

Monday, November 24, 2008

OU alum named Michigan Outstanding American History teacher

Karen Lessenberry, who received her bachelor's degree in History from OU in 1964 (then MSU-O), was named by the Michigan Council on History Education (MCHE) as the Michigan Outstanding History Teacher of the Year. She was honored as the state recipient at the annual MCHE Conference on Nov. 5 at the Lansing Convention Center.

Lessenberry has been a history teacher for 45 years, 43 at Groves High School in Birmingham, Mich. She said the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 were the catalysts in her decision to teach history.

"Both events dramatically elevated my sense of insecurity -- that when 'reality bites' it clearly demonstrates that no nation can control events absolutely," she says. "As the 1960s continued to unfold, it was in history that I sought my answers, found perspective and began to understand it as a deep well of wisdom."

Lessenberry, who currently teaches Advanced Placement United States History, says she gets a great deal of satisfaction from teaching. "I love researching material for the course and discovering the deep and very human elements which bring a richness to history under the microscope," she says. "I also enjoy interacting with students, learning from them, laughing with them, and keeping their hope alive with an optimism for the future."

Crediting Oakland's rigorous curriculum, Lessenberry, whose husband Jack teaches at Wayne State University, says she learned to work hard and strive for excellence at the university. "I was in the second class beginning in 1960, and experienced the academic challenges. The curriculum and professors forced me to think harder, to be persistent and consistent in studying, and it reinforced my desire to excel academically. Like many, I grew into meeting expectations."

She also was inspired by her professors.

"I had three history professors, Melvin Chernob, Robert Howes and Joseph Klaitz, who influenced me," she says. "Chernob taught European history with an energy, incisive intellect and a clear understanding of historiography that I admired. Howes inspired my interest in Russian history and led two OU trips to the Soviet Union which furthered my understanding of the other superpower. From Klaitz I took a French history course which he presented largely as narrative; he also used an effective Socratic method of teaching and demonstrated an easy demeanor making him very approachable. All three brought history alive, and I have synthesized elements from all of them in my own teaching style and methodology."

Lessenberry says receiving the award is icing on the cake of a rewarding teaching career.

"I have devoted my life to teaching," she says. "I do believe this is what I should be doing."

SUMMARY

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