New Major in Pop Culture Brings Unique Career Opportunities to WKU Students
Welcome to the inaugural issue of Arts & Letters: The Magazine of Potter College at Western Kentucky University! Like much of higher education, Potter College is in the midst of a time of exciting change, and in this issue we’d like to give you a glimpse of the changes that are shaping the College. Drawing on our distinctive blend of tradition and technology, faculty and staff across the College are keeping our programs at the forefront of 21st century education.

Potter College is exploring innovative degree programs, reaching out to new student populations, and finding creative ways to give our students an international experience. Many of our new programs blend coursework from various disciplines, and our new Popular Culture Studies major is a great example of such programs. It’s only the second such major offered in the United States. One of the challenges of higher education in the 21st century is delivering curricula to mid-career professionals. A prime example of how Potter College is meeting this challenge is the collaborative graduate Communication and Public Administration programs we are delivering to police and fire first responders in Owensboro. And, at a time when an international experience is crucial to an undergraduate education, Imagewest, our student-run advertising and public relations agency, has a new idea about how to give students a truly unique global opportunity.

This issue will also introduce you to some of the people who make Potter College what it is. You’ll meet the four faculty members who have won this year’s College and University awards for outstanding achievement in teaching, research, advising and service. You’ll join a young journalist on her trip from Cumberland County, Kentucky, to the anchor desk in Washington, D.C. You’ll get to eavesdrop as two of our graduates talk about how their Potter College education served them well in their careers in the state capital. Finally, you’ll read about Lively and Frances Wilson, two WKU graduates from the 1940s and how their support transformed our jazz program.

We’re always delighted to hear from friends of the College. You can e-mail me at david.lee@wku.edu or better yet, stop by our office in the Fine Arts Center the next time you are on campus. We always welcome new ideas about how we can meet the challenges of higher education in the 21st century.

David Lee
Dean, Potter College of Arts & Letters
New Major in Pop Culture

Offers Unique Learning and Career Opportunities

BY ANGELA JEROME

I am a child of the 80’s. I could probably win a “Little House on the Prairie” trivia contest, I know every word to the theme song from “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air,” and the first movie I recall watching is “ET” (I too like Reese’s Pieces)! Though I hesitate to admit it, I owned a pair of parachute pants, a Michael Jackson-style leather jacket, and I can “moonwalk.” In my youth, most Sunday afternoons were spent sitting in front of a television watching NASCAR greats like Dale Earnhardt and Darrell Waltrip battle for position. Little did I imagine at the time, however, that the pleasures of my childhood held broader social, political, and economic significance. But a new cutting edge program launching this fall at WKU will help students understand how popular culture matters.

According to the Director of the new Popular Culture Studies major, Dr. Tony Harkins, Associate Professor of History, the goal of the program is to prepare WKU students “to read, write, and think critically about the arts and culture of everyday life, their uses by audiences, and their impact on the broader social, political and economic landscape.”

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According to Dr. Karen Schneider, Chair of the Department of English and a leader in the development of the major, explains why the new program is so needed:

“Our students are immersed in popular culture from the day they are born. It is probably the most influential complex of factors in their lives, and yet we do not encourage them to think critically about it. This is a lost opportunity. Our new major will make students conscious of the fact that everything in their everyday lives—their clothing choices, personal care products, the buildings they spend time in, their iPhones and cell phones, not to mention the more obvious things such as movies, TV, music, graphic novels, video games, and commercials—all both reflect and shape the way they see the world. And none of these things are “natural”—they are all cultural constructions. If we do not think about what values, attitudes, and assumptions lie behind them, what behaviors they promote or discourage, how they shape what we think and do, then we live that allows students to pursue their own academic interests within this area of study. The program also plans to develop special events and bring in guest speakers to promote student engagement and community involvement.

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Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion and co-instructor with Harkins of POP 101

Dr. Tony Harkins and Dr. Eric Bain-Selbo teach students enrolled in Pop Culture 101.

our lives in a form of ignorance. The Pop Culture major will provide the tools and experience to really think about these things and to make more informed choices.”

Dr. Eric Bain-Selbo,
Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion and co-instructor along with Harkins of POP 101, the new “Introduction to Popular Culture Studies” class, adds that the interdisciplinary nature of this program “teaches students how to approach and understand phenomena from multiple perspectives. In this sense, the major represents a great example or model of what is happening in higher education more generally.”

“On a personal level,” he continues, “I hope students find it valuable to think more critically about their consumption of popular culture, and become more informed citizens as a consequence.”

Students enrolled in the 34-hour Popular Culture Studies major will take POP 101, a capstone senior seminar, one course in each of four core categories organized to ensure interdisciplinary breadth, and five electives from various disciplines across Potter College and the University, including History, Philosophy, Sociology, Film Studies, Literature, Folklore and Anthropology, Mass Communication, Art History, Political Science, and Modern Languages. Students are also required to have a second major or minor.

To those who question the practicality of such a major in terms of career opportunities, proponents counter that the curriculum’s focus on past and contemporary American and international popular culture, in combination with any number of WKU’s current academic majors or minors, prepares students for a wide range of careers in fields such as media production, research, marketing and analysis, museum and archival work, government service, teaching, and graduate studies. “One thing that I’ve learned from talking with folks over the years,” notes Dr. Bain-Selbo, “is that employers want people who can think well, communicate well, and are able to approach issues or problems from a variety of angles. This fits well with the Popular Culture major. In addition, employers want employees who are interesting and can think outside the box. I believe that this major will help in cultivating and enhancing those qualities in our students.”

The program was launched in March with a very successful kickoff event at the WKU Faculty House for all interested students and faculty and has received much favorable media coverage. If the full-capacity enrollment for the fall semester’s inaugural POP 101 course is any indication, it appears the new major is extremely popular and appealing to students.

As for my own study of popular culture, my most recent project is a rhetorical analysis of the legend of Dale Earnhardt. As I look back, it is fascinating how much influence sports culture has had on me and the role it has played in shaping my career. Truthfully, I am a bit envious of the opportunities this new major offers WKU students — so envious, in fact, that I might have to take one or two classes myself!
Dr. Sandy Hughes
University Award and Potter College Award for Excellence in Teaching

The 2008-09 University Faculty Award for Teaching went to Potter College's Dr. Sandy Hughes, assistant professor of English. From general education composition courses to graduate literature classes, Dr. Hughes' students praise her ability to inspire, challenge, and engage them inside and out of the classroom. Her colleagues are quick to join in the praise. Dr. Karen Schneider, English department head and herself a former recipient of the University Award for Teaching, says that Hughes has in abundance all the hallmarks of excellent teaching. "Sandy has a depth of knowledge, enthusiasm for her subject matter and the practice of teaching, and the ability to make the material come alive. She also has a willingness to work with students individually and a record of extraordinary student engagement inside the classroom and out. Her uncompromisingly high standards just top everything off." Sandy's passion for teaching also spills into her research and extensive service activities. She contends that research should grow out of one's teaching and be reinvested into it. By maintaining a vigorous intellectual life Sandy encourages students to do the same. Her mentoring and leadership don't stop with students. Hughes firmly believes that guiding new faculty members is vital to the life of the university. Sandy co-founded the WKU New Faculty Organization, a group which provides an informal social support network to new faculty at WKU.

Sandy’s enthusiasm and commitment to teaching is best summed up by one of her students: "When you are one of Dr. Hughes' students, you become part of her passion in the classroom."

Dr. Jerry Daday
Potter College Award for Excellence in Research and Creative Activity

The 2008-09 Potter College Faculty Award Winner for Research is Dr. Jerry Daday, assistant professor of Sociology. Jerry’s training as a criminologist has directed his research interests in the areas of criminology, victimology, and comparative sociology. Jerry has published articles examining the overlap and divergence between offenders and victims in violent crimes and the influence of corruption on homicide rates in various countries. He has studied factors associated with fear of crime in Kenya and South Korea.

Jerry’s interdisciplinary collaborations further expand his research agenda. Along with Dr. Mike Stokes in the Biology Department at WKU and Dr. Charles Kimwele from the University of Nairobi (UN), Jerry has examined the intersection of extreme poverty, wildlife poaching, and conservation efforts in a rural area of southeastern Kenya. Jerry and his colleagues spend three or four weeks each summer working with students from WKU and the UN collecting survey and interview data from several villages. Their research examines how socioeconomic development affects human-wildlife relationships.

In addition to his own research, Jerry is actively involved in the research projects of several current and former graduate students in WKU’s Department of Sociology. His students have presented their research at all levels, from the WKU Research Conference to major national professional meetings.

Dr. Stokes observes of Daday, "Jerry is an imaginative, capable and enthusiastic researcher. His energy level and willingness to attack new problems in creative ways serves as an inspiration to me and to many students I’ve observed over the years."

Dr. Richard Weigel
Potter College Award for Excellence in Student Advising

Dr. Richard Weigel, professor of History, was the recipient of the 2008-09 Potter College Faculty Award for Advising. For more than thirty years, Rich has advised social studies and history majors at WKU. His interest in fostering the academic and personal development of individual students makes him an exemplary adviser. Along with his sincere interest in students, Rich’s deep knowledge of general education requirements, communication skills, and approachability makes him a popular advisor. Students sense his commitment to their academic success. During his tenure as History Department Head, Rich gained an even greater appreciation for academic advising, so much so that when he stepped down as department head in 2007, he assumed responsibility as the undergraduate adviser to more than 300 History and Social Studies students. Rich explains “I have learned very quickly that if I greet my advisees with a smile and a willingness to listen to their problems, I can usually help them plan a schedule and avoid taking unnecessary coursework. What was most surprising to me was how sincerely thankful most students are for this assistance.”

Rich’s contributions to undergraduate advising have not gone unnoticed by his colleagues. History Department Head Robert Dietle notes, "I can attest to the hours that Rich spends each week talking with students about their course of studies as well as their futures beyond college. His familiarity with our students is an invaluable asset for the department."

Academic advising is a critical component of the undergraduate experience, and faculty members like Rich help students to get the most out of their academic program at WKU.

Dr. John Cipolla
Potter College Award for Excellence in Public Service

The 2008-09 Potter College Faculty Award for Public Service went to Dr. John Cipolla, associate professor of Music. Dr. Cipolla’s distinguished record of service demonstrates the significance of academic public service to the University’s function as a center of learning. A highly skilled clarinetist, John uses his talent to engage a variety of audiences and inspire them in love of music. His service activities include performing numerous pre-school and elementary school concerts. These performances have had a tremendous positive influence on children in the community. Debbie Richey, Briarwood School Principal, says, “The message from Dr. Cipolla’s heart sings to students of all ages. That message is that you can be anything you want to be, you can use your talents to get there, and sharing those talents is part of the reason we are here.” Additionally, John tutors All-State Session students in WKU. For high school musicians, makes recruiting visits to regional high schools, serves as a clinician for area high school students, and teaches individual lessons for K-12 students. John has become a leader in utilizing the internet to provide free music instruction to young instrumentists through the creation of more than 20 instructional YouTube videos. In summer 2008, John organized the first Topper Clarinet Weekend for high school musicians. He holds office in both the Kentucky Music Educators Association and the International Clarinet Association.

John’s philosophy of public service is closely linked to his teaching. He notes, “Often the reason I teach is to simply serve the students, who will, hopefully, serve their profession and ultimately their community. So if we all do our job with enthusiasm and open-mindedness, students will graduate being prepared to serve their profession and community as advocates of music and music education.”
Imagewest: A National Leader with International Reach

“...I feel so fortunate to have this extraordinary experience to add to my resume. Not only did I receive invaluable knowledge about the industry and international business, but I got to immerse myself in a diverse and different culture.”

- Brooke Winebrenner ('09)

Imagewest International Senior Account and Public Relations Coordinator

For many university students, summer vacation encompasses taking a course, working to earn much needed extra cash, or heading home to be with family and friends. However, four WKU students recently experienced a summer that was far from the ordinary, taking part in an internship abroad to work with an international client. This rare opportunity was made possible through Imagewest, the nation’s only full-service, revenue generating, student-run advertising and public relations agencies, located in Potter College’s School of Journalism and Broadcasting.

Imagewest recently returned from its second trip abroad, this year traveling to Spain to work with the City Council of Villanueva de la Cañada, a municipality of the Community of Madrid, located about 30 miles outside of the capital city. Three recent WKU graduates, Matt Plappert, Zac Stout and Brooke Winebrenner, and WKU senior Maggie Hinklin received scholarships from Imagewest to aid in trip expenses for the internship abroad. Agency manager Heather Garcia and WKU advertising professor Mark Simpson supervised the Imagewest International team during their time in Spain.

Imagewest International began their journey in Barcelona, visiting with two universities, the Universitat Pompeu Fabra and the Universitat Internacional Catalunya, to establish future international partnerships. After Barcelona, the team worked with the City Council of Villanueva de la Cañada (VDLC) to...
Imagewest took its first group of student interns abroad last summer, traveling to Malaysia to work on branding, advertising, public relations, as well as design for print, web and video for the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The first journey proved to be a great success and established Imagewest as an agency with an international scope of work. Imagewest will continue to travel abroad each summer to work with clients in order to give students global experience.

“I was very impressed with Imagewest’s work and level of performance,” said Azmuddin Ibrahim, associate professor and head of the Communication Department at IIUM. “The team worked closely with our department and students. They consulted with us on starting our own student-run agency, Image East, and now we are taking on client projects.”

During the fall and spring semesters of the school year, Imagewest operates as a full-service, advertising and public relations agency, providing an array of clients with a variety of services such as graphic and web design, media relations, research and strategic planning. The agency, located on the third floor of Mass Media and Technology Hall, offers positions such as public relations coordinator, account executive, and graphic and web designer to 12 interns each semester. Any major can apply and students receive class credit for their internship at the agency.

An internship at Imagewest gives students a unique opportunity to apply the principles, skills, and theory taught in the classroom to real, hands-on client projects. At Imagewest students gain insightful experience that builds their resumes and portfolios, giving them a competitive edge as they enter the workforce. Imagewest has increased awareness among professionals in the industry about WKU students and programs and has given its interns opportunities to network with these professionals.

Imagewest opened in 2004 and has experienced tremendous growth and success throughout its past five years in business. Imagewest has worked with over 150 clients on a local, regional and international level and has had more than 150 interns come through its doors. Over the past five years, Imagewest has won many awards and distinguished itself as a national leader and model for many universities across the nation who often make inquiries with Imagewest about opening a student-run agency on their campus.

Beyond its recent international growth, Imagewest has implemented many initiatives including community outreach projects and scholarships. Last semester, Imagewest successfully hosted its first educational workshop with Kaleidoscope, a local community based development program that seeks to empower youth through the arts. Two $800 scholarships were also awarded recently to WKU advertising and public relations students to cover the tuition costs of a summer internship course.

“Imagewest has exceeded all of our expectations and has benefited our students in more ways than we could have ever imagined,” said Heather Garcia, agency manager at Imagewest. “The students amaze me every semester with their creative approach to projects and fresh perspectives. I’m looking forward to another five amazing years.”

Imagewest strives to build upon their success. The agency continues to be dedicated to their client’s needs and provide students with important opportunities for experience and growth. Imagewest International has left its mark on Malaysia and has now been successful in Spain. It is without question that Imagewest has fostered WKU’s unique characteristics of the agency’s students and to bring good fortune to the agency.
Adam Johnston always knew he wanted to be a police officer. He achieved that goal in 2001 after earning an associate degree in law enforcement from the Owensboro Community & Technical College. Now he has set his sights on even loftier goals – to earn a Master’s degree in Public Administration (MPA) and a Graduate Certificate in Organizational Communication through WKU in Owensboro. He aspires to someday be a manager within the police department.

Chris Luttrell, a firefighter for 12 years with the Owensboro Fire Department, developed an interest in working for the public sector because of a tragedy he witnessed as a teenager.

In May 1988, Luttrell’s high school band took a trip to Kings Island in Cincinnati. Their bus parked beside a church bus from Radcliff, Kentucky. The church bus pulled out of the Kings Island parking lot and headed back to Radcliff a few minutes before Luttrell’s bus. Just a short while later, the bus carrying the band students came upon the scene of a bus crash on Interstate 71 in Carroll County, Kentucky. The church bus from Radcliff is forever etched in history as the worst bus crash in the history of the United States – the Carrollton Bus Crash. Twenty-seven people died when the church bus burst into flames after being hit almost head-on by a drunk driver who was going the wrong way on the Interstate.

“At the time, I felt helpless,” Luttrell said, “but I knew there was something I could do later on…that’s what helped me decide to join the fire department.” Six years later, Luttrell became a volunteer firefighter. He later joined the Owensboro
Municipal Fire Department and now he is working toward a master’s degree from WKU as part of a cohort of public safety professionals in Owensboro. He also hopes the advanced degree will help further his career in the public sector.

WKU-O and the Departments of Political Science and Communication have created a partnership with the City of Owensboro to bring advanced degree opportunities to Owensboro’s public safety professionals, including law enforcement, firefighters, and emergency management personnel. The partnership reflects WKU’s overall outreach strategy, facilitated through the Division of Extended Learning & Outreach (DELO), and the state’s goal of increasing the number of college degree holders.

This 39-credit hour cohort program delivers a Master’s of Public Administration (MPA) and Graduate Certificate in Organizational Communication to participating students. These two courses of study blend together into one customized program, resulting in graduates with a set of highly valued skills.

“The professors of the MPA Program are committed to customizing the course content to emphasize public safety and local area situations,” said Dr. James Chappell, director of the MPA program. The city of Owensboro chose to partner with WKU in 2008 to offer this educational opportunity, the brainchild of Dr. Chappell and Police Chief Glenn Skeens, as a way to develop personnel skills while building future leaders for the departments. The initial group of 21 students will graduate in 2012 with the Master’s Degree and the Graduate Certificate.

“We needed a strong education piece, and we felt that partnering with WKU for the MPA with the certificate in organizational communication would provide a foundation for future success and prepare our people for leadership positions,” Chief Skeens stated. “Once the MPA Program cohort graduates, 50 percent of the supervisory staff in the Owensboro Police Department will hold a graduate degree, and I’m extremely excited about that.”

The students participate in classes held online, traditional classroom settings, or a mixture of both formats. Other classes are held via Interactive Video, giving students the chance to interact with other WKU students at the Bowling Green, Glasgow, and Elizabethtown campuses. Classes cover topics such as political science, communication, public administration, and ethics.

Luttrell expressed excitement about being able to talk with students at the other campuses, but he and the other students enjoy the face-to-face classes as well. The convenience of having the classes in Owensboro is one of the most enticing aspects of the program.

Dr. Sally Ray, assistant dean of Potter College of Arts & Letters, praised the first cohort group to go through this program. “These folks are excellent students, and they bring a different perspective to classroom discussions. They add so much value to the class.”

In their Crisis Communication course, students worked in groups to review and refine the disaster response policies at various public organizations and agencies from a communication perspective. One group focused on a disaster plan for City Hall in Owensboro, simulating what to do in the event of a bomb scare. The group took an existing plan and reworked it to be more responsive in the event of such an emergency at City Hall.

Johnston, named Patrolman of the Year in 2008, said this project “really opened our eyes as responders. Communication is everything. If you can’t communicate, you can’t do your job.”

WKU’s presence in Owensboro, through the WKU-O Regional Campus, makes this partnership a great match for both the community and the University. The program has been such a success that WKU may use the same cohort model in Glasgow and Elizabethtown, where the university also has Regional Campuses, as part of its continued outreach efforts.

Getting through the program is not an easy task, but WKU has made the scheduling options as flexible as possible for the public safety professionals who are participating. Students cite flexibility as one of the greatest benefits WKU has been able to provide.

“We don’t get weekends off, and we don’t get holidays off. We work seven days a week, so it’s important to stress how flexible the program is,” Johnston remarked. “The instructors have worked really well on accommodating us, and that has been a great benefit from the University.”

According to Dr. Ray, “It’s not uncommon for students to go to class on Friday, then work a Friday night shift, go to class on Saturday morning, and then work a Saturday shift.”

That kind of dedication and determination is exactly what Chief Skeens is looking for in his future leaders.

Chief Glenn Skeens is the driving force behind this partnership between WKU and the city of Owensboro. He sees the program as a long-term investment in the community. “I see it as an investment in our people, and they’re our most valuable resource,” Skeens said. “That’s why this program is so important.”

Skeens felt firmly that the officers needed to prepare for administrative positions, and his goal was to answer the question: “how do we best develop our personnel for the future?” He is optimistic about what this educational program will mean for the future of the community.

In planning for the future he envisions partnering with WKU-O to conduct regional training courses for public safety personnel in the new building that is slated to open in January 2010. He also anticipates a bachelor’s completion degree in Law Enforcement Management. “Success depends on being flexible in building a solid program and seeing it through,” Skeens said.

Skeens has served on the Owensboro Police Department for 21 years and was an inaugural participant in the School of Strategic Leadership, a program aimed at the top level of law enforcement leadership in the state. He holds a Master of Science Degree in Criminal Justice from Eastern Kentucky University. He also serves on the WKU-O Advisory Board.
Beverly Kirk is the evening anchor for NewsChannel 8 in Washington D.C., providing the nation’s capital with the latest news. Not only does she anchor “Federal News Today,” but she also covers NewsChannel 8’s “Live Tonight.” In addition, she handles PR events for the station. Most days her work begins before she even arrives at the station. As busy as she is, Beverly is exactly where she wants to be.

“I wouldn’t change anything about where I’ve ended up,” Kirk said. “The only thing I would change about the path I’ve taken is that I would have gotten here earlier.”

Kirk got to where she is today through determination and hard work that began at Western Kentucky University. She graduated in 1988 with baccalaureate degrees in broadcasting and history. As a Cumberland County, Ky., native, Beverly chose to go to WKU because of the prestigious Journalism and Broadcasting program and its reputation for educating top-quality journalists. Kirk valued the hands-on experience the program offered to learn and practice her craft.

While at WKU, Beverly was an Alumni Leadership Scholar, a member of Gamma Sigma Sigma, and involved with Student Government. As an Alumni Scholar, she had some of her best college experiences. “As students, we would meet with people who were leaders in the community and around the state,” Kirk said. “I remember meeting former Governor [Martha Layne] Collins. That made an impression on me.”

After graduating from WKU and subsequently completing a master’s degree in international politics from the University of Kentucky’s Patterson School, Kirk’s broadcasting career began at WBKO in Bowling Green. She also worked as a correspondent for NBC News for six years and was anchor and local government reporter for WLEX in Lexington. Before coming to NewsChannel 8, Beverly anchored news briefs for National Public Radio around the country.

During her career, Kirk has covered major national events ranging from the impeachment hearings of President Bill Clinton to the 2001 terrorist attack on the Pentagon. Kirk’s most exciting time as a journalist came when she was working for NBC News. She covered events such as anthrax attacks, the 2000 Summer Olympics, the 2000 Presidential Election, and the 9/11 attacks. The most difficult stories were September 11th and the anthrax attacks, she said. Living about two miles from the Pentagon, she was surrounded by the action. “It is the hardest thing to cover when you live there and are seeing and experiencing what happened and covering at same time,” Kirk said.

Kirk received inspiration from others in the business along the way. She has always admired Oprah Winfrey because she grew up watching Oprah anchor in Nashville and respects the many things Oprah has accomplished. Kirk also had a high regard for the late Tim Russert, long time moderator of “Meet the Press.”

WKU professors had a strong influence on Beverly. She gives much credit to Paul Just, retired WKU sports information director, for helping her become a good writer. “He gave me my first writing job,” she says. Beverly graciously credits all her teachers at WKU for providing her a strong foundation for working in the industry.

“I don’t know if I would be where I am today without them,” Kirk said. “I appreciate all the opportunities available while I was there.”

And as for the future, Beverly continues to explore new opportunities. Intent on gaining experiences beyond the newsroom, she has plans to write a book on race media politics. “I have seen a lot, heard a lot, and I have a lot to say about it,” Kirk said. “My next adventure will be more opinionated.”
Communications, Politics, and the Liberal Arts

A Conversation with KET’s Renee Shaw and Kentucky State Senator David Givens

By Sally Ray

Almost 15 years after leaving WKU, Potter College graduates Renee Shaw (M.A. Communication, 1996; B.A. Broadcasting and Political Science, 1994) and David Givens (M.A. Communication, 1997; B.S. Agriculture, 1989) have learned a thing or two about communications, politics, and the value of a liberal arts education.

Shaw is producer/managing editor and host of Kentucky Educational Television’s (KET) coverage of the Kentucky General Assembly. She co-produces “Comment on Kentucky” and numerous other public affairs programs for KET, as well as co-hosts KET’s election night coverage. Prior to joining KET in 1997, Renee was a reporter and associate producer with WKYU-TV and WKYU-FM, where she earned state and national awards for her radio reporting.

Givens was sworn in as a freshman senator from the ninth Senatorial District in Kentucky in January 2009. He was chosen by senate leadership to be the first chairman of the new Senate Agriculture Committee. Senator Givens is an owner in his family’s business in Greensburg, Ky., a beef farmer, and one of the founders of the Green River Cattle Company.

Renee and David agree that the liberal arts education which they received at WKU was excellent preparation for their professional success. During the June 2009 Special Session of the Kentucky General Assembly I had the opportunity to talk with both Renee and David.

“A liberal arts education enhanced my potential.” -Sen. David Givens

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“A liberal arts education enhanced my potential.” -Sen. David Givens

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Sally: You have positioned yourselves at the center of Kentucky’s legislative process. How did you arrive at this point?

Renee: This has always been something that I was very interested in. I had a double-major in Political Science and Broadcasting. This was a great way to marry the two things that I love. When I completed my graduate degree I wasn’t sure which direction I would take. I knew commercial news wasn’t for me. I had worked in it and didn’t care for the focus of that format. But I really fell in love with PBS because I had watched it my whole life. I was an only child and grew up with PBS. Big Bird was my company! Then it was Jim Lehrer and the “MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour,” “Frontline,” and “Wide Angle” – in-depth programs that shaped how I look at journalism. It just seemed natural to go into that area. I interned with WKYU’s public radio and television and had great mentors. Dan Modlin, WKYU news director, took me under his wing and showed me the ropes. I was with WKYU for four or five years. I also worked at the local FOX television station for the experience. The master's degree in organizational communication was important because I thought someday I might pursue a management role and would need to know how to lead as well as manage people.

Sally: You took advantage of the opportunities available to you at WKU?

Renee: Absolutely! I set out to prove that I was serious and was there to learn and grow. Then folks really took an interest in me and pushed me to even greater heights than I initially thought I could reach. As I was completing the M.A., Dave Wilkinson, who was over Western’s public broadcasting at the time, opened the door to KET for me. He said to Virginia Fox, former Executive Director of KET, “I’ve got this young lady here who is getting ready to graduate with her master’s degree. I can’t offer her a full time job right now. Do you all have a place for her?” As it happened, a reporter position was open so I sent in my resume and the rest is history.

Sally: David, what influenced your entry into politics?

David: I graduated from WKU in 1989 with a B.S. in Agriculture and moved back to Greensburg, Ky., to help my family grow our farm supply business. While I found business, family and community very fulfilling, I needed to better grasp the ‘human’ variable in this experiment of life. For example, based on science I could prepare the soundest and most economical solution to meet a farmer’s need. However, the final decision he or she would make would often be swayed by some other element in their decision making process. Seeking to better understand these processes prompted me to pursue a master’s degree in organizational communication. My motivation to enter the state Senate is a result of the satisfaction I find in crafting solutions to meet people’s needs, growing existing businesses and starting new businesses. Election to the state senate allowed me to discover solutions that will impact more people, to promote business endeavors that will benefit a larger region and to support the conservative values that I feel are important.

Sally: Have your views about politics and the legislative process changed?

David: There may be pieces that we don’t like, but the process has amazed me because it is dynamic. The system can take challenges and deal with them and create legislation that fits the culture. It fits the needs of the people. That’s amazing to me. We’re quick to criticize and point out the negatives, but you have to look at the larger scope and the system permits us to do that. It’s fascinating to be on the inside.

Renee: That’s one thing I always try to emphasize in radio interviews about what’s happening in the legislature. You always hear that legislators are just up there spending our money, but after being here more than a dozen years, I can say that when a session is over I don’t ever question anyone’s motive as far as it being impure or just self interest. I believe that everyone comes up here thinking they want to do the right thing. Of course, the right thing is different depending on who you ask, but I don’t believe that there is this collective body of people who were just motivated by their own political agendas at the peril of the four million people in this state.

Sally: David, what has been the biggest challenge so far?

David: The time demands here are huge for citizen legislators. The balancing act between what I do to earn my living, raising a family with three young children, and then legislating is tough. Good arguments can be made for full time legislators, but we are better legislators when we are citizen legislators.
I am sincere for saying that for two reasons. First of all, I’m connected. I’m on the front line. When I leave here and go back to the farm store people argue with me over the price of a ton of fertilizer just like they did two years ago before I ever came up here. I need that connection to better legislate in Frankfort. Second, I’ve got a fall-back position. If I do something or say something that causes me to get voted out of office, I can go home and keep providing for my family. And that gives me the political capital to take more risk than I would otherwise. I’m able to vote my conscience and not always having to see which direction the wind is blowing. Hopefully that makes me a better legislator.

Sally: What observations do you have about the changing media environment and its impact on the governing process and citizen perceptions of that process?

David: We live in an era of what I call “fast food news.” In other words, the public is accustomed to the 24-hour news cycle and a demand for a constant flow of information via the Internet and cable news networks. We live in a fast-paced era and citizens want their information quickly and without too much detail. There is so much more to what goes on in the Kentucky General Assembly than you can read in a two-column article or hear in a two-minute news clip. There is so much good that goes on here. KET is not fast food news, and I can’t complement Renee enough for her journalistic approach.

Renee: Attention spans, starting with our generation, have become much shorter than generations preceding us. I want to see a full day of legislative coverage in a minute and 30 seconds. And, the general managers demand civic and political stories be shorter because people say they don’t care or they aren’t in tune to issues because they don’t see how it affects them. I fear with the emergence of blogging (and everybody is a journalist who has a cell phone or a camera) we create ambush journalists or low grade paparazzi. Anything now is up for YouTube and that really dilutes the power of journalism. Some journalists argue that media are going to have to adjust. Newspapers are going to have to adjust to not being something that you place on the desk and read with your coffee. Journalists are going to have to be portable and pod cast and provide news on cell phones or online. We’re all moving in that direction. All of us have very strong web components or are working on having a strong web component. Does that mean that because you have faster delivery that it affects them. I fear with the emergence of blogging (and everybody is a journalist who has a cell phone or a camera) we create ambush journalists or low grade paparazzi. Anything now is up for YouTube and that really dilutes the power of journalism. Some journalists argue that media are going to have to adjust. Newspapers are going to have to adjust to not being something that you place on the desk and read with your coffee. Journalists are going to have to be portable and pod cast and provide news on cell phones or online. We’re all moving in that direction. All of us have very strong web components or are working on having a strong web component. Does that mean that because you have faster delivery that people are better informed? No.

David: So your depth of news coverage can’t be what it was before.

“ Technical training might have opened the door for me, but my liberal arts education has provided the staying power.” - Renee Shaw

Renee: That’s right. And that’s why it’s important to have a network like PBS. You’re not overrun with demands for ratings and commercialization.

David: So much of what I experienced campaigning last year was packaging information into little 30-second sound bites. You’ve got to have a clear message and stay on message. Sadly enough, the goal in campaigning is to convince enough voters that you are on the same side of issues that they are on. In an ideal world every voter would make candidates clarify their value system and decision-making process so they could then understand how decisions are made rather than where one stands on a particular issue. There are numerous issues that voters will never have a chance to know about, but if my constituencies understand my value system and decision-making process they’re in a better position to vote smart. But you can’t package that into a 30-second sound bite. Really, that is what we need to be monitoring and measuring.

Sally: As you reflect on your professional journeys, what thoughts do you have about the value of a liberal arts education?

David: A liberal arts education has tremendous value. It enhanced my potential to lead and serve others by understanding the complexity of human nature and the world and developing my skills as a critical problem solver, decision maker, and communicator in today’s culturally diverse world.

Renee: For me, a liberal arts education was about educating the whole person. Technical training might have opened the door for me, but my liberal arts education has provided the staying power and given me the foundation to grow and develop in a changing industry and world. I pursued the master’s degree because I thought I might get into management eventually. Broadcasting by its nature is a very low paying industry unless you are a prime time anchor or are in management. I wanted to have options and I felt a graduate degree in communication would better equip me for a management position, and I absolutely think it did.

Sally: What advice would you give to students who want to follow in your paths?

David: Have passion. Have enough passion to overcome whatever obstacles life is going to put in your path. You have to have passion to knock on enough doors and be committed to what you believe in so that when someone says your stance is wrong you’re quick to say “I’ll listen to you, but you have to listen to me.”

Renee: Know who you are, have passion, don’t be timid, and take charge of your own education. I was born and raised in Portland, Tennessee, but I grew up at WKU. It’s not just the place where I received an education, but it’s the place where I came into my own, as to who I am as a person and a journalist and being comfortable with who I am. The people at WKU contributed to that, whether it was the professors, other students, or the staff. They were all about developing the whole person. I think that’s just part of the WKU experience.
Generous for the Sake of Jazz

BY DEANNA JENKINS

Steadfast supporters like Frances and Lively Wilson are treasured not only by those who benefit directly from their generosity, but also by the Western Kentucky University music community. The Wilsons have contributed financially to the development of the Jazz Program, including sponsoring guest artists as soloists with the Jazz Band and Jazz Band runout concerts in area high schools. Both considered one of the deans of the trial bar, with more than 50 years experience in litigation, utility rate-making, and appellate advocacy.

Dr. Marshall Scott, director of the WKU Jazz Program, praised the Wilsons for their generous spirit and ethical character. “They found me,” Scott said, remembering how he was first contacted by the Wilsons late on a Friday afternoon as they inquired about the annual operating budget for the Jazz Program. Dr. Scott laughed and stated that he had no operating budget. The Wilsons wanted to ensure the Jazz Program at WKU had every opportunity to succeed and desired to support their alma mater at the same time. “Pretty soon, I found out I had an operating budget completely thanks to them,” Scott said.

From then on, the Wilsons were regular supporters of the WKU Jazz Program, including a provision in their estate that will provide support for the program in perpetuity. After their retirement from their respective careers, Frances as a professional jazz musician and piano teacher and Lively as a well-respected attorney, the couple spent the majority of their time traveling. Whenever they could, they attended Jazz Band concerts on the Hill and in other venues in Bowling Green. Professor Scott fondly remembers how the Wilsons never liked to talk business or money, instead preferring to trade stories on their children.

The last concert the Wilsons attended together was in the fall of 2008. The concert played to a full house at the Capitol Arts Center in downtown Bowling Green. Scott says this concert allowed the Wilsons to see what they had helped create. It was a perfect example of their gift in action.

Lively Wilson passed away in July of 2009 in Louisville, Ky. Such a generous and revered man will be greatly missed. However, the legacy he and Frances created will continue.

Make a Gift

We hope you’ve enjoyed this publication and are as excited as we are about the accomplishments of Potter College’s students, alumni, and faculty. Please make a gift today supporting the Potter College Dean’s Fund for Excellence. Your financial support will provide increased academic opportunities for students within Potter College, including student support for Study Abroad, Research and Creative Activity, and Innovative Learning Opportunities beyond the classroom. We greatly appreciate your gift. It’s an investment in the future.

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Two students from Matt Tullis’ Graphic Design 231 class work on an assignment to choose and research a type face, combine characteristic type elements into a new form, and redraw it on a grand scale. These students have chosen the sidewalk in the courtyard of the Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center.