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## Students Tell Local Immigrant Stories Through Films and Photos

April 17, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University anthropology students tell the immigration stories of 12 local residents as part of an ethnography course that fosters collaboration and the use of visual media to tell cultural stories.

The students are enrolled in Visual and Ethnographic Methods, a qualitative research course where student researchers use interviews and photography to collaborate with their subjects. The immigrant stories will be told through ethnographic photo-essays available on the IWU Digital Commons, posters presented at the John Wesley Powell Research Conference on April 20, and four, 15-minute films to be shown at the Student Film Festival April 25 at 7 p.m. at The Ames Library's Beckman Auditorium.

The collaborative process of selecting photos and information from the immigrant's life is one of the most ethical ways of doing ethnography, according to Rebecca Gearhart, chair of the department of sociology and anthropology and instructor of the course. Each student reviewed available photos from the immigrant's past and took additional photos of the interviewee in his or her life today.

"The use of photography allows for more creative outlets of collaboration between the anthropologist and consultants and can help bridge the gap presented by obstacles such as linguistic barriers," said anthropology major Kat Lukes '15.

The local residents who were interviewed for the course included an organic farmer living in Normal who is originally from Kenya; an Illinois Wesleyan professor who grew up under communism in the former Soviet Union; and a Ph.D. student at Illinois State University originally from Mexico. Most of those interviewed are now United States citizens.

Separating their emotions from their roles as researchers proved difficult for some of the students. Lauren Henry '14 interviewed Marina Balina, the Isaac Funk Professor and Professor of Russian Studies at Illinois Wesleyan. Born into a Jewish family in Russia, Balina left the former Soviet Union in June 1988 with her husband and son, traveling to refugee camps in Austria and Italy before arriving in Boston, MA, where Balina's uncle was living.

"Dr. Balina's story was very emotional to hear her tell, and at times I felt a little insensitive frantically writing down notes as she was telling me about such sensitive topics," said Henry. "In the end, though, Dr. Balina was extremely helpful in making me comprehend the appalling circumstances of her life in Russia and allowed me to now have a much greater appreciation for the rights I have as an American."

Gearhart said the method of visual ethnography is not commonly taught in the United States because it is labor intensive and many anthropologists have not been exposed to the methods.

"Anthropologists, like other scholars, use images very haphazardly," said Gearhart. "Anthropologists think of photos just to illustrate their text, not as a separate useful entity."

Gearhart teaches the Visual Ethnography course each spring but this is the first time she has tied the content to Illinois Wesleyan's yearlong commitment to promoting a greater understanding of human rights issues. A cluster of courses each semester has focused on "**Making Human Rights Real**" for Wesleyan students enrolled in one of the courses exploring human rights and social justice. Gearhart got the idea for the immigration story content from a faculty group discussing *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives* (McSweeney's, 2008).

“The only problem was we never got around to discussing the book,” said Gearhart. “We were more interested in our colleagues telling us their own immigration stories each time we got together, and I thought, ‘we just have to tell these’ to a broader audience.”

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