

Regional

Frey-Spurlock studies women's roles in society

Since the 1960s public awareness of the profound changes made by women in society and culture has grown substantially. And while there is still much to be accomplished in terms of equality with men – such as pay equity – the progress that has been made has become the focus of scholarly interest. One of these researchers is Connie Frey-Spurlock, an assistant professor of sociology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. It was during her own undergraduate experience, when seeing how the contributions of women in her class textbooks were downplayed, that she decided on her career as a sociologist.

“At the time, which wasn’t that long ago, there were no women in the theory textbooks, there were no women that were recognized as important to being part of the development of sociology in the U.S.,” Frey-Spurlock explained. “As a woman undergraduate I was curious as to whether or not that was an accurate reflection.” Born in Nashville, Tenn., she earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in sociology from Middle Tennessee State University and her doctorate, also in sociology, from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. While studying to become a sociologist, she discovered the work of one of the founders of sociology in the United States, Jane Addams.

“She is quite a towering figure,” Frey-Spurlock said. “She was born and lived her life around the Chicago area. She is known probably most famously for opening Hull House, which she did with Ellen Gate Star. They opened Hull House to serve the needs of the community. So it was a research center and many researchers from around the country and around the world traveled to Hull House to study and to learn with Addams and her colleagues.” Addams, who was the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, also played a major role in achieving voting rights for women.

“That was important to her because she felt that as outsiders to the politi-



Dr. Connie Frey-Spurlock

Photo by Reina Junk

cal system at the time, women had a lot to offer from that viewpoint,” Frey-Spurlock said. “They were outside so they could see the weaknesses, they could see the strengths, they could see the areas where what Addams called ‘feminine values’ could enhance and improve the political system. And she also worked with people of color and was a founding member of the NAACP.”

Besides the political causes, Addams was also interested in very practical things like the needs of mothers and

children, whose voices she argued were not part of the political discourse.

“She felt that we, in a patriarchal society, set women and girls up to fail and that our society lacked the ability to reach its full potential because of the silencing of women and girls,” Frey-Spurlock said. “And it was critical for her to get women’s voices involved in that. Also, one of her biggest contributions had to do with the establishment of the juvenile justice system. So Cook County had the first juvenile justice

court system in the United States and that was a result again of Addams and her colleagues recognizing that children have different needs.” At SIUE, Frey-Spurlock teaches a course titled “victimology.”

“I think we are fortunate to have a class and a concern about victims in our department. The literature on victimology courses and education in general says that many criminal justice students go through their programs and never have a meaningful conversation about

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victims, which is surprising to me given that while they may focus on people who create victims, oftentimes those offenders are still victims themselves and there is a victim present somewhere,” she explained. “So having no understanding of what victims’ needs are, what victims’ rights are, what kinds of experiences they have, and what kinds of experiences enable healing from trauma is a real problem in our criminal justice education.” She said that she thinks that having a course like this broadens the perspective of both criminal justice majors and sociology majors.

“This class has shown me that there are number of students on campus that have had some rather traumatic experiences,” she said. “It comes out in the conversations, through their writings, and what-not in that class. And I have seen that it helps those students put their experiences into a larger context, so there is an opportunity for some to develop personally as well as professionally.”

Frey-Spurlock is currently working on what is called an ecoliteracy project. Ecoliteracy has been defined as an understanding of the natural and social systems that allow for human community existence. “I would like to ultimately create a system where we can assess how literate undergraduate students are coming from high school and then to see if we have made any changes upon graduating,” she said. “And becoming a more sustainable university and universe we would strive for a higher level of ecoliteracy than we certainly are at now.”

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_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.