

Regional

McClinton teaches sensitivity toward other cultures

In an increasingly diverse world, we need to prepare students to understand other cultures so they can be better and more productive citizens of the world. An educator dedicated to that task is Rowena McClinton, a professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

McClinton was born in Jackson, Miss., and received her bachelor's degree in education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, her master's from Western Carolina University and her doctoral degree from the University of Kentucky.

McClinton grew up in Mississippi under Jim Crow and vividly remembers signs for white-only restrooms and drinking fountains that persisted until the mid-'60s. The kind of tensions that these laws created led her to look at these kinds of situations in a way that the leaders of the state couldn't or wouldn't – the morality of a government that refused to treat all of its citizens as equally important members of society. It was up to the people, McClinton said, to bring about change.

"The African American community did a magnificent service to all of us in bringing wider freedom to everyone when they coordinated and communicated this wider freedom through the legislation that was passed by Congress in 1964 and 1965," she said.

An individual's and a community's history is important to McClinton's scholarship, and her research takes her into small, often isolated communities that tend to be wary of strangers.

"I think that interacting with people from other cultures is always a tenuous and ongoing process in negotiating," McClinton

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

said. "I think that one works very hard to win that confidence so that one may get the information and call out the essentials of the information from that culture or from their own historical record so that one may contribute to that culture's past."

And because she deals with sensitive issues such as race, an added pressure is always present when she is conducting her research.

"I have assured every person with whom I have had contact that they would always have access to those records before they are published," McClinton explained. "And in translating Moravian missionary diaries and their work among the Cherokees I asked the Moravians on several occasions to check the translations," she said.

Her own experience of growing up in Mississippi helped her to be very sensitive regarding the perceptions of minority communities. "My father's businesses were located in black communities and he depended on African American trade in order to be successful," McClinton said. "My working in his stores was an illuminating experience in the sense that I learned incredible respect for another culture. My brother and I learned from a very early age that we were dealing with other human beings and we learned incredible respect and trust. And also we learned not to fear and not to play on ignorance in order to invite any kind of fear."

These early experiences – along with her academic training – oftentimes allow



Shan Lu/SIUE Photo

Dr. Rowena McClinton in front of the Meridian sculpture on the SIUE campus.

her to gain people's confidence in just few weeks. "It depends on personality and how one approaches another community," she explained. "If you go in and learn those people's names and who they are related to and where they have their community meetings or where they hold their ceremonies

that helps. What one really wants to accomplish is for that culture to unburden its inner soul."

She said that she believes that when we come in contact with different cultures we are all in the process of changing and we use different ways to express ourselves

and sometimes we even adopt the other culture's practices.

For McClinton to be able to bring these experiences to her own students has had a tremendous effect on many of them. "I find that students will remind me on evaluations on many occasions," she said. "They will say, 'I never knew that point of view. I never heard about the Native American experience.' I teach a course with Prof. Prince Wells from the music department called African American Music and the Struggle of Freedom and so many times in that situation I also hear 'we never heard that this was really what happened with African Americans and how they developed all this magnificent music when they were under incredible white oppression.'"

When asked if she thinks that her teaching may change some of her students' lives she takes the long view. "The great thing about teaching is that you give everything away and you want to come away feeling that you have given everything away," she said. "I feel that so many times in some of the students' writings or evaluations. One student recently said, 'I felt like the class was a community' and I valued that assessment. But I do value the fact when students say 'she is very passionate about what she is teaching' or 'she is very knowledgeable about what she is teaching.'"

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.