd at her

barista gig, Tibbetts is always enthusiastically encountering myriad literary and cultural themes. As we met up for coffee and a chat (*after* a barista shift of her own—talk about dedication), she walked me through a little of her identity as a lit and culture student.

While Tibbetts’ love of literature and culture began in high school, she says she didn’t fully comprehend the scope of the field until her undergraduate degree in English at Olivet Nazarene University. “[In high school] I took a global lit class where our reading list consisted of Shakespeare and a few other British authors,” she says. “Because I was 16, I didn’t question that. But then when I went to undergrad, I took a world literature class, and we read books from Colombia and Nigeria and India and Russia. I was like, oh, *this* is what world literature is.”

She landed at ISU for her master's because of the lit and culture offering, stating how she was "surprised by how it's becoming increasingly difficult to find programs that prioritize culture." During her time at the University, she's enjoyed studying under multiple professors and a range of course offerings. She particularly resonated with a YA Literature course ("Shout out Dr. Jeremy Johnston,") and Dr. Rebecca Saunders' cultural theory course, which culminated in a "Name That Theorist" quiz game during finals week. "Her perspective was always that we were theorists," she said of Dr. Saunders, "instead of just being students learning about theory."

Her thesis, which she will defend next spring, focuses on Langston Hughes' poem "Let America Be America Again" and the way the different cultural identities Hughes presents within the poem are represented in different literary works from all over the canon. She explains, "[Hughes] identifies the kinds of people that America has failed. My project and my research is going to use that poem as a lens to analyze four books that coordinate with those groups that he identifies."

After completing her degree, Tibbetts hopes to continue teaching, either in middle school, high school or as an affiliate professor before returning for her Ph.D.. "I think the Ph.D. is happening," she says. "I think I just need a break from being a student for a second. But I love to learn, so I know I'll [be back]."

## Creative Writing

### Tate Lewis-Caroll, master's student



Tate Lewis-Caroll, M.A. Student

"Creative writing means living a life at the top of your breath."

If you couldn't already tell from the above quotation, Tate Lewis-Caroll, a second-year master's student, lives and breathes creative writing. You'd be hard pressed to find them without a notebook (or two) at all times, ready to record, unravel, and reassemble the world around them on the page. A steward of strange and wonderful poetic work, it's almost

impossible to imagine Lewis-Caroll away from the written word for long.

But, at one time, that was exactly the case. When they began their undergraduate degree at Illinois Wesleyan University, they were a nursing major, a path that, in their own words, "was not good for me." After taking some time off, they returned to Wesleyan newly invigorated and ready to "figure out what I need to do to make a bunch of money and be successful as a person. So, until then, I'll just be an English major."

This decision could not have come at a more critical time. In their first semester back, and as an English major, Tate's father was diagnosed with cancer and tragically passed away six months later. "That whole experience couldn't have come at a better time for me than with me in a writing class," they said when reflecting on that difficult time. "Like, [I was] really figuring out how important and how urgent poetry can be, and in dealing with these issues and reading other people and just that community of artists and pain and healing and like, noticing you, you know? It really helped me."

Eventually, Lewis-Caroll found their way to ISU to pursue their master's degree under the guidance of Dr. Gabriel Gudding, author of *Rhode Island Notebook*, a collection that they found par-

ticularly compelling. At ISU, Lewis-Caroll focuses on developing a ritualistic approach to writing that challenges a concept they've developed called the "anxiety of production," describing the anxiety that creative writers face under the pressure of having to monetize their practice. To combat the constant pressure to write something "producible," Lewis-Caroll has begun a practice of writing daily using a typewriter on rolls of receipt paper. "I love the rolls because they keep me going," they say, "It forces me to approach my writing in ways that I wouldn't have before, you know, because it's only two and a half inches across, but it's fifty feet long. It's more about just the ritual of sitting at the typewriter each morning and just writing this strange and inaccessible word."

After completing their degree next year at ISU, Lewis-Caroll hopes to continue their research and writing in a creative writing Ph.D. program.

## Rhetorics and Composition

### Kristy Hume, master's student



Kristy Hume, M.A. Student

"Rhet comp means the different ways we communicate and the different ways we make meaning."

Master's candidate Kristy Hume is a proud Normal native to her core. From attending ISU as an undergraduate studying political theory and constitutional democracy to teaching at a local high school to now pursuing a graduate degree at the same university, Hume has thrived as a community member and leader in

both the Bloomington-Normal area and on campus, dedicated to English Education and, now, Rhetorics and Composition.

However, her path back to grad school was not an easy one. Her interest in coming back to school was sparked after her experience battling cancer: "I spent a year kind of like, blogging about having cancer and the different ways that changed my relationships with my kids and my friends and my outlook on life." Wanting to explore the relationship between writing, life, and meaning further, Hume decided to go back to school to pursue a master's degree in children's literature. But there was another bump in the road. "When I decided to give grad school a swing, I started when the kids were too little. It was too much work with the kids in elementary school."

While returning her focus to her young children, Hume never gave up on learning and continued taking classes at ISU over the years. One class, Dr. Robillard's life writing course, proved pivotal for Hume's life and educational pursuits. "I started doing a lot of life writing and thinking about storytelling. I took some rhetoric classes on storytelling rhetoric. And that's when it really started to solidify for me what I'm doing here."

Now officially back for good and with one year left in her pursuit of a master's degree, Hume has expanded her research to incorporate storytelling rhetorics in relation to myriad related interest areas, including exclusionary narratives, podcast rhetorics, and non-traditional storytelling mediums. "I want to research and talk about the ways stories are being told," Hume says. "Who resists being erased, like Native American voices and African American voices and women's voices because the existing narrative is, you know, cis white males." Rhet comp is especially relevant now, she



adds, because of the current political state of the country as a whole. “I feel like we’re at a special moment where our country is resisting diversity, but they are pretending that this diversity doesn’t exist innately in this country’s fabric. I just think it’s important that we don’t just let one story be told.”

After completing her degree, Hume’s future holds plenty of exciting possibilities. Although she knows for sure she is done with teaching high school (“supervising prom and finding pot in someone’s purse is not my favorite part of my teaching career”), she’s open to any path that allows her to keep talking about writing and books.

### AJ Pittman, Ph.D. student



AJ Pittman, Ph.D. student

“I think for me, understanding that rhetoric is persuasion at its core and understanding that all language has a purpose behind it ... the goal is to understand the world better.”

AJ Pittman is a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate studying Rhetorics and Composition. In speaking with them for this feature, it became immediately clear that they are deeply invested and naturally explorative in the field. From religious rhetorics to its impact on the environ-

ment and larger border rhetorics, Pittman is a scholar who dutifully follows each thread they encounter in their research, carefully marking intersections and meaningful connections: “It feels like it expands every time I go to start reading something I need to read, and then I’m just like, oh, there’s this other thing you can bring in.”

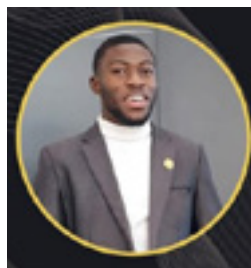
It was this innate curiosity that led Pittman to “stumble into” rhet comp. After attending an evangelical university for their undergraduate degree that mainly focused on literature, specifically Brit Lit, they began taking rhet comp courses during their master’s program. “It sounded really cool,” they say, “I was starting to focus more on politics and stuff, too, so I kind of fell in with that.” Their evangelical background also spurred their interest in religious rhetoric, a major focus of their studies here at ISU. “I think I used to believe there was some kind of form of absolute truth,” they muse. “At this point, I see that language is extremely malleable. I wanted to study how people are using language, among other things, as a persuasive element for their end goal.”

At ISU, Pittman has taken a number of memorable courses with Dr. Eda Ozyesilpinar, a rhetorics and composition faculty member who helped inform Pittman’s studies. “She’s incredible,” they say, “I really enjoyed her focus on border rhetorics. Adding that to what I’m seeing, how religion plays into that, I think is extremely important, too.” Pittman taught English 183, Rhetoric as Civic Literacy, last fall for completion of their teaching internship. During that course, they emphasized the importance of how rhetorics impact the students’ real world, encouraging them to write and discuss how course concepts appeared in their lives outside of the classroom. They will be teaching the course again in the fall 2025 semester.

After completing their Ph.D., Pittman hopes to pursue a role in academia to continue their teaching and researching career. “I love teaching. I love seeing students learn. I love learning from the students.”

## TESOL

### Ishmael Neequaye, master’s student



Ishmael Neequaye, MA student

“When I was a teaching assistant, they started introducing TESOL courses. I was fascinated by some of the key issues, like equity, differentiated instruction advocacy and inclusivity.”

Ishmael Neequaye is a master’s candidate in TESOL. Originally from Ghana and having taught and attended schools both in Ghana and the United States, his well-rounded experience, passion, and dedication to all things TESOL is immediately evident. Neequaye described

his research as a tapestry of advocacy, resilience, and scholarship that led him to his studies at ISU.

Neequaye’s research centers on how English language teachers in Ghanaian high schools can prepare their students both for their secondary certification exams, tests that ultimately determine the students’ paths for tertiary school, and English language usage outside of the classroom entirely. As both a student and a teacher of Ghanaian senior high schools with firsthand experience of the exam system, he brings his personal knowledge to his qualitative research. “My goal for the research is to explore how English language teachers are preparing students to meet the vocabulary demands of the exams and to what extent the exams influence institutional practices,” he says. “I am especially interested in whether those teaching practices actually support student communicating competence.”

Although Neequaye faces recent travel restrictions that make traveling to and from the U.S. and Ghana almost impossible, he is making full use of the resources available through his studies at ISU to conduct research that he will ultimately share with Ghanaian institutions. This year, he presented his preliminary findings at a conference on bilingual education, as well as ISU’s University Research Symposium. Interacting with the data in these early stages, Neequaye identifies some of the major challenges facing Ghanaian instructors: “They are faced with systemic challenges like large class sizes and inadequate reading materials,” he says. “In Ghana, we have category C schools, category B schools, and category A schools. Even in the schools there is segregation. Category C schools are for people who did not perform very well on their exams. The opportunity for students to learn from each other if they have different abilities is denied.”

Neequaye is currently working on his thesis under the direction of Dr. Kris Lewis. He hopes that his research, which he plans to continue through the pursuit of a Ph.D. in TESOL, will “make a contribution to my country and then the globe as well.”

## Department Faculty Spotlights

It goes without saying that the incredible work the department produces would not be possible without its backbone: the current faculty. Two exceptional instructional assistant professors and three new tenure-track assistant professors shine a light on the impact these researchers and educators are making on the ISU community and the impact that ISU is making on them.

## Talking through Teaching with Instructional Assistant Professors Dr. Autumn West and Dr. Barbi Smyser-Fauble



Dr. Autumn West



Dr. Barbi Smyser-Fauble

### *Talk about your educational background; where did you go to school?*

**Dr. West:** I have a bachelor's degree in rhetoric from the University of Illinois, where all my degrees are from. I have a master's in education, and I got my Ph.D. in education, but my concentration was in writing studies.

**Dr. Smyser-Fauble:** [A little] different from other colleagues in the department, I actually started at Eastern Illinois University for my bachelor's and master's; however, the route that I initially started was my bachelor's degree is in marketing. Once I finished my bachelor's degree, I got that first job and worked with the company to go back and get a master's degree. I was doing it while I was working full time. I worked professionally for about eight more years and then applied in the technical writing and new media studies area here at Illinois State University [for my doctorate].

### *What courses have you taught/do you teach at ISU?*

**Dr. West:** I've taught English 145, which is Writing in the Academic Disciplines. I've taught English 145.13, which is Writing for Business and Government Organizations. I've also taught English 402, which is Teaching Composition for grad students, and I've taught English 239, which is Multimodal Composition. I think I got them all!

**Dr. Smyser-Fauble:** So, right now, as an instructional assistant professor, my main focus is the technical writing and rhetoric sequence. The ones I focus on are 249, which is the Technical and Professional Writing course, then 349 which is the next progressive advancement step, Technical Writing II, and then Visible Rhetoric, Multimodal Composition, as well as 353, Technical Editing. Then, I've gotten the chance to teach some general education classes, which would be like 124 Film Style and Literature, which is sort of my side passion. I'm a culture person.

### *Before you came to ISU, what were you like as a teacher?*

**Dr. West:** I was lucky to have a wonderful advisor [at U of I], Dr. Sarah McCarthy, and she was always an advocate for me and made sure that I had opportunities to teach. So, I actually started teaching my first semester when I started my Ph.D.. I actually taught a lot of courses. I also taught social justice education and I think that was, to me, my most significant accomplishment was that

I applied for that with the help of my advisor and got hired to be a TA. And I did that for most of my time as a Ph.D. student, but I was always teaching at least a couple classes.

**Dr. Smyser-Fauble:** Originally, my teaching experience was more in training and development because once I left Eastern with my undergrad, my first job sort of expanded into training and development for a department. I was creating training manuals, doing the onboarding training, and that expanded to doing health care training for both health insurance companies as well as hospitals. From there, I went into pharmaceuticals. I enjoyed that teaching, but as the pharmaceutical industry started to implode, I realized that I really wanted to keep teaching and doing it in a more formalized manner. So, that's when I went back to get my doctorate so that I could teach more at colleges and universities and continue my development as a teacher.

### *After teaching at ISU, how has your personal pedagogy changed?*

**Dr. West:** I would say the population [at Illinois State] is slightly different, in a way. I mean, you might have way more students who are actually like commuting and all these different things. There's some privilege [in the students], maybe, teaching at [U of I], whereas at ISU, I find the students to be more well-rounded. Students from different backgrounds, demographics, so there were things that I had to change, which I'm happy I did. But it was kind of like taking a step back to reevaluate if I'm working with technology, which I do in all my courses, how do I make it so that the students are prepared for this? How do I introduce students to things they need to know in order to be successful in the course? I think, just, more scaffolding, more modeling of things I'm asking for helps.

**Dr. Smyser-Fauble:** When I came here as a graduate teaching assistant, [I got] the same training that other graduate students got [in terms of] really developing a pedagogical presence that I felt really helped me prepare for teaching. I was more focused on not just the goals of a class and the institution and the department, but incorporating the goals of each student, which obviously encompassed a variety of different perspectives. I need to be responsive and reflect a lot of what students are needing, both in the current academic setting [and] what they need in terms of a professional path, because learning and education don't just exist in a classroom space. Most of us who are teaching need to be very flexible and respond to different needs.

### *If I were your student, what could I expect to do/find in your classroom?*

**Dr. West:** So, my class is heavy on experimentation. I always tell my students that I take a design-based thinking approach to my classes. It's definitely not a lecture. We do a lot of tinkering, we'll be playing with a lot with technology. They shouldn't look at it as just like, oh, you're going to sit back, but that you're going to be agentive and I'm going to require you to step into that composer space and really problem-solve and play around.

**Dr. Smyser-Fauble:** The generalized approach I have is that I want students to have a positive experience. For example, a lot of the 249 students I have are in computer science, and a lot of them are very nervous about writing in general, or being graded on writing. Right away, I try to put these people at ease with the scope of the class and the situation of the class they are in—whether it's required, whether it was an optional choice, something they're excited

about or something that's going to challenge them, I want them to feel comfortable and confident. I want people to feel like they're a part of the class. I let them know that their opinions matter in the class. I want them to feel like they are a part of the class, not just taking the class.

**What do you hope students leave your class with at the end of the semester?**

**Dr. West:** A primary goal for me is that they understand that they have the ability to intervene in the discourse around them. So, understanding that, we are all writers. We participate in different ways, with different technology, different media. But I want them to understand that you don't have to just listen, right? You can participate. You can *change* discourse. You can actually *shape* discourse, and that is something I want all my students to take away: that you have the power to do that.

**Dr. Smyser-Fauble:** Every project, whether it's technical writing in terms of a specific type of profession, they all impact possible things that they could be doing, that they could transfer to a variety of different disciplines, whether that's publishing, creative writing, computer science, video game programming, cybersecurity, whatever their majors are. I try to develop assignments that bridge and transfer to more of a professional setting. I like to give them [in the class] fewer risky opportunities so they can try new things like invisible rhetoric and multimodal composition.

**What are you up to now?**

**Dr. West:** I'm working on a chapter about post-digital writers, something that me and my colleague Anna Smith are writing together. We've moved past this kind of new digital era into something that's very much post-digital, so we wrote a chapter. I've been working on that, and I just love it because, in that chapter, I get to talk about my slight obsession with TikTok. TikTok has taught me a lot about where we're going with writing, it's taught me a lot about artificial intelligence, which, you know, I teach about as well. It'll be in a book called *Becoming Writers* published at the end of 2025. And then I have two articles that I'm working on that deal with AI, so I'm excited that I got invited to write about that. I do a little poetry in my spare time. I'm happy that I'm actually, like, returning to writing creatively.

**Dr. Smyser-Fauble:** I work with a lot of colleagues here as well as colleagues I've met across various organizations like the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing. I'm working on projects in medical rhetorics and disability studies. So, things like clinical trials and the impact on a variety of audiences. A project I also enjoy is looking at the impacts and effects of popular culture and technical writing. Like, how the evolving effects of things like technology—whether that's AI, social media, even film representation, or other forms of popular culture—impact technical documents in ways that people don't necessarily anticipate.

## New Tenure-Track Faculty

**Dr. Jeremy Johnston, Dr. Ray Levy, and Dr. Jose Antonio Villarán**



Dr. Jeremy Johnston



Dr. Jose Antonio Villarán

Taking on any new role poses new challenges. Add on moving to a new university, state, or even *country* to both teach and research with an entirely new demographic of students and archive of resources, and you have the unique situation facing ISU's new tenure-track faculty in English: Dr. Jeremy Johnston in Children's Literature and Dr. Ray Levy and Dr. Jose Antonio Villarán in Creative Writing. They spoke about how their first year at the University went.

**Talk about your background; where did you grow up/go to school?**

**Dr. Johnston:** So, I guess I'll note here that I'm Canadian. From Laurentian University I did a bachelor's degree of honors in English and then from there I did a master's degree at the University of Windsor. Then, I did my Ph.D. at the University of Western Ontario. I also had the opportunity to work in the student support area, like as administrative staff supporting graduate students. I did that for a couple years where I was supporting grad students from a staff capacity, helping them navigate courses and teaching classes at the university.

**Dr. Villarán:** I was born and raised in Peru. My family is bilingual. My mom's side was all Mexican-U.S. and my dad's side was all Peruvian. I don't remember learning English—it was always there. I grew up in Peru, and I loved it. But part of the deal with my parents is that we would all go to college in the states. I went to the University of Connecticut, and I studied there for two years. I did awful, and I didn't really like it. But when I was 21 or 22, I figured I would do what I really like, which was to read and write, so I ended up graduating from San Francisco State University and their Creative Writing program. After that, I went back to Peru because I wanted to publish in Spanish first. I published two books in Peru. The second one was bilingual. I did an MFA [and Ph.D.] at the University of California in San Diego. I've always wanted to teach in a public university, and so I came here.

**Dr. Levy:** I did a BA in English, Creative Writing, at Allegheny College in Western Pennsylvania, and then I did an M.A. in English at Miami University in Ohio. Then, I did an MFA at University of Colorado, Boulder in Fiction Writing and a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Utah. After I got my Ph.D., I spent a year teaching at Michigan State on a postdoc fellowship, and then I worked for five years as an assistant professor of Creative Writing at a public liberal arts college in Virginia called the University of Mary Washington, and then I came here.



**What about your research? What are you interested in studying and where have those studies taken you?**

**Dr. Johnston:** My trajectory has definitely shifted, as with anyone who does research quite a bit. When I first started doing research in the field of children's and young adult literature, I largely focused on young adult literature specifically. And then I started doing my master's looking at narratives of death, grief, and mourning. It was particularly around the heyday of things like *The Hunger Games*, *The Fault in Our Stars* ... a lot of YA literature was focused on teens dying. And as a researcher I was like, why are we so concerned about this right now? I noticed a lot of these narratives were also talking about mental health; effectively, the guiding research question of my dissertation became: "What does a happy ending look like for someone with depression, and particularly an adolescent with depression?"

**Dr. Villarón:** My designated area of emphasis during my Ph.D. was critical race and ethnic studies, and that's because I'm very invested in socioeconomic issues, particularly within the LatinX community in the United States. To me, research and creative writing or creative output are kind of one and the same. I do appreciate the usefulness of social science theories and those lenses. My last project was titled *The Open Pit*, focusing primarily on extractivism, and it focused on one mining town in Peru. I'm really invested in being able to research something as a writer, not necessarily a theorist, but then to use that material in the work that I do, which is writing.

**Dr. Levy:** So, I'm primarily a fiction writer, and a lot of my training was in formally experimental traditions of fiction, which is something I'm still really invested in. The research focus of my Ph.D. work was on comedy and the comic novel and theories of humor. More recently, I've become really interested in satire and the intersection of horror and comedy. I think horror's really meaningful, and, yeah, I love its allegorical potential. Kind of beyond those, I'm also an active publisher, so I do a lot of editorial work. I run a small independent literary magazine called *Dragomworld*, and I'm an editor at *Fiction Collective*, which is an experimental fiction publishing house.

**What drew you to apply to teach at ISU?**

**Dr. Johnston:** This is where I'm happy to introduce a little fun fact about myself that actually only a handful of people know. I actually applied to do my Ph.D. at ISU several years ago and was not successful. But I knew that this was a community with a relationship to children's literature that was an important one. It's just one of those things that wasn't my door. And in many ways, I'm grateful for that because I got to go on and do work and, you know, establish different kinds of networks. I got to meet my wife. But I think, to your point about what drew me to come here, it's the children's lit community here. It's so well-known in the field, and it's given rise to tremendous scholarship. And so, when the opportunity arose for a position here, even though it meant sort of uprooting, I knew that this sort of academic environment was something I wanted to be a part of.

**Dr. Villarón:** When I was an undergraduate in San Francisco, that's a public institution, and I can say that it really impacted me as a writer. To me, that's when I was like, *I am* a writer. So, at a very general and broad level, I hope that at ISU I can help students to kind of find their way as writers, because that's what the public institution did for me.

**Dr. Levy:** I've kind of always known of ISU and respected a lot of the people who've taught here and a lot of the work that's been done. When I saw the job ad, I was really excited because there was an emphasis on experimental and innovative creative writing traditions. This department is also really attractive to me because I'll get to teach and collaborate across sub-disciplines and work with all kinds of students. I feel like the department is a really great group of people. My colleagues, I feel like they're people I can learn from. They're incredibly kind and have a lot of integrity. The graduate students are really exciting. Yeah, I'm a fan of Illinois State.

**What was the process of coming here like? Any big changes from your last university or place you lived?**

**Dr. Johnston:** So, of course, moving to a new country comes with a lot of work and change. I would say prior to this move, I thought, well, we're way more similar than we're not with regards to the American and Canadian dynamic. There's plenty of the Bloomington area that feels very familiar to where I come from in Ontario. But I was born and raised in a rural township surrounded by farms, and like, I think this Midwest space is something that feels very familiar and homey in this way. But there are adjustments I had to make. For example, our grading system is very different in Canada. We don't typically have a standardized GPA system; we don't really use letter grades at all. So, you know, they're not major obstacles to change, but it's just a different kind of mindset in terms of helping students who are very concerned about grades, making sure I understand the nuances of this system and acclimating to that kind of culture.

**Dr. Villarón:** You know, when I first came to the states I was like, wow, things are different. I think in California, I was in an extremely liberal and progressive and also kind of militant school. At ISU, even though we're in the same country, I think just geographically it's so different, and the people are different, so I feel like I'm still kind of figuring it out. The students have been really friendly and really patient with me because I mean, it's culture shock, right? It's not only that I come from California, but like, California was a culture shock to begin with. I'm very appreciative that students have been patient and even helped explain things like, *Well, if you have a tornado, don't worry, just go to the basement.*

**Dr. Levy:** I mean, I'm happy to be back in the Midwest! I much prefer the Midwest in every way: it's more affordable; I feel like I can lead a much more dedicated life; I can find great housing. So, yeah, I just love this part of the country. And one of my oldest, best friends teaches at Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the Latino Studies program, and I never thought that, you know, we would get to live in the same area ever again. I mean, that felt almost like a miracle. Other than that, it's just been amazing transitioning into a professor role that has a lot of support for research. I feel like I have the time to develop as a writer and a teacher here.

**What's your teaching philosophy like? If it's changed at all since coming to ISU, what has that change been like?**

**Dr. Johnston:** I'm always fascinated by questions like this because there's a part of me that thinks it's a question only my students can answer, about what kind of teacher I am. I think when I set out the teaching philosophy, it starts with the idea of defamiliarization. I like to find ways to look at things differently, whether it's using a different methodology, looking in a different light or context and

defamiliarizing what we think is “normal” is, to me, really key. And so, with that, I like to make students in my room be teachers as well. I’m trying to foster a community in which my students are also collaborative teachers in the classroom. I value, in many ways, my students’ own sort of diverse ways of looking at the world and using that to the benefit of the rest of us in the room. Coming to ISU was my first time getting to teach a grad class. One of the guiding principles of that class was making sure every student felt they had something they could roll out of it. Like, all right, I got something I can work with. I got something tangible.

**Dr. Villarón:** I’ll be very happy if I can help people feel that what they’re doing in the classroom is relevant and worthy. I think I’m used to a kind of teacher-student relationship that is maybe not so common here. I also think I still don’t fully understand the effect of the Midwest, you know, and so I think that might take a while for me. I think it’s because I’m getting used to the place, and the place has an impact on the people. But I’m also really grateful that the classes I’ve had, which have been four at this point, I’m happy with what happened, and I think I was able to help some students with their work. So, overall, I think it’s been a good first year.

**Dr. Levy:** I like to have fun and laugh a lot in the classroom, so I really enjoy it. A lot of my pedagogy is really focused on helping students develop their artistic sensibilities and processes so they have a solid foundation and toolkit they can draw on well beyond their time at ISU. I want to help students figure out what their subjects are, what their style is, what it means for them to take risks in their writing and how to kind of produce something that actually matters to them. I think those are really important things to figure out how to do. I want to provide support and encouragement to students who are doing that work. Some of the changes that are occurring are figuring out how to teach and mentor grad students; that’s an ongoing thing that I’m learning.

### **What do you hope to accomplish during your time at ISU?**

**Dr. Johnston:** There is a long tradition of excellent and wonderful children’s and young adult literature education and scholarship at this institution, and I’m really grateful that I’ve been brought on board to be a part of that history. What I hope to do now is pick up a piece of that baton and share it with my current colleagues and perhaps future colleagues, somewhere down the line. Keep this a place where students at the undergraduate level get a comprehensive and thorough education in this field that is so important. For me, in this first year, I have felt welcome in the department, in the community. My fellow faculty and colleagues and grad students have been very welcoming and accommodating to me, helping me understand, just, you know, where the buildings are (which I’m still trying to figure out). Where I’d like to see myself in the next five years is to be more involved with things both in and outside of the department, also getting more involved in the community.

**Dr. Villarón:** I really hope that I can create courses that are bilingual and incorporate U.S. LatinX culture and U.S. LatinX writers and scholarship. That is something that I’m very interested in because I would also like to find students who are interested in this. So, that’s a more specific and long-term objective, which won’t be easy, but I think it’s possible. Like, I want to have bilingual creative writing classes and workshops, and I want this to be approved by the registrar, you know what I mean? So, that is something that’s very important to me. And then, Professor Gudding and I are going

to embark on this crazy project. Professor Gudding has translated the work of Gunnar Wærness, a Norwegian poet, writer, scholar, who’s doing amazing work. He put me in contact with Gunnar, and the three of us are going to translate it now into Spanish. I’ve never done this before. I’ve never worked with three different languages, with people alive, so I’m very excited about that.

**Dr. Levy:** I want to continue to develop as a teacher, to figure out what it means to be a good steward of the creative writing program, to grow and fortify that program here and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the *Fiction Collective* and the Illinois State publishing unit. One of my goals is to publish a horror novel.

## **Statements from Impact Awardees**

For the 2024-2025 school year, six members of the English department were honored as Impact Awardees. Awardees must be nominated by an undergraduate student as recognition of “motivating, inspiring, and supportive” actions that “help any student succeed” (Illinois State University). To gain a little insight into the impacts of these individuals on our campus culture, we asked them to respond to the following question:

### **What does it mean to make an impact as a teacher?**

**Shelby Boehm, Visiting Assistant Professor:** To make an impact as a teacher means supporting learners in achieving their goals, both academic and personal. As a teacher of future teachers, making an impact as a teacher also means supporting the next generation of educators and their future students.

**Heidi Bowman, Instructional Assistant Professor:** I didn’t start teaching until I was in my late-30s, and I am continually in awe of all the “wins” of this profession. I feel most alive in the classroom because students impact me—they make me think, they make me laugh, and they make me hope, even on the hard days. I am honored to receive an Impact Award and to have had a positive effect on my students, as they have most definitely had a positive effect on me.

**Jeremy Hurley, Instructional Assistant Professor:** Teaching is more than presenting content in an engaging and meaningful way; it starts with building a classroom environment where students feel respected, supported, and heard. I strive to help students gain confidence in themselves and develop empathy for those around them, so they leave the classroom not only more knowledgeable but also more prepared to make a positive impact in the world.

**Abaigeal Uphoff, Graduate Teaching Assistant:** This past year teaching was my first year *ever*, so I’m sure my answer to this question will evolve as I keep going. But right now, I think this first year taught me that making an impact on students means putting students first—finding out what they care about, what compels them and interests them, and incorporating those things into the course to ensure that they feel excited to come to class and like they can take their learning with them outside of the classroom. *Huge* shout-out to Dr. Gramer and the Writing Program team for the training and support that made this possible!

# Pub Unit Alumni Feature: Kayla Jeffers '18

By Jacob Lyle



Kayla Jeffers

Kayla Jeffers '18 graduated from Illinois State University with a degree in publishing studies from the [Department of English](#). During her time at Illinois State, she gained hands-on experience as a production intern for the [Publications Unit](#), contributing to the fall 2017 and fall 2018 issues of the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*. She also served as a copy editor and columnist for the *Vidette*, Illinois State's student-run news outlet.

Residing in Springfield, Jeffers currently serves as communications coordinator supporting a Capacity Building Initiative between the [Illinois Department of Agriculture](#) (IDOA) and the [Natural Resource Conservation Service](#) (NRCS). The position includes editorial and production work on the *Agroecology + Innovation Matters* (AIM) *Newsletter*, social media, press releases, and other print collateral; managing website content and design; employing graphic design skills for marketing activities; and public relations work, while building a communications foundation for the organizations.

Previously, she worked as an associate magazine editor before being promoted to managing editor for the *Township Officials of Illinois* (TOI), where she served for six years after graduating from Illinois State. Jeffers spoke about her time at Illinois State, her journey into the publishing industry, her career experiences, and her advice for those pursuing a path in publishing.

## ***What inspired you to major in publishing studies at Illinois State and pursue a career in publishing?***

When choosing which college I wanted to attend, Illinois State was my top choice. My late grandmother Julie Jeffers '48 attended Illinois State, and my whole life, I wanted to follow in her footsteps of being a Redbird. Unfortunately, my grandmother passed away in 2016 and was unable to see me finish my studies and graduate from her (our) alma mater. While attending Illinois State was always the dream, I went back and forth on possible majors. I knew I wanted to study English, but I didn't know in what capacity I wanted to pursue a career. So, when I saw that the English Department had a publishing studies sequence, I was beyond excited!

My late aunt Susan Jeffers (UIUC class of 1976) greatly encouraged me to follow this area of study, as she had worked in the publishing industry for over 20 years by the time of my enrollment, most notably at Scholastic Books as a senior production editor until 2009. Unfortunately, my aunt passed away in 2015 at the end of my freshman year, and she was unable to see me enter the world of publishing. It is both of their memories that inspired me to major in publishing studies at Illinois State University and follow my dream of becoming an editor.

## ***How did your internship with the Publications Unit and your experience as an editor with the Vidette influence your career choices after graduation?***

The experience of interning at both the Publications Unit and the *Vidette* prepared me to juggle multiple production cycles of periodicals. At the Publications Unit, I worked on the *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter* (fall 2017 and spring 2018), the *Illinois English Bulletin* (spring 2018), the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* (spring 2018), and the *Illinois Association of Teachers of English Newsletter* (spring 2018). Most of these projects had semester-long production cycles that involved multiple rounds of proofs between myself and either the assistant director or director of the Publications Unit, as well as the editor of each publication. This kind of production cycle prepared me for the monthly production cycle of the magazine I worked on for six years, *Township Perspective*, where I worked closely with the editor and contributing authors. Interning as a copy editor with the *Vidette* prepared me for a much faster-paced production cycle, as each day it was a brand-new news cycle. When I was at the *Vidette*, the paper printed physical editions twice weekly. Being able to see my work—as a copy editor and as a columnist!—twice a week was really helpful in feeling accomplished and having physical proof of the work I had done. This prepared me to work in a faster paced environment.

Both of these internships brought me a joy for working on periodicals, newsletters, and magazines. Publishing isn't just books. Currently, I work on the *AIM Newsletter* as part of the Capacity Building Initiative between IDOA and NRCS. This is also a monthly production cycle but with an electronic deliverable.

## ***What experiences would you recommend new or prospective publishing studies students pursue outside of the classroom during their time at Illinois State?***

A little bit of everything, really. I would recommend getting involved with the Publications Unit as soon as you can! Working with Holms Troelstrup and Steve Halle (former assistant director and director, respectively) really influenced the kind of editor I am today, and I would not be where I am without them. I would also suggest getting involved with the *Vidette*, as that is a different production environment. Try to join *Euphemism*, either as editorial staff or as contributing author. Also, get DIY with it: start a zine with friends, run a blog, etc. The more experience, the better. But also, have fun!

## ***Since the job search can be a challenging part of the process for students, can you share your experience searching for a job after graduation? How did you find the position at the Township Officials of Illinois, and what attracted you to the role?***

I am not from the Chicagoland area, which I found challenging when applying for jobs leading up to graduation and immediately post-graduation. But I didn't let that deter me, and I kept applying. I really lucked out when applying for the role of associate editor with the Township Officials of Illinois, as it was a Springfield-based position. The job market has changed since then though, with many more remote positions available. What initially attracted me to the role was that it was in Springfield (that's where I am from and currently live), it was an editorial position, and I would be working on a monthly magazine.

***You were in your position for six years and promoted to managing editor during that time. Can you describe what a typical workday as managing editor entailed and share the important skills you brought to the role from your time at the Publications***



***Unit? Additionally, what important skills did you develop while on the job?***

Over the course of the six years I worked with TOI, my role expanded beyond just working on their monthly magazine *Township Perspective*. I worked on TOI's social media, website, quarterly electronic newsletter, and other office duties. Because of the range of duties I oversaw, there really wasn't a "typical" workday, but I can give you a general idea of the regular tasks I performed. I stayed in regular contact with all contributing authors for the magazine, this included those in office and across the state in board positions of TOI's divisions, as well as with contacts within state government. I would email deadline reminders as well as asking clarifying questions on topics. The project management and organizational skills I learned from my internship with the Publications Unit really shined here, as I kept track of the various moving parts of the magazine in highly detailed, organized computer folders, where I kept track of articles, corresponding images, etc. Because I dealt with upwards of a dozen regular contributing authors, learning how to properly clean the text, soft edit, and share edits with the editor was paramount.

And luckily the Publications Unit gave me that skillset. I did not do a lot of layout work with *Township Perspective*, but with the experience I had doing layout at the Publications Unit, I better understood what was needed from me because I understood the full spectrum of the publishing process. When I started with TOI, the magazine was printed at K. K. Stevens in Astoria, Illinois, and then production was moved to Kingery Printing in Effingham. My experience with layout really informed my ability to forge strong relationships with the page designers I worked with.

***You recently stepped into the position of communications coordinator for the AIM Initiative. Could you describe the core of your responsibilities as communications coordinator?***

My core responsibilities with AIM include working on our monthly electronic newsletter, social media, website, and creating flyers and graphics. This role is much more marketing focused than my previous role, but I am happy to be here and using the skills I gained along the way.

***What does the day-to-day look like as a communications coordinator, and how do the skills you gained during your time as a managing editor transfer to this new role? Additionally, what new skills will you develop in this position?***

My day-to-day involves keeping in communication with my team, tracking progress of various projects, and determining where/when to publicize them. Some of the key skills I gained as a managing editor at TOI included: working on my own internal projects and developing new projects; learning about social media marketing and website management; and creating projects in InDesign to be delivered each month.

The main skill I am developing in this position is creating the foundational base of communications for the AIM Initiative (at my previous job, there were 70+ years of foundation, while AIM is only two years old). Coming in with a strong knowledge base of best practices in communications, editing, graphic design, and social media has been extremely helpful in creating the communications arm of the AIM Initiative.

***Your role with the Township Officials of Illinois and your new position with the Capacity Building Initiative share similar responsibilities but differ significantly in their focus and subject matter. Can you describe what motivated this career movement? Additionally, can you share some insight on the job search: how long did your job search take, and what differences did you notice between your initial post-graduation job search and this recent one?***

The decision to change careers was not an easy one; it was a decision I weighed heavily before going through with. I had been with TOI for six years, having started there in September 2018, just three and a half months after graduating from Illinois State. I will be forever thankful to former Executive Director Bryan Smith and current Executive Director Jerry Crabtree for the collaboration on *Township Perspective*. But because I started there at 22 and turned 28 this year, I felt it was time to make a change. I had my eye on the job market for a while, and the application for AIM came at just the right time.

To be honest, I found similarities between my job search in 2018 and my job search in 2024. I am from Central Illinois, and there aren't a lot publishing/communications positions here. In 2018, I had been willing to move to Chicagoland or out of state, but luckily, I didn't have to. I started my job search in early 2018, before graduation, and there was some interest but nothing came together until TOI a few months later.

This year, I saw many more remote positions available than I did in 2018. That was surprising to me, but I was also excited to apply for them. My situation was also different this time around because I purchased a home in Springfield in 2021, so my ability to leave Central Illinois was limited. But, again, luckily, I found a job here in Springfield.

***I would like to circle back to the very beginning and close out by asking: What advice would you give to your undergraduate self as you were about to embark on your publishing studies degree at Illinois State?***

Take a deep breath, calm down, don't overwork yourself. Pursue joy and self-fulfillment, however that appears. Join more clubs and RSOs that bring genuine happiness and a sense of self-actualization. Write more, write so much more, never stop writing. Make friends with similar goals, and keep those friendships for a lifetime. But also know when to let those friendships go. Get out of your dorm room/apartment. Take chances and risks; failure isn't forever.

*About the Author:* Jacob Lyle is an undergraduate at Illinois State University, studying English in the publishing studies sequence. He is currently interning as a production assistant at the Publications Unit. When not working, he can be found immersed in a story-driven video game or getting angry at characters in a book.

Find additional information here about the [publishing studies](#) sequence and internship and assistantship [student opportunities](#) at the [Publications Unit](#) or contact Steve Halle, director of the Publications Unit, at [cshalle@IllinoisState.edu](mailto:cshalle@IllinoisState.edu) or 309-438-7481. Follow the Publications Unit on X [@PubUnit\\_ISU](#) and on Instagram [PubUnit](#).

# ISU English Department Takes Lead on Generative AI Conversation

Hustling from panel to panel, I was struck by the lively, even joyous spirit of intellectual debate in the Bone Center. In one room you could listen to a legal scholar discussing AI and law making from the University of Hamburg. On the same panel, a neuroscientist from the Polish Academy of Sciences spoke on the implications



Matthew Salzano  
IDIA Fellow on Ethical AI  
Stony Brook University



Emily M. Bender  
Professor of Linguistics  
University of Washington



Lillian-Yvonne Bertram  
Director of MFA in Creative Writing  
University of Maryland



Flourice W. Richardson  
North Carolina Agricultural and  
Technical State University



Javier Muñoz-Bacols  
University of Sevilla &  
University of Oxford



Andrea L. Guzman  
Northern Illinois University



Lydia Wilkes  
Auburn University



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## AI & the Humanities Symposium 2025

of personifying AI. Just an hour later, a director of technology at the University of Chicago discussed higher education's challenge designing ethical guidelines, and later in the afternoon, a session was about optimism and recent cool projects using AI in the humanities at Bradley University, UIUC, and Illinois Wesleyan. And that was just in a couple of hours of this two-day conference, with panels from the first light of morning until the long shadow of Watterson Tower blended into the dark sidewalks. Thanks to a Provost Innovation Enhancement (PIE) Grant, funds from the Office of Sustainability, and partnerships with the Departments of Philosophy, Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, the School of Communication, and the program in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, our Department of English hosted a unique conference in April of 2026 entitled "AI & the Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Symposium."

It was truly interdisciplinary, drawing scholars across these disciplines and from English Studies fields, including theoretical and applied linguistics, TESOL, English education, creative writing, literary studies, rhetoric, writing studies, technical communication, children's and young adult literature, and publishing. Over 200 attended, with 79 presenters, four keynotes, and five featured speakers. For two days, Normal and the Illinois State University campus felt like the very human center of the machine output conversation.

You may have heard these terms before, but what do they mean for humanities disciplines? Generative artificial intelligence. Large language processing models. Advanced data analytics. Reinforced and unsupervised machine learning. Predictive prose. As humanist scholars and educators outside of computer science, mathematics, and engineering, we must now also be well versed in the terminology of AI. We must also have candid conversations with one another and with students about the potential epistemological, ethical, existential, and pedagogical consequences of technologies of human behavior simulation. Most importantly, perhaps, we must be proactive in educating students about the ethical use of new tools and when to *not* click on them. One of my takeaways from the symposium is that as with any new topic, some faculty are energetically confronting the technology with critical but practical questions and experiments while others are responding with an emphatic "No, thank you."

Disagreements and shared visions were lively as ISU Department of English faculty presented in person and virtually with scholars from Germany, Sweden, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the U.K. U.S. scholars traveled from Utah, Alabama, Connecticut, New York, Iowa, Texas, Michigan, North Carolina, and Maryland to address big questions like: How will genAI change humanist research? How do we theorize personhood and the concepts central to our fields? How will genAI affect the production and reception of writing and creative works? Panels covered topics including mental health, deep-fakes, chatbots, ChatGPT, injustice and objectivity, the material impact of AI centers, the consequences of its rhetoric immateriality of "unreadable," creativity, identity, racial and gender bias, and practical tips for teaching. English department faculty also shared knowledge with faculty across campus in Creative Technologies, Dance, Communication, Philosophy, History, Education, Milner Library, the Center for Integrated Professional Development (CIPD), Academic Affairs and the Provost's office, and Morton Community Unit School District 709.

Students participated, too, and offered some of the most eye-opening remarks and analyses. Undergraduates in a psychology lab openly discussed the uses and limitations of AI in clinical counseling psychology research. With Dr. Kris Lewis, students presented on AI for teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and creative writing graduate students hosted a roundtable on the ethics of using AI in creative writing.

The creative writing roundtable was attended by one of the event's six keynote speakers, Dr. Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, director of the MFA program in Creative Writing at the University of Maryland. Bertram closed the conference with "Computers Killed the Creative Writing Star," a biographical look at their use of interesting tools, like word generators, which reveal how Black life is codified and how the hardwired systems within which computer programming operate are clearly shaped by white men. Dr. Flourice Richardson, at the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, is a technical communications scholar

who reached similar conclusions. Informed by Black feminism, Richardson (an alum of our program!) studies AI use and bias in professional settings.

Earlier that day, Dr. Matthew Salzano, IDEA Fellow at Stony Brook University, delivered a lunch keynote “On Training: Machine Learning and Democratic Participation.” How are generative AI large language models trained, and with what misinformed rhetoric that circulates on the internet? Can rhetoricians intervene not only in the classroom but in the public? Salzano’s teaching philosophy centers on experimentation and imperfection, bringing students into the process of building an alternative framework for training data to encourage democratic participation. Dr. Andrea Guzman, human-machine communication scholar at Northern Illinois University, similarly warned of the dangers of automated journalism and critiqued media framing of technology.

University of Washington’s Dr. Emily Bender’s keynote drew a large crowd and issued a passionate warning against using humanizing language to describe machine output. It does not “create,” she argued, or “think.” When we start imagining AI as human—even when we use the term artificial “intelligence,” a human trait—we normalize and support a system through which bias is perpetuated, through which falsehoods are asserted as facts, and through which community ecosystems and water reserves are being destroyed. A linguist, Bender issued a manifesto that was persuasive and eye opening.

Like Bender, Dr. Lydia Wilkes, rhetoric and composition scholar at Auburn University, was concerned about language, though she focused on genAI’s reliance on invisible human labor, violations of privacy, and its role in widening the digital divide. Dr. Javier Muñoz-Basols, research fellow at the University of Oxford and a Beatriz Galindo Distinguished Senior Researcher at the University of Seville, discussed language contact and multilingualism with attention to AI and Spanish language teaching. Finally, Amy Kurzweil surprised audiences in the evening with a completely different approach to machine learning tools, narrating her experience conversing with a chatbot trained on the voice and music of her father, who had passed away. She turned this experience into a moving graphic novel, *Artificial*.

Participants emailed after the symposium asking if we will host it annually. This is where machines may have one advantage over humans: to do so, our department would need not only funding, but energy (with acknowledgement that machines draw their energy from real natural resources, like water, too, and so their productivity is not only *not* limitless, but detrimental to life). Talks are in the works, though, for a collected edition of expanded papers.

*Written by Katherine Ellison*

Are you interested in talking about generative AI and the impact of machine output on writing, reading, teaching, education, or other practices and topics we hold dear? The English Department wants to hear from you! We are looking for ideas to host workshops not only on campus but in the community, in person or online. Looking for someone to lead a session in your classroom, business, or organization? Let’s talk! Email me at [keellis@ilstu.edu](mailto:keellis@ilstu.edu).

## Upcoming Birds Give Back and Hatch Campaigns

Check your email for upcoming fundraising campaigns that we are designing for the fall and spring semesters and for Birds Give Back. In fall 2025, we will seek support for internship scholarships. We have found that internships for English majors are typically unpaid, and in addition to requiring gas money, they can take time during the week when students would otherwise be clocking hours in paid employment. Most of our majors work on or off campus. Our goal is to raise \$5,000 to reward students completing internships this year and to continue supporting this scholarship fund in the future.

In the spring, our department will run a campaign for *Euphemism*, our creative writing journal that is produced entirely by students and advised by Dr. Jeremy Hurley. *Euphemism* would like to produce a special anniversary print edition. All donors will receive a copy.

During Birds Give Back this year, we will continue to support our General Fund, which serves all students in our department, the English Alumni Advisory Board Scholarship, the Neuleib-Scharton Award for Excellence in Rhetoric, the Publications Unit, *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the Black Diaspora*, and the Lois Lenski Fund, which is so close to its endowment level.





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