



# THE Spartan Tablet

Department of ENGLISH and COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

## A Legacy of Giving

How can one person make a difference? This question drove Martha Heasley Cox's philanthropic goals over the course of her life. Martha Heasley Cox (1919-2015), a prolific author, teacher, director, visionary, and ardent supporter of the College of Humanities and the Arts, taught in the Department of English for 34 years and was well-regarded for her critical studies of American writers. Founder and director of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San José State University, which houses one of the world's largest archives of materials related to John Steinbeck, she also created the Steinbeck Fellows Program. This program awards promising writers from across the globe with a \$10,000 stipend for a year of sustained focus on their writing. Dr. Cox donated a total of \$4.8 million dollars to the university, making her one of San José State's largest donors ever.

Professor Arlene Okerlund, Dean Emeritus of the College of Humanities and the Arts, proudly revealed that "Professor Cox's goal was—and is—to enrich the academic programs at SJSU. Her first donation founded a

lecture series, which since 1985 has brought to campus such speakers as Wallace Stegner, Toni Morrison, Arthur Miller, Joyce Carol Oates, and J.M. Coetzee. Her recent bequest has significantly augmented this lecture endowment, which will continue to bring writers of equivalent renown to campus." Dr. Cox's largest donation was to the Steinbeck Fellows Program. "Her endowment for the Steinbeck Fellows Program will provide significant and on-going financial support for young writers, researchers, and scholars," and it will allow the program to grow from 3 to 10 fellows a year.

Professor Nick Taylor, the current director of the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, said "Dr. Cox believed that Steinbeck was so important to American literature. She responded to the social message within Steinbeck's writing, as well as his depiction of American Realism." He continued: "Martha was very opinionated, extremely smart, and very well-read. When choosing the fellows, she was good at spotting things that none of the other reviewers would see. She would select writers who have some momentum to their career, writers who have the



Photo by David Schmitz

potential to make an important impact."

In 2000, Dr. Cox received the Tower Award, SJSU's highest recognition for those who have contributed immense service to the University. In the wake of her phenomenal educational career, Martha Heasley Cox leaves behind a legacy of giving, opening the doors for the many students and artists that have benefited from her generosity and her vision of what it means to make a difference.



Photo by David Schmitz

## Setting a New Path: Persis Karim

*After groundbreaking work in Persian studies, recent Outstanding Professor Awardee to head up new center at San Francisco State University.*

As the founding director of Persian Studies and coordinator for Middle East Studies, Dr. Persis Karim has spent the last eighteen years at SJSU advocating for a more culturally inclusive space, a place where her students are encouraged to “ask big questions and test their voices.” Her commitment to students and pursuit of breaking down social conventions has rightfully earned her the “Outstanding Professor” award for 2017, an award in which she was selected from professors across every department and college at SJSU.

“I would like to thank first and foremost those who nominated me for this award as well as the many wonderful SJSU students who have taught me how to teach and how to engage students, but also the many

hardworking students who make me feel that my job is meaningful and important,” Dr. Persis Karim responded ecstatically. “I can’t think of a more meaningful award for a long career of 18 years at SJSU!”

Her groundbreaking career has not only changed the way Persian and Iranian literature is viewed in the United States, but also has acted as a catalyst for increased student engagement and connection. Debra Hunter, a SJSU lecturer and former student of Professor Karim’s, describes how “She opened my eyes to many social issues. . . . From my first day in her class, Persis made me feel welcomed and valued, and then, interested and intellectually challenged by concepts she taught in that course.” Notably, Debra found Professor Karim’s classes to be “the most intellectually stimulating and enlightening of my [her] undergraduate academic career.” One of the many students and faculty members who supported Professor Persis Karim for the Outstanding Professor Award, Debra Hunter describes how

Professor Karim “instigated the transformation of my identity from housewife to university lecturer.”

Over two decades, Professor Karim has taken an active role in deconstructing incorrect stereotypes and generalizations about Iranian culture. Her anthologies of Persian literature debunk current misconceptions of Iranian women as “silent, passive, and without agency.” She believes that “Iranians around the globe have stories and experiences that are much more nuanced, humane, and colorful than the stereotypes and media headlines they convey.” As an editor, scholar, and professor, she has made significant strides in breaking down the ignorance surrounding the Iranian culture. This fall marks another milestone in her remarkable career. She will join the faculty of San Francisco State University’s Comparative Literature department and direct the newly-established Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies. “I’m honored to begin a new journey at another CSU campus! I look forward to serving students and faculty in a new and exciting capacity.”

 **Make a Gift**

*Support our talented students in their pursuit of an education! You can help support student success by making a donation today.*

# With a song in her heart, Mary Warner accepts a State-Wide Teaching Award



Dr. Mary Warner considers herself “very much a ‘heart person,’” a trait at the center of the teaching philosophy of this professor of English. “I rate compassion as an essential for teachers... My students’ stories challenge me to find literature that touches their lives, that move them to hear others’ stories, and gives them a better sense of our common humanity.”

This commitment to her students was recognized by the California Association of Teachers of English (CATE) this year; Professor Warner received the 2017 Award for Classroom Excellence in February at their annual convention held in Santa Clara. Every year, the CATE regional council committees “nominate one or two teachers at different grade levels” to receive this prestigious Award for Classroom Excellence.

Dr. Mary Warner, who has been teaching English for 42 years, described the award as “a delightful surprise, humbling and

a great honor.” Dr. Warner, who is also a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, named some of the influences on her teaching, from literature to the bible. The Little Prince teaches us that “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly,” while the Gospel of Matthew instructs our life’s practice: “the gift you have received, give as gift.”

With a focus on the heart and the power of others’ stories for both learning and teaching, Professor Warner closed her acceptance speech with an enduring rendition of “The Servant Song” by Richard Gillard. Sustaining her themes of support and community that shape her own teaching practice, she sang, “We are travelers on the road. We are here to help each other. Walk the mile and bear the load.”

For a clip of Professor Warner’s acceptance speech, go to: [https://youtu.be/P64E1CxQA\\_o](https://youtu.be/P64E1CxQA_o)



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## Chair’s Letter

This edition of *The Spartan Tablet* recognizes five amazing women, all of whom see stories as central to their lives. Martha Heasley Cox saw the power in the stories of John Steinbeck and made her legacy supporting his vision and supporting up-and-coming writers who will set the future of American letters. Professor Persis Karim, a storyteller of her own in her poetry, has reshaped our understanding of Persian and Iranian women through her anthologies and her literary criticism. Professor Mary Warner sees the stories of others as the centerpiece of her teaching philosophy, one based on the heart. And Professor Cathleen Miller tells the stories of astonishing women in her nonfiction writing. In this amazing year, three of our professors received university-level, regional, or state awards for their creativity and their teaching. Those accomplishments are complemented by Martha Heasley Cox’s immensely generous and productive contribution to San José State University through her support of the Steinbeck Center and the Steinbeck Fellows Program. And the department couldn’t be prouder of Fatema Elbakoury, who was one of two Outstanding Seniors from the graduating class of 2017. We look forward to following what we are sure will be Fatema’s amazing journey and her own story to tell.

Shannon Miller



## 2017 SV Laureate Cathleen Miller

With a delicate swish of her pen, SJSU Creative Writing Professor Cathleen Miller has managed to work her way into the hearts of millions of readers. Having taught at SJSU since 2004, she is further empowering and encouraging young minds to engage in the beauty of the written word. Moreover, her own works have made significant cultural contributions to the cultural life of Silicon Valley. This year that befittingly earned her a 2017 Silicon Valley Laureates award.

Professor Cathleen Miller is a renowned writer and adored professor. Her 1998 novel *Desert Flower*, which discussed female genital mutilation, has brought the topic to the forefront of a global discussion; the novel has sold 11 million copies in print and was made into a feature film of the same name in 2009.

On Monday, April 24, Professor Miller was honored at the 2017 SV Laureates Celebration. SVCREATES is a distinguished network of leaders, who have awarded more than 150 artists since 1991 for their "artistic

excellence and community service." Annually, SVCREATES "honors artists who have made exceptional contributions to the cultural and aesthetic life of Silicon Valley."

"To be named an artist laureate here out of all places is an honor. I think we need to tell stories and listen to stories. Passion and truth when storytelling is what I seek when writing," she said smiling. Professor Miller continuously remind us of the true importance of this great art form: "Long after we forget the names we will remember the stories."

## SJSU's 2017 Outstanding Senior: [An interview with Fatema Elbakoury](#)

Fatema Elbakoury, a graduating English major, has worked as a Diversity Advocate intern at SJSU's MOSAIC Cross Cultural Center, a Salzburg International Scholar, and as a Peer Mentor at Peer Connections, a program committed to students tutoring other students. She has offered workshops on feminism, Islam, whiteness, transphobia, mass incarceration and body image through MOSAIC. Despite her tremendous workload, Elbakoury was able to graduate from SJSU Summa Cum Laude with a 3.974 GPA. Over the course of her undergraduate career, she has exemplified the true makings of an Outstanding Senior: strong leadership skills, a high level

of academic achievement, and significant contributions to the welfare of the university and the community.

**Spartan Tablet:** What were your initial thoughts when you received the Outstanding Senior Award?

**Fatema Elbakoury:** I was humbled that I was chosen. I don't think a lot about my accomplishments because they don't feel like that big of a deal to me. I just do the work. So when I got that call from Reggie [Blaylock, VP of Student Affairs], I was really shocked because it meant that other people were finding value in my work. Then, I was excited because I was able to tell the faculty and staff who nominated me that I won the award. I love to make my



professors happy because I know how much student success means to them. So I think the excitement at the prospect of notifying them was the prevailing sentiment I had.

**ST:** Is there anyone that you would like to thank?

**FE:** Yes--the faculty and staff who nominated me: David Meshner, Kenneth Peter, Deanna Peck, Hyon Chu Yi-Baker, Persis Karim, and Samuel Maio. And of course, my parents for making this education possible. There are many other peers, friends, colleagues, and supervisors who challenged me throughout my college career and who helped me grow tremendously, so I am indebted to them as well.

**ST:** What are your plans after SJSU?

**FE:** For the next two years, I will be attending Harvard Divinity School to study religion, literature, and culture. After that, I am not too sure! I would love to do research on a fellowship, get an MFA, or do some long form journalism. I want to be a fiction writer more than anything, so that is the ultimate goal.

**ST:** What was the highlight of your SJSU experience?

**FE:** I don't think I can name one single moment. While in the moment I would struggle to find meaning in the endless nights and the overwhelming responsibilities I've had, I look back and I know that those were my moments of greatest growth.



## Center for Literary Arts

The upcoming CLA season, includes the Pulitzer Series with winners in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.



**2017**

**September 22**

*Reed Magazine*  
150th Anniversary Gala  
San Jose City Hall Rotunda

**October 18**

Houston Lecture  
Viet Thanh Nguyen  
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Sympathizer*  
reading & conversation with Andrew Lam  
Hammer Theatre



Photo: Viet Thanh Nguyen

**November 8**

Cox Lecture  
William Finnegan  
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction for *Barbarian Days*  
reading & conversation with Cathleen Miller  
location tbd

**2018**

**February 8**

Natalie Baszile  
author of *Queen Sugar*  
reading & conversation with Selena Anderson  
location tbd

**March 20**

Lurie Author-in-Residence  
Don George  
author of *The Way of Wanderlust*  
and editor at large for *National Geographic Traveler*, special features editor for BBC Travel  
location tbd

**April 12**

Lewandowski Poet  
Peter Balakian  
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Ozone Journal*  
reading & conversation with President Mary Papazian  
Hammer Theatre  
in conjunction with Legacy of Poetry Day

Check our website for details:  
<http://www.litart.org>

*The Spartan Tablet* thanks **Lance Wyndon** for his research and writing contributions in this newsletter.

Photo by Marissa McPeak



*Erika Harris and Micayla Reed, winners of the Catherine Urban Scholarship Award, with family donor Holly Leonard, holding a portrait of her grandmother, Catherine Urban.*

## Scholarship Awards

The generosity of alumni and emeritus faculty members make these scholarships and awards possible for our best students.

### **Bonita M. Cox Award for Classical and Medieval Studies**

Jenny Walicek

### **Schelby A. Sweeney Beowulf Prize**

Sandy Tompkins

### **First Year Writing Awards**

My Dinh *1st Place*

Hedieh Amiri *Honorable Mention*

Andrew Cenidoza *Honorable Mention*

### **Shirley Nelson Iverson Award**

Oners Silva

### **Dorothy Pritchard Wright**

**Children's Literature**

**Scholarship**

Bethany Callahan

### **Kichung Kim Endowed Scholarship**

Julia Franco

Erika Harris

Jamie Jara

Mariah Ramsour

### **Carol Robles Memorial Scholarship**

Andrew Khazanovsky *Graduate*

Drew Stanke *Undergraduate*

### **James O. Wood Scholarship for Shakespeare Studies**

Barbara Purmort

### **Catherine Urban Scholarship**

Erika Harris

Barbara Purmort

Micayla Reed

### **Dr. Josephine Chandler Scholarship**

Luke Coulter

Mackenzie Rodriguez

### **Dr. Jack E. and Maxine Hunt Fink Scholarship Endowment for English Majors**

Blaise Olguin

### **Ruth MacLean McGee Scholarship**

Melissa Laptalo

### **Dorrit A. Sibley Scholarship**

Eli Hansen *Graduate*

Kervin Cano *Undergraduate*

### **Roberta Holloway Scholarship**

Fatema Elbakoury

### **W.O. Crockett Scholarship**

Hawwi Namarra

### **Harvey Birenbaum Prize**

Aubrey Laughlin

### **Owen Milton Broyles Scholarship**

Joshua Speers

### **Ida Fay Sachs Ludwig Memorial Scholarship**

Kimy Martinez

### **Rico-Ressman Endowment for Creative Writing**

Sharon Simonson

### **Lois King Thore Scholarship**

Julia Franco

### **Academy of American Poets Virginia de Araujo Prize**

Camille Miller *1st Place*

Kimy Martinez *Honorable Mention*

### **James D. Phelan Literary Awards**

#### **Phelan Personal Essay**

Jennifer Creech *Graduate*

#### **Phelan Critical Essay**

Jennifer Creech *Graduate*

#### **Phelan Free Verse**

*Graduate:*

Kimy Martinez

Richard To

Jenny Walicek

*Undergraduate:*

Sarah Marasco *1st place*

Robert Passalacqua *2nd place*

Eric Rummelhoff *3rd place*

#### **Phelan Short Story**

Richard To *Graduate*

Brian Adam *Undergraduate*