

Expressions

Volume 8

SJSU COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND THE ARTS

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Video - School of Music and Dance

Join us for the exciting [events](#) happening this semester in the School of Music and Dance!

<https://youtu.be/ZynzmazNzm4>



Theatre and Religion are Sisters

By Victoria Rue, M.Div., Ph.D.

In 2014, I decided to take the fall semester off from teaching Comparative Religious Studies at SJSU. I wanted to volunteer my abilities somewhere in the world. With guidance from a friend and volunteers in Global Service, I exchanged emails with Visthar: an Academy for Justice and Peace in Bengaluru, South India. "Visthar" means open space. What I discovered right away was that the work of Visthar dovetailed my own: gender, sexuality, religion, education, and theatre.

Visthar presents workshops on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and religion to LGBTQ activists, social workers, students, women pastors, and inter-faith leaders. Within the trainings, Visthar asked me to offer a theatre workshop that allowed participants to creatively embody and strategize these issues.

I collaborated with sixteen girls from Visthar's Bandhavi residential school program for girls for a week to create a play that would then be performed in one of the local villages.



Who we are: Urja, Ganga, Yellama, Kaviangeli, Mala, Goori, Maria, Aishvarya, Devima, Durga, Sampoti, Heymawatee, Nagama, Shasheekala, Yashoda, Sonya, and Sheela my collaborator (an actress/singer, all around theatre person, and a mother of two wonderful girls).

Saturday, October 18:

Bandhavi is located in the northern part of the state of Karnataka, out in the flat and fertile countryside. I arrive in the nearby town of Koppal by overnight train from Bengaluru.

We begin our work of creating a play together the next morning under a tree, a shrine to the Goddess Jedagama/Durga. And so we sat under the protective branches of a very large Neem tree, the center of the shrine. We asked a blessing for our creativity and collaboration, a blessing for struggles. We thanked the Mother and then we put the red powder of blessing on each of our foreheads.

We learned that trust in each other is crucial through playing a theatre game, "blind walk"—trusting the other to lead us to new textures and objects as we keep our eyes closed. Here were their comments following the exercise:

"I did not recognize anything I touched, except textures of things."

"I will trust because she trusted me."

"I felt I saw [imagined] the worker of everything I touched [a rice bag, a lattice piece]."

"Now I am aware of the beauty of walking."

"I learned I was afraid — I was afraid and then she gave me a flower to touch, and I

trusted her.”

“It felt like she was my mother: leading me, taking care of me.”

“Blind people have their light inside—we all do.”

“So many things we can’t see, but all is there when we close our eyes. When we close our eyes, we can see more.”

In the afternoon I asked them to sing children’s songs they knew: “Let me fly, mother,” “Learn while you play” (for learning words like: ama, games, creatures, Creator/God, child), “Ask the Crow” (sung on the arrival of a person), and “In her Dream” (she went to the moon’s world, sun, and stars...).

I also asked them to play games they knew: hide and seek/blindfold, and under the bridge. I was following my intuition with the hope that these songs and games might be forms for our work together.

I noticed they call me “madam.” Some called me “ama” (mother). I say, “Call me Victoria.” Their names are, at least here at the beginning, so difficult to pronounce, so I begin to call each one sister: “Thank you, sister,” and “Good morning, sister.” And it sticks; we all begin to call ourselves sisters.

From Monday to Thursday, we built the play – “Come Fly to the Dream.” It is built on the structure of children’s games and songs, but tells the stories of the girls’ mothers and the relationship of each girl to the Sacred.

One evening in rehearsal, we turned off the lights lit a candle and began a conversation about the Sacred. “What is it?” I asked: it’s a search, it makes you feel better; there is no God—I am God; God is a tree; someone who helps us is God; the environment is God. What in your imagination does the face of God look like? Her tongue is out and she’s angry; she has wild hair and wears a sari; God has a monkey face; the face of Jesus has thorns; the face looks like ourselves.

We began an exercise. Everyone laid on their backs on the floor. There was the flickering of the candlelight. I asked them, starting with the bottoms of their feet, to feel God/Sacred/Shakti-Energy moving up through the entire body. Next I asked them to slowly rise, in silence, hanging on to that Shakti-Energy/God in them as they walked about the room. My collaborator Sheela and I gasped as the girls slowly stood and moved around the room, their giant shadows filling the candlelit walls. We viscerally felt a huge presence of Energy/Spirits/the Unknown. This went on for many moments.

“What does the future look like from where you are?” I asked. Three said there would be another tsunami; another, Pakistan haunts us; another said people trust, the world will develop more, but the environ will spoil; floods will happen and we will have to move; all will get equality; all will work.

I asked them to slowly sit and take a piece of paper and pencil and write what the God/Shakti-Energy wanted to say to the world, to women, to men, to children. When they finished I asked them to stretch and breathe as they released the Shakti-Energy/God.

Several scenes that became part of the play came from this exercise. One of them was this short dialog:

Nagama [a nine year old girl]: Sister, I think about these questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What do I believe in? Do you have these questions?

Urja [a twelve year old girl]: Sister, yes, I too have questions, but my questions are different: Why do some people have so much and some so little, and some have nothing? Why do people hurt each other? Why is there hatred?

Nagama: A long time ago I was born as a god. Do the gods have the answers?

Urja: Sister, if they do have the answers, I think they work through us.

The performance of the play, "Come Fly to the Dream," took place in the village of Kodadal, a Dalit village, on October 24th with some 200 children and adults in attendance. After the play there was a Q & A and many children got up and told their dreams for themselves, just as the young girls in the play had also told of their dreams.

It was an extraordinary week. I have many deep feelings of gratitude for how giving and honest the young girls were in creating their theatre play, and for Sheela, my collaborator and translator who was spectacular to work with. Together, we all did indeed fly to our dreams. Amazingly enough, we began under a Neem Tree and we ended under a Neem Tree! Indeed, the Goddess was with us.

If you wish to read more about Victoria's journey and work in India, she kept a blog while there [Oct. 6—Nov.16]: www.victoriaruepoethig.wordpress.com

Former Chair Leaves Generous Legacy

We are saddened by the recent passing of Donna Gustafson, former professor and chair of the Department of World Languages and Literatures. And while she will be remembered as a valued colleague who greatly expanded language offerings at SJSU, she will also be remembered for her generosity and the legacy a gift from her estate has provided her former department.

"Donna Gustafson was a dedicated teacher, a generous colleague and someone truly devoted to San José State University," says Carmen Sigler, former provost and vice president for Academic Affairs at SJSU. "During her tenure as Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages, Professor Gustafson spearheaded the development of baccalaureate degrees in Chinese and Japanese and the establishment of the departmental language laboratory. She was also instrumental in the hiring of a significant number of tenure-track faculty members in Spanish and French, Latin and Greek, as well as Chinese and Japanese, and she served as a role model and mentor for many of us.

"While I was deeply saddened to hear the news of her death," Sigler continues, "I was not surprised to learn of her bequest because she was genuinely committed to student success. When I assumed the chairmanship of the department following her retirement, her parting words of advice for me were: 'When faced with a difficult decision, think of the students first.'"

Department Chair Damian Bacich reiterates this sentiment, saying, "Faculty in our department have a reputation for taking care of our students and fostering a strong community. This gift from Donna is just one more example of faculty commitment to student success. We can't overstate how much impact a generous gift like this has on students, as well as faculty. Dr. Gustafson's contribution to the department continues long after her retirement."

The World Languages and Literature Department at SJSU offers the only M.A. in Spanish in the CSU system, not only in the South Bay, but south to the Los Angeles basin. Dr. Bacich says, "Because of the costs of living in or near San José, our students frequently make sacrifices to pursue their graduate degrees. While there is some support for graduate and undergraduate students in the form of Teaching Assistantships and the Meta Marion Goldsmith Scholarship," Dr. Bacich continues, "this gift greatly expands the support we can give to our students."

The Department of World Languages and Literatures at San José State University offers programs of study in Chinese, French, German, classical Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Persian/Farsi, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Additionally, the department contributes to the preparation of teachers by offering courses in subject-matter teacher preparation, and supervised teacher training leading to a secondary teaching credential (awarded in conjunction with the College of Education.)

"In addition to the wide variety of languages we currently offer," Dr. Bacich says, "we're also proud to offer the opportunity to study Assyrian through Special Session—especially

in light of the ongoing tragedies in that part of the world, and the attack on the culture of the Assyrian people.”

The Department of World Languages and Literatures is sponsoring two upcoming events. In conjunction with the Mexican American Studies Department, the department will host a literary conversation with Mexican American Author Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez on October 14th. The department is also celebrating 400 years of the second part of *Don Quixote*, featuring the recently released book *Approaches to Teaching Cervantes' Don Quixote*, which is edited by Dean of the College Lisa Vollendorf, who also has a chapter in the book.

Upcoming WLL Events:

On a Journey: A Conversation with author Santiago Vaquero-Vásquez
Wednesday, October 14, at MLK Library (time and room TBD).

Celebrating the 400th Anniversary of Don Quixote
Tuesday, October 20, at MLK Library room 225 5-7pm.

SJSU Steinbeck Fellow Wins Award



Vanessa Hua, a 2013-14 Steinbeck Fellow, has won the 2015 Rona Jaffee Foundation Award, an annual award given to emerging women writers of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. Hua joined five other women writers in New York for the awards ceremony, which was hosted by Pulitzer Prize winning poet and memoirist Tracy K. Smith, a former Foundation Award winner.

Writing on [her blog](#), Hua says, "This amazing grant for emerging women writers will allow me to devote more time to my fiction, and provides much-needed encouragement to keep me going as I toil on my novel."

The novel she mentions is Hua's current project, *A River of Stars*, which tells the story of a pregnant Chinese factory clerk whose lover sends her to America to deliver the baby, thus giving his heir U.S. citizenship. Ms. Hua says, "The novel explores the intersecting lives of Chinese immigrants and the American-born who straddle the Pacific, who lead a transnational existence and hold a complicated relationship to their ancestral and adopted homelands—the clash between self and society, tradition and change."

Hua's collection of short stories, *The Responsibility of Deceit*, received the 2015 Willow Books Grand Prize Literature Award for Prose and will be published next year.

Hua came to SJSU as a Steinbeck Fellow in 2013, joining a long list of talented writers who have called the halls of SJSU home for a year. Since 2000, the program has brought thirty-six fellows to campus and distributed more than \$360,000 to support their work. To date, twenty-three books have been published by Steinbeck Fellows program alumni, with more being added every year.

The program has its origins in Steinbeck himself who, when he was in his twenties, was given a small monthly allowance from his father that enabled him to keep writing. The Steinbeck Fellows program was established in this spirit. Every year, the Center for Steinbeck Studies selects two or three emerging writers and supports their work with a \$10,000 stipend. The financial assistance is helpful, but former fellows have said that the vote of confidence is just as important.

Nick Taylor, Director of the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, says he hopes that "alumni of the fellows program who become successful continue to 'pay it forward' as Steinbeck did when he gave his 1939 Pulitzer Prize money to his friend Ritchie Lovejoy, who was struggling with his own first book."

Current Steinbeck Fellows include Candace Eros Diaz, whose work blends fact and fiction; Jennie Lin, who is working on a collection of short stories and a novel; and Gabriel Thompson, author of several books including *Working in the Shadows*, a behind-the-

scenes look at the labor done by Latino immigrants. Diaz, Lin, and Thompson will read from their works at the Fall Fellows Reading this November in the MLK library. Please join us for an evening of engaging interaction with these outstanding young authors.

Fall Steinbeck Fellows Reading

Tues, November 17, 7:30pm, MLK 225/229

Green Ninja Project Awarded Grant

An interdisciplinary research team from San José State including Associate Professor of Animation/Illustration and Design David Chai has been awarded \$1.1 million from the National Science Foundation to launch the "Green Ninja Film Academy (GENIE)," an educational initiative that will leverage well-established research on motivation to build student competencies in science, engineering design, media technology, and communications.

Focused on the adventures of the Green Ninja – a superhero – GENIE uses youth-oriented and humorous stories to pique students' interest in the climate and to develop their understanding of the science around climate change. GENIE builds on the Green Ninja Project, an established SJSU effort that uses short films to educate students about science and the environment. Green Ninja short films are popular on YouTube, with a current viewership of over 1,800,000. Viewers include K-12 teachers, who use Green Ninja films and accompanying educational materials to provide students with hands-on learning experiences linked to science competencies.

Speaking about his enthusiasm for the project, David Chai says, "I love working on the Green Ninja project for several reasons. Growing up, I learned a lot of important things from unexpected places. Saturday morning cartoons taught me how a bill gets to Capitol Hill, the functions of conjunctions, and where Lolly could get adverbs. I learned that only I could prevent forest fires from Smoky Bear, to give a hoot and not pollute from Woodsy the Owl, and how to help take a bite out of crime from McGruff the Crime Dog. The Green Ninja's goal is to not only provide teachers and students with learning materials for teaching environmental topics, but similarly to present them in fun, memorable, and engaging ways."



"Equally exciting for me is our recent grant," he continues. "It will allow us to take student engagement to another level by having K-12 students not only study our learning topics, but become actively engaged by providing them filmmaking concepts and materials, so they can make their own Green Ninja films."

During the three-year project, 60 teachers and at least 2,000 middle school students will directly participate in the GENIE project, with additional participation from parents, friends, and teachers who attend the Green Ninja Film Festival. Grounded in science and data, GENIE will help teachers prepare to implement the Common Core and Next Generation Science standards using climate change as a context.

"The thing I love most," Chai says, "is the collaboration between all of the people who make it possible. We're combining scientists, educators, filmmakers, actors, animators,

and concept artists; we're adding the 'A' in 'Arts' to 'STEM'; going full STEAM ahead. I think it's one of the most cross-disciplinary and exciting collaborations on campus."

Joining Chai as principal investigators of the NSF grant are SJSU professors Eugene Cordero (Meteorology and Climate Science), Ellen Metzger (Geology and Science Ed), Grinell Smith (Elementary Education), and Elizabeth Walsh (Meteorology and Climate Science and Science Education). More information about the project can be found at www.greenninja.org.

Profile: Pat Cunningham

By Kaitlynn Magnuson



The College of Humanities and the Arts is thrilled to welcome Pat Cunningham as the newest member of the Dean's staff team. Although new to the Dean's office, Cunningham is not new to San José State: she earned her bachelor's degree in business accounting here at SJSU, and has recently worked for both the College of Education and the Department of English.

With more than thirty years of corporate accounting and small business management experience under her belt, Cunningham brings a unique range of skills and an enthusiastic mindset to her new position. Ongoing projects and new initiatives, such as the revitalization of the Hammer Theatre, will benefit from her real-world experience and allow her to contribute to the mission of the College in deeply meaningful ways.

Cunningham's drive to improve the campus and its Colleges helps explain why she returned to SJSU after being in the corporate world for so long. "I love being on campus," she says. "I love being around the students, I love the professors, and I love the diversity of everything that happens here. There are just so many things that happen every day; every day is completely different."

Cunningham's arrival in the Dean's office will allow for the expansion and creation of more projects that will support student learning throughout the College's many disciplines. We are thrilled that she has joined our team, and we look forward to working with her to provide a high-quality liberal arts education that prepares students to be compassionate, informed citizens of the world.

Profile: Robin Lasser

By Kaitlynn Magnuson



Bringing a new perspective to urban planning, Professor of Art Robin Lasser recently teamed up with artists Trena Noval and Genevieve Hastings to create a public, interactive mobile kiosk entitled *Our Lives in This Place*. The kiosk displays twenty-eight postcards that spotlight project participants and their dreams for the city's future on the front; on the back of the postcards are a series of questions prompting responses from city residents. *Our Lives in This Place* travelled throughout the East Santa Clara corridor for three months, collecting stories from residents that would help the city of San José shape an urban village plan for the next few decades.

By incorporating art and public interaction into the city planning process, Lasser and her collaborators created a civic intervention that was both approachable and welcoming to the members of the community. "We, as artists, brought emotional content to something that might otherwise be a dry situation," Lasser remarked. "And I think it not only helped the community recognize each other, but also brought attention to the ways residents can help shape the future of their neighborhoods."

The intertwining of art and social engagement gave Lasser a unique perspective and opportunity to interact with community members in a way she hadn't before. "As a professor working over twenty-five years here at the university, I felt I really hadn't had an opportunity to engage in my own community outside of the university," Lasser noted. "To get to know the businesses, to get to know the residents...I took this project on as a challenge."

And for Lasser, this challenge ultimately was a success. The artists' input allowed the city to gather an abundance of ideas, inspiration, and impressions while increasing awareness of how individual residents, working together, can take responsibility for the future of the communities that we call home. Bridging the gap between the people and the city, *Our Lives in This Place* speaks to the power of individuals coming together to create a future, as well as to the power of artists working in public spaces to effect positive change.

Profile: Jessica Nguyen

By Kaitlynn Magnuson

San José State's "My Story is Here" campaign highlights the vast array of students, faculty, staff, and alumni who fill the SJSU campus with vibrancy and life. Through banners that run down the campus section of 7th Street and on an accompanying blog, "My Story is Here" illustrates how each person who sets foot on campus contributes to the ever-expanding Spartan story.



"One day I was headed toward the music building," recalls Jessica Nguyen, a member of the School of Music studying Music Education. "Suddenly I saw my face on banners near the music building. I was surprised and shocked, and I laughed out loud as I realized it was my face up there."

SJSU has played a major role in shaping Jessica's studies, goals, and future. Over the course of her time here, she has met inspirational mentors, worked side-by-side with countless colleagues, and created an unimaginably strong network of friends, both professionally and socially. With the goal of becoming a music teacher, she has worked toward excellence alongside SJSU's faculty, deepening her knowledge and developing the skills she needs to be an exemplary professional educator. She believes that sharing her story will help other students access similar

opportunities and thus strengthen the on-campus community.

"I think this campaign is inspirational," says Jessica. "It really brings more depth to SJSU, and brings out the stories and characters of real students. I think it's important on a large campus such as ours to bring out each person's story for all students."

Jessica notes that several students have already approached her, having read and enjoyed learning about her story, which is ultimately the goal of "My Story is Here" - to bring students together in a large campus environment.

To learn more about "My Story is Here," or to read more about other members of the SJSU campus community, [click here](#).

It's a Dean's Life Vol. 8

October 2015



Fall has begun, and with this new season comes a sense of excitement around the university and downtown San José.

I know many people around the region are curious about the university's progress on the Hammer Theatre project. So here's your update, hot off the presses: our partners at the city have been tremendously helpful in working through the necessary modifications and repairs to get the theatre up and running as soon as possible. We will be returning to City Council soon for final approval of the contract, and we hope to start hiring staff by the end of this calendar year. We are still aiming for a spring opening, and will post updates on the [Hammer 2.0 site](#), where you can sign up for an email

distribution list about the Hammer.

The College recently had the privilege of welcoming author [Chang-rae Lee](#) to campus. He gave a moving talk as part of the fall series sponsored by our [Center for Literary Arts](#). Under Professor Cathleen Miller's able direction, the CLA is also welcoming [Mark Slouka](#), [Claudia Rankine](#), and the current Steinbeck Fellows this fall. Don't miss these amazing, free events!

Professor Robin Lasser has been tremendously active in public art projects. One project, ["Our Lives in this Place,"](#) was featured in the Metro and stands as a testament to the power of art to shape and improve communities. Lasser worked with two other artists, Trena Noval and SJSU alumna Genevieve Hastings. This powerful trio reminds us of the many ways our faculty and alumni carry the Spartan legacy out into the world. Along similarly inspirational lines, once again we take off our hats in honor of our Animation/Illustration program, which recently was listed among the Best in the West, coming in at #8 in [Animation Career Review](#).

I am proud that we will soon be welcoming the world-renowned [Sphinx Virtuosi](#) to our School of Music and Dance on October 21, 2015, at 7:30 p.m. in the Music Concert Hall. This amazing organization identifies and nurtures the nation's top Latino and Black classical soloists. This concert represents a tremendous opportunity for our students and our community members, and we very much hope you can join us. You can buy tickets [here](#).

Many of you probably saw the Mercury News article highlighting [Professor Gus Lease](#) and his longstanding service to the university. To honor Professor Lease's tremendous legacy, we are seeking to establish a \$65,000 scholarship endowment, a goal that represents \$1,000 for every year of Professor Lease's service at SJSU. If you're interested in supporting this effort, please visit our [College homepage](#) or contact our wonderful new Director of Development, Matthew Taylor Siegel (matthew.taylorsiegel@sjsu.edu).

We recently lost a visionary leader of our community: Martha Heasley Cox (1919-2015) passed away peacefully in September. Professor Cox had the foresight to found a center focused on her favorite author, John Steinbeck. Among its many contributions, [SJSU's Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies](#) nurtures scholars and emerging authors and provides resources for teachers and students of Steinbeck around the globe. You can read an uplifting tribute to this truly generous woman on [Steinbeck.Now](#).

Above all else, the Steinbeck Center provides a touchstone for students, faculty, staff, scholars, and community members to come together around the core values expressed by Steinbeck in his work: a commitment to social justice, access, equity, diversity, and environmental stewardship. In short, Martha Heasley Cox created a center that expresses our core values as people devoted to supporting public education. She also had the generosity and vision to give back to the university that she so dearly loved.

As we continue with the work of educating 33,000 students this fall, Professor Cox's passing serves as a strong reminder of the power of legacy to do good in the world. With the support of donors, this year we have been able to offer more than \$75,000 in scholarships to help deserving students and upgrade some of our facilities to improve educational quality. As you will read in this edition of Expressions, we have much to be proud of in the College of Humanities and the Arts. If you would like to learn more about ways to support our people and our programs, please feel free to contact me directly.

With gratitude,



Lisa Vollendorf, Dean

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