

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH LAURA R. DAVIS

CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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TS: The interview today is with Laura Davis, who is the 2017 recipient of KSU's Outstanding Teaching Award. Laura, let's start with your background, particularly your educational background. I know you went to Wake Forest University for your bachelor's degree. I assume that you were a traditional student right out of high school, but would you talk about why Wake Forest, and how did you become an English major?

LD: My parents got married really young and had me really young, so socioeconomically, they were always catching up. We lived in a trailer park when I was born. A place like Wake Forest, without [a scholarship covering] tuition, was pretty firmly out of our grasp. They had definitely [moved up] the socioeconomic ladder by the time I was 18, but I really wanted to go there. It was always a matter of knowing I needed to work for a scholarship. I used to be in choirs, and we would go and sing at Wake Forest. They would have these big choral festivals.

TS: Were you Baptist back then.

LD: We were. I grew up Southern Baptist. We would go to these choral festivals and things at Wake Forest, and I just fell in love with it. Wake Forest was always my idea of what a college should look like. It's a beautiful campus.

TS: I think Betty [L.] Siegel [president of Kennesaw State University, 1981-2006] got her bachelor's from there.

LD: She did. I'll tell you a funny story about the first time I met her. I just loved it, but it was always a matter of trying to get a scholarship. I did. They have this scholarship for ... I don't know how much you know about Wake Forest, but mostly people that go to school there are not from North Carolina. They are very wealthy, and they come from the Northeast. They come down to go to a really rigorous school without having to be in the snow in Boston and things like this, right?

TS: Smart.

LD: Right. There is this group of alumni, faculty, and administrators that felt really strongly that they wanted more North Carolinians to be able to afford to come. I say that I got to go on the "poor farm kid's scholarship." It's not officially called that, but they wanted somebody from a more rural county.

TS: Which county was it?

- LD: I was in Mecklenburg County, which actually encompasses Charlotte. Where I lived in Mecklenburg, especially at that time, was pretty rural. They give out a few of these scholarships every year to people who, otherwise, would not be able to afford it and are North Carolinians.
- TS: I have a sister-in-law who lives near Charlotte on Lake Norman. That's a pretty ritzy place though.
- LD: It has become that way. It wasn't always. Wake Forest was a bit of a shock, because everybody, even at 18, drove cars. Nobody in my family would ever be able to afford that even at the prime of their economic success. It was definitely a different experience, but a really rich one.
- TS: So your father was a farmer?
- LD: No, he wasn't. He worked for BellSouth. He was a lineman. My mom worked in a lab at a hospital in Charlotte. But my grandmother was a farmer and so was my great-grandmother; so a lot of women farmers in my family, from here in Georgia actually. I wrote about that a lot in my application for [the outstanding teaching] award. I'm so grateful that somebody gave the money to do that. I'm a public school kid, and after Wake Forest I was at public institutions. I'm a big advocate of public institutions, but I think for this one little moment in my life it was good to open my eyes. They could afford to bring in opportunities for their students that state schools couldn't.
- TS: You said there was a funny story about meeting Betty Siegel.
- LD: My first day on campus she came into the new faculty orientation; you know all those meetings they make you sit in. She came in with all her energy. I knew she had gone to Wake Forest when I researched the school for the job interview. She tells this story about Wake Forest and what a wonderful place it was and how it inspired her and how she thinks the motto they have there, which is *pro humanitate*, doing good for humanity, inspired her teaching. She just went on and on about it. Then she asked us, "I'm going to ask you to raise your hand if you went to a place like that." A bunch of us raised our hands. She just coincidentally happened to call on me and said, "Where did you go to school? I want to know how it compares to Wake Forest?" And I said, "Wake Forest." That is how I met Betty Siegel. I think she had sons there or at least one son there, maybe two, a little bit before me. We knew a lot of the same people, so it was a good way to feel at home on my first day on campus.
- TS: I saw her just Monday when she was present for the opening of the Betty Siegel exhibit in the Dr. Betty L. Siegel Student Recreation and Activities Center. [Her husband] Joel was there and spoke for her. She was very energetic still.
- LD: Yes. Good. I cannot imagine her any other way.
- TS: Did you go to be an English major? Did you know that already before you got there?

LD: I don't think I knew that the minute I got there, but pretty soon thereafter. It was between English and history for sure. I dabbled in both, and then I just happened to meet the right teachers at the right moment in the English Department and went that direction. I think if I had just the right teacher in history, I could have easily gone that direction. All my work has always been a blend of both. I always, even as a child, loved to read and write. It's not a surprise.

TS: Any mentors at Wake Forest or did that come when you got to graduate school?

LD: I think probably Barry Maine in the English Department. He was such a great teacher. He was so funny, and he was so laid back, but yet you learned so much that you didn't even know that you learned. You would walk out of class feeling like you just had this great time, and then you realized, "I accidentally learned a tremendous amount." He was really good. He introduced me to Thomas [R.] Pynchon [Jr.] in one of the first courses I took. I think it was a literature survey, just a hodgepodge of stuff.

TS: Can we talk about that?

LD: That is not somebody I have ever really gone back and read since that class, but I just remember it was this revelation because he was so fired up about Pynchon.

TS: I will have to look him up. I don't know anything about him.

LD: He's a quirky bird. He's a quirky bird. Nobody knows really what he looks like or who he is. He writes all these novels [*Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), etc.], but he's totally reclusive. Nobody really knows where he is at any given time.

Then there was an associate dean, Patricia Johansson. She was probably towards the end of her career when I was there [retired in 1998], which was a long time ago. She took a special interest in me and would meet with me one-on-one and talk about my writing. I would say those are the two people who really stand out to me there. I tried for years to get into Maya Angelou's class. She would teach one class a year. She was on the faculty there. The waiting list, as you might imagine, was just tremendous, and I never go in. The one semester I did get in, I was slated to go study abroad, so I ended up doing study abroad instead. It has always been a regret. What an opportunity missed!

TS: Where did you go for your study abroad?

LD: England. We were in London. I spent a semester there.

TS: So you were interested in English literature at that time?

LD: I actually was with the Sociology Department, which was pretty fascinating. It was my minor. I got to go because of my minor. We studied economics, actually, the whole time we were there. We studied all these business models and how European business models and British business models were different from the United States. Oddly, that was such

an outlier in my educational career, but I could tell you a lot about that still. It really stuck.

TS: So you got your bachelor's in 1997; did you get it in four year?

LD: I did. The farm scholarship was running out. They don't pay those North Carolinians to stay around for six years.

TS: Okay. What happens after that? I know five years later you got a master's at Middle Tennessee State University.

LD: Yes, a little interlude.

TS: What happens in those five years?

LD: I graduated from Wake Forest, and my parents were so proud that we had this distinguished degree from this very rich, expensive university. My parents still paid plenty to help me go there. They always said they would pay what [it would cost to] go to a state school. Education is really important to them. They set that money aside. They paid that part of it, and the scholarship paid for some, and then I worked and got through it. I think I was so busy sucking in all that there was to do at Wake Forest that I really had no plan. As my students graduate, they often are the same way, right? So I pretty much just thought, well, what to do now?

I had some friends in Nashville from a summer job I had worked, and I just always had a wandering spirit. I can't believe I've actually been at Kennesaw this many years. I tend to like to move around, so I went to Nashville and just started doing whatever jobs I could find. I worked for a plumber. I worked at a mall decorating Christmas displays. I did close captioning, doing the typing for close captioning on TV. Just a bunch of random jobs, and it was a really, really fun time in my life. My parents were like, "Why did we pay for this really expensive institution?" But you learn a lot in those [situations]. I worked in all kinds of different places, met all kinds of different people. It was interesting.

Then I settled into a job that was on Music Row doing marketing. A lot of English students end up in marketing, so I thought maybe this was the way to go. That was really fun too because you're right there on Music Row, and there's always something going on. But that didn't take for too long. I realized that selling things was not my thing. At the same time I was coaching middle school volleyball. It's interesting how you were saying that you are always going to be a teacher, and you are going to find a way to do that. [In retirement] you're teaching Sunday school. So I started coaching and soon realized that teaching is what was really fun.

TS: Did you play volleyball in college or high school?

LD: No, but I had played in church leagues stuff and everything. It was just this random job I had. I had a lot of random jobs at that point. But that one really lit a fire. So I decided to quit my job. I went back to get a master's to start teaching. I went to Middle Tennessee State University because it was right there. I didn't want to move. That ended up being one of the best decisions I ever made in my life. Again, back to the public institution, but because it was a public school, they had more opportunities for us to teach. It was a very practical degree, like, "Let's get you teaching right away and working in a writing center." I got all this great pedagogical instruction.

TS: Were you teaching composition courses?

LD: They had us in the writing center first, and then we got to teach composition. I think nobody should teach English unless they've worked in a writing center. You've got to cut your teeth doing that. It's just one-on-one instruction. There's no hiding what you don't know—one person right here in front of you and learning to work with a lot of different types of students. I worked in the MTSU Student-Athlete Enhancement Center, which means I was the football coach/tutor. I did that for a while, and that was also a really good experience.

TS: I bet.

LD: Yes, and I'm so lucky. It was MTSU, and they knew who they were. They knew what kinds of jobs we were going to get. They wanted us teaching right away. It was more of a focus on teaching than on research or scholarship.

TS: Were they thinking about college teaching jobs or high school or ...

LD: Both. They had a mix.

TS: Did you take education courses?

LD: They made us. They made us take education courses. They made us take a pedagogy course. I'm so grateful for that. I learned so much before they would put us in a classroom. Then my first semester teaching I had been in the classroom maybe three or four weeks, and I was scheduled to have my first ever evaluation. You're really nervous, right, as a new teacher? Somebody's going to come in and evaluate you, and it was the woman that taught our pedagogy class. That was September 12th in the year of September 11 [2001]. I was evaluated the day after the [terrorist attack on the] World Trade Center. So, obviously, my lesson plans went out the window. But she came and evaluated me, and I will never forget that for sure, having to handle those students and what they were processing and then also being evaluated at the same time.

TS: Middle Tennessee State has a super Public History program.

LD: I've heard this. I have a friend who is actually teaching there. She's been there three years, I guess, and she loves it. Someone I actually met here at Kennesaw who then moved there.

TS: Sounds like you were very busy while you were in your program.

LD: Yes, they gave us a lot of opportunities.

TS: Okay, so in 2002 you got your master's. What about mentors at Middle Tennessee State University?

LD: The woman that came in to observe me that day—her name is Ayne Cantrell. For years and years she taught the class that prepared all the GTAs [graduate teaching assistants] and all the writing center tutors to move into the classroom. That was her life's work.

TS: And what did you learn from her in particular?

LD: I learned to give as much detail and effort to teaching as I ever did to any line of writing I ever wrote. She was so detailed. We had this rubric that I've never seen the likes of to this day. It had three thousand points, and by the time you were done with that you felt like you had gone through all the steps to become an Eagle Scout. It was like you had won your badges! She was just so exacting that we were not going to be put into the classroom unless she had determined that we were worthy.

She wrote me this email. I still have it because it has meant a lot to me. She was about to retire [in 2005]. Really and truly, the hoops you had to jump through were amazing. I'm the kind of person that if you do something like that to me, I just get really exacting too. I'm determined to get all the points. And she wrote me an email saying that in all of her career nobody had ever gotten all three thousand points until me, and I got all three thousand points. I remember thinking that I had really made it as a teacher! Of course, I knew nothing as a teacher. That was years ago.

TS: Okay. So you go immediately from the master's program to Kennesaw. How did that come about?

LD: Yes. Actually, I moved to Oregon in between there. I had a friend living out in Oregon. I needed to write my thesis, and so I moved to Oregon and spent a year out there writing my thesis and learning what it was like living in a different part of the country. I liked to move to different places. That was interesting. It rains a lot; that's what I learned. I learned I didn't want to stay there. So I started looking at the job market. A friend of mine who had been in the master's program with me at MTSU had graduated a year before I did, and she had gotten one of the jobs here at Kennesaw as an instructor. She called me and said, "I'm teaching at this place in Georgia. These are real interesting jobs; they're tenured-tracked without the PhD," which you know doesn't exist very often. She said, "I'm really happy here. I like the department. You should interview." So that's how I got here.

TS: Who interviewed you when you came here?

LD: [M.] Todd Harper was on the committee. Letizia [M.] Guglielmo was the person I knew, but she had to sit out for my interview. She was on the committee, but she had to sit out my interview since she knew me. I think Dede [Yow] was on that committee, and I don't remember whom else.

TS: Was Laura [S.] Dabundo the department chair?

LD: She was the chair. I interviewed with Laura that day. I did a phone interview first, then came in for the campus visit.

TS: And this was a special program at that time because we had so many students that needed to take composition?

LD: Yes.

TS: And so they were hiring a bunch of instructors to teach the general education classes?

LD: Yes, it was very controversial. I remember even my first day on campus wondering what I had gotten myself into because several people said, "Oh, we really didn't want these positions in our department. We didn't think that you all should be hired"—which is always a little disconcerting.

TS: They'd rather hire people with doctorates?

LD: Yes, or hire people with master's degrees, but not put them on the tenure track. That was the sticky point.

TS: I bet that was controversial. I always thought of the English Department in those days as a very dysfunctional department.

LD: [Laughs]. It had its highs and its lows, like every department. They had really split into two armed camps. That is what we had walked into. There were four people hired the year that Letizia got hired, then six of us the next year. So there was this huddle of ten of us who bound together.

TS: Now was Beth Daniell working with the freshman English program?

LD: Not yet. She came a few years later [in 2004 as director of composition].

TS: Was there somebody in particular that was assigned to mentor you?

LD: We were all assigned individual mentors, so I had Dede, but Laura Dabundo was, and continues to be to this day, somebody I would always say is probably in the top two or three mentors in my life, personally and professionally. I shudder to think, actually, the

road we would have had if she hadn't taken a strong stance of, "Yes, I respect the opinions of this camp of people, but these people are here now, and it's not their fault. They're human beings, so let us treat them as such." She took a really firm stance in that. She's a good person.

TS: Okay, so I guess you were teaching all composition as an instructor?

LD: They gave us Comp and World Literature. That pretty much was our bread and butter for many years. We were on a 5-5 load [five classes in the fall and five in the spring], so that was intense. I taught in the summer too. I'll go back to that. Just like the writing center, I'm so glad I had that experience because, again, if you're teaching a 5-5 load of mostly composition, you're going to learn something about teaching. You're going to learn a lot.

TS: I guess so. How many students were in the classroom?

LD: We had twenty-five in the Comp, and then in the World Lit we were thirty-five.

TS: That's a lot of students.

LD: Yes.

TS: So you had well over a hundred students every semester?

LD: Every time, yes, like 160 or 170 sometimes.

TS: So when they hired you, they said, "You're going to do a lot of teaching. We don't expect any scholarship?"

LD: Right, and, "We don't expect a PhD." They said that too. "You can get tenure without the PhD." That ended up not being true.

TS: Oh, really?

LD: Yes, that was a bit of a mess.

TS: So nobody ever got tenure without the PhD?

LD: A couple people did. That was a really big mess, actually. Right at the very last minute, it turns out the BOR [Board of Regents] didn't know they had promised us that. The BOR had changed the policy, and somehow that was never communicated. Maybe it was. We never got the full story.

TS: The Board of Regents was responsible for saying you had to have a doctorate?

LD: Yes, the Board of Regents, I guess, had changed some kind of policy where people, we were told, couldn't be considered if they did not have the doctorate, but that had not been communicated to KSU. But then KSU hit back and said. "Yes, but you've got these people who have MFAs [master of fine arts, regarded as the terminal degree for faculty members in some programs] and stuff." So then it became like "terminal degree," and then it became "terminal degree or the equivalency thereof," because we had all these people who had been promised tenure, and we were almost about to go up. So some people were able to demonstrate equivalency of the PhD, but that was really hard to do. A lot of people ended up having to leave instead because they just didn't [meet the requirements]. I know somebody who got tenure because she had two master's degrees and a book.

TS: I would say a book should count for something.

LD: Yes. There were a couple of people who got through that way.

TS: Did we have senior lecturers then?

LD: No we didn't. Actually, that all came about simultaneously. They gave us the option of opting out into a lecturer track and senior lecturer and things like that. So some people chose to do that. Some people left altogether. I finished [my PhD] right on time. It was really close. It was a squeaker. I got tenure in 2011 or 2012, and my dissertation is 2011. It was real close. I applied for tenure at the same time I was writing the dissertation, so it was close.

TS: You can only stay an instructor so many years, right? So they've got to make you an assistant professor or a senior lecturer.

LD: Right, right and it was all a little bit different there. When we were hired, we were told we couldn't go up for a promotion or tenure for ten years.

TS: You can stay an instructor ten years?

LD: Not now, but then we were hired in these really odd positions. They were really odd. The way they [the higher administration] sold it to these departments who didn't want to give somebody tenure if they didn't have a PhD or a terminal degree was, "We'll make them do this extra long track to tenure." I think they pretty much thought we'd all be dead or quit before we ever even went up for tenure, honestly. I think that's how it was. It was a ten-year track to tenure. It was something.

TS: So 2002 to 2012?

LD: Yes, I think 2012 was the earliest I could actually have been given tenure.

TS: My mind's getting foggy on all this now, but I started here in 1968, if you can believe that, and it was March of 1978 when I actually got the PhD. They had to promote me to

assistant professor by the seventh year, but I didn't have tenure until I got the degree. So I had to send in the paperwork as soon as I had the degree in hand, just in time for them to make the tenure decision.

LD: Yes, so you know, the nail biter. "Are you going to finish?" Ours was the opposite. We could not apply for tenure and promotion at the same time. This is why I can't remember the years exactly because I think I got tenure in 2011, and then the very next year we had to turn around and apply for assistant professor. But I was always grateful that my tenure committee made a mistake on the form. They thought we could go up for both. They didn't realize, and they had checked off that they were willing to promote me. So that made me feel better the next year, right? [Laughs]

TS: So you were an instructor all the way to 2012?

LD: Yes, assistant professor in 2012. Then I went up for associate really fast after that. I can go up for full next year, I think. So it's an odd thing. I always have to explain that to the committees. Even now, this legacy of being hired in this weird position follows me. When I go up for full, I'm going to have to explain it, so they don't think that I didn't get promoted because something was wrong. We're still explaining how this goes.

TS: When does interdisciplinary studies come in for you?

LD: That has been a really big turn for me. I'd have to look up the year of that too. Sarah [R.] Robbins, who also was a huge mentor for me here, took a real interest in those of us who were instructors. I think she always felt like this is a really hard raw deal that these folks are getting. It was a great deal in its way because people weren't getting jobs, and we got one and we got tenure, but still, ten years before you get tenure is pretty ridiculous. Also she knew some of us were really interested in scholarship, but that was discouraged at first for us. Sarah is real big on helping people find a livable life. She was real big on, "How do we make your lives livable? I can't change everything about the system, but how would your life be more livable?" She knew I had this interest in gender studies because of some of the work I had done. So she asked me to teach one of the first—I think it was actually the first semester they were ever taught—one of the first Introduction to Gender Studies classes.

She and a couple of other people were trying to come up with a Gender and Women's Studies Program here. It's really crazy that a university this size didn't have a Gender and Women's Studies Program. That has to do with our community college roots, I think. In the 1960s when all these other schools that are Kennesaw's size now were getting all these programs with all the things that were going on with liberation movements, we were still just a community college. We didn't get that then. She was trying to bring that online. I started teaching Gender and Women's Studies. I loved it. That became a program, and then all these programs eventually banded together to be sort of a department [as the Cultural and Regional Studies unit]. We didn't have a chair at that point.

- TS: As I recall, Sarah was pretty much the coordinator.
- LD: Sort of de facto chair in a way. Then right after that she retired and left and got the big job in Texas.
- TS: [As the Lorraine Sherley Professor of American Literature], Texas Christian University.
- LD: Then after that, we became a full-fledged department, for a while with Dawn [L.] Kirby as chair, for a while with [Anthony M.] Tony Grooms as chair, and now Robbie Lieberman. At first I wanted to stay totally in the English Department, but still keep teaching Gender and Women's Studies because that's just how I had always been. But then I was elected to coordinate the Gender and Women's Studies Program, and the bylaws were such that you weren't allowed to be a coordinator of any of those programs unless you were half in the department. So at that point I had to have a joint appointment. I'm always glad because I wouldn't have had the nerve to leap and do that because I was comfortable in my little English zone. You get comfortable and, "Oh, I have to go to two department meetings, to go to double meetings and all these things." I didn't want to do it. But I'm so glad that I did. So glad!
- TS: It seems to be complicated for some folks too on tenure and promotion. You've got two different departments.
- LD: Yes, and luckily I think I was already tenured before I made the leap. Maybe for my promotion committee I had to have both, but by then the stakes were lower. It wasn't like tenure. That's how I ended up being joint appointed.
- TS: So when did you start your PhD program?
- LD: I did that, I think, in three and a half years. It was insane; four years maybe. It was really fast. It had to be, because I knew I needed it for tenure.
- TS: So why did you decide that you were going to Georgia State for your PhD?
- LD: There had been rumblings about this whole thing that maybe we would need a PhD. Plus, I just had really good mentors like Sarah and a couple of other people who really pushed me. They said, "Don't not do this. You're smart. You're doing all this research anyway." In that time I was already working on a book, and, they said, "You're always going to be hobbled if you don't have this credential. Don't limit yourself." [Herbert W.] Bill Rice was wonderful.
- TS: Who was the chair of the English Department by that time [after 2006].
- LD: He was the chair by that time who also I would put in my top three mentor pile. He always gave me good advice.
- TS: That top three is getting crowded.

LD: No, I'd say Sarah, Bill, and Laura, man. Those are the people who just really did so much for me here. He really pushed; Laura pushed; and it really made the decision easy because I didn't have time, teaching a 5-5 load, to drive [far]. I briefly looked at UGA [University of Georgia]. They had a program in adult learners that really fascinated me. Part of the reason I came to Kennesaw is because we had so many adult learners. That was just something I still to this day love to do. But [Athens] was just too far. I mean, there's no way, right? So Georgia State was the only option. But again, it became the right place. I'm glad I ended up there because I wanted to do Southern Studies. Tom McHaney was there [as Kenneth M. England Professor of Southern Literature]. Pearl McHaney, his wife, was there. These are people I would have wanted to study with no matter where they were, and here they were. I wanted to do [William] Faulkner studies, and what a stroke of luck that you've got Tom and Pearl right here.

TS: Why Faulkner?

LD: Why Faulkner ... I don't love Faulkner. This is my confession on tape. I have a love/hate relationship with Faulkner, but because of what I wanted to study and what I wanted to do, I needed somebody where there was a prolific amount of work. Who is more prolific than Faulkner? My dissertation ended up covering eight different novels, so I needed somebody that had that kind of breadth. Also I was always fascinated with intersections of race and gender in the South, so you are going to end up being a Faulkner scholar whether you like it or not [laughs].

TS: Sure. So you still had courses to take, I guess, in your doctoral program.

LD: Yes. It was interesting. When I was at MTSU I was a Brit Lit [British literature] person to the end. If you go back and look at my transcript, you would never think I was an Americanist. Then at the very end I took this class and learned Lillian Smith, and that changed everything.

TS: *Strange Fruit* [published 1944].

LD: Yes, I still to this day teach *Strange Fruit*. I taught *Strange Fruit* a month ago. So I was introduced to Lillian Smith and that changed everything. I did my master's thesis on Smith and [Flannery] O'Connor and [Pierre] Tielhard de Chardin. Then from there on I was an Americanist. Those were the three people. So like it or not, I always get looped back to my Georgia roots. I think I would have made my grandmother laugh, but somehow that's what always happened.

TS: It's unusual at Middle Tennessee State that you were doing Georgia writers.

LD: Yes, that is what happened. There is a guy there named Will Brantley [William O. Brantley, professor of English] who introduced me to Lillian Smith in one of my last classes. It is interesting because when I got to Georgia State I was very clear that I wanted to do this PhD in American Lit, but, yes, I did get a lot of questions like, "Your

transcript is clearly like the Victorianists.” So I had to really make up some ground, taking as many American studies classes as I could.

TS: So how many classes were you teaching here while you were taking classes at Georgia State.

LD: It was 5-5. I think maybe the last semester they switched us to 5-4, but I was almost done.

TS: So you had a very heavy teaching load, and you were taking a lot of classes at Georgia State. I gather you got married somewhere along the line.

LD: Yes, not until much later, thank goodness. There were no kids, nothing like that.

TS: When would you ever sleep?

LD: I didn't sleep a lot, but the only saving grace was that I didn't have my children yet until I finished.

TS: So your children are very young.

LD: They are very young, yes; they are four and one. My youngest just turned one. I started late. So I would teach here, and then I would get on the commuter bus right there at the KSU Center on Busbee [Drive]. I would rush over there to get on the bus and take the bus down to Georgia State to take all these classes.

TS: So you would study on your way, I guess.

LD: Well, I get motion sickness. Sadly, I couldn't even read on the bus. But you do a lot of good thinking as you're looking out the window. So, yes, I would sometimes catch the bus here. I lived in Acworth at the time, and they had a commuter stop there, so I could also get on the bus in Acworth, sometimes really early in the morning. I would catch the 6:00 or 7:00 o'clock bus with all these students for Georgia State who also lived in Acworth. I would ride on the bus with all these undergrad students. I would get off the bus and take classes. Then I would get the bus back to the lot here, teach my classes here, and then catch a ride with somebody back to my car in the commuter lot in Acworth. I was teaching a crazy load.

TS: So you were teaching mainly night classes?

LD: I taught a lot of night classes, and a lot of the 5:00 to 11:00 kind of thing. I did that a lot. Mike Tierce [Michael T. Tierce, associate English Department chair], thank God, was so helpful in helping me figure out my schedule around all my classes at Georgia State. You know, he was always the scheduling guru. Thank goodness, I didn't have a rigid person because I wouldn't have made it. He would move my schedule around, do all this

stuff. And then the other thing that started changing my life is then at that point I got to move into online teaching. That helped a lot.

TS: I noticed that you do a lot of online teaching.

LD: Yes, I do, so that helped a whole bunch. At the same time I was stupidly writing a book on a totally different topic. The book also came out in 2011. It was a mess!

TS: Is that *Teachers as Avatars: English Studies in the Digital Age* [edited with Linda Stewart (Hampton Press 2011)]?

LD: Yes. That came out in 2011, I got the PhD in 2011, and I got tenure right around there somewhere. It was a busy time. Thankfully, kids didn't come until 2013. There's a reason for that.

TS: And you got along with two hours sleep a night?

LD: Yes, yes, and now my children don't sleep, so it's good that I was trained well.

TS: How much did you sleep at night while you were doing all that?

LD: I mean, really hardly at all—maybe four hours or five hours. I don't know. It was really tough. And I would be remiss if I didn't say this; this is really important to me: Right in that time I really didn't think I was going to finish in time. I was really worried because it was going to be neck and neck with when I had to go up for tenure. I had to be finished, and I wasn't dawdling. I did that PhD reasonably fast. But it was just close because they [the Board of Regents] didn't tell KSU [we had to have PhDs] until pretty close to when I was going up for tenure. I was like, "I am not going to be able to do this if I don't take a semester off." But they don't pay you when you take a semester off. So I just was not sure how I was going to do that. Then the other problem is when you take a semester off you no longer can qualify for TAP, which is the Tuition Assistance Program here. I had gotten all my courses free at Georgia State because of this thing called TAP, the Tuition Assistance Program. But if I was not actively working, then suddenly I was not going to be able to get my courses paid for. So I applied for, thank goodness, the Clendenin Scholarship.

TS: I thought I saw something on your bio about the Clendenin Scholars Program.

LD: It saved me. It really did. To this day, every time I see [Thomas E.] Tom Clendenin I tell him thank you because I think I would have had to leave KSU. I don't know that I would have gotten tenure without it because the book wasn't out yet.

TS: What exactly did the Clendenin Scholarship pay?

LD: Some people are on the Clendenin for four year, five years even. I don't know who has been on it the longest. But they were willing to see people through a program from the

start to the finish. For me, I applied and said, "Look, I am so close. I just need one semester." So it basically paid for my living expenses and my tuition that one semester, so that I could take a semester off. It enabled me to finish. I really only had it for this really tiny amount of time, but it was a pivotal moment. They made a big difference in my life.

TS: So Kennesaw will support you in the sense that you had the Clendenin Scholarship, which the KSU Foundation is responsible for. And Mike Tierce was helpful.

LD: Yes, helping me with my schedule. And Bill Rice was like my number one cheerleader. He was like, "You're gonna finish; you're gonna make it."

TS: So those are the positives, but on the other hand, they had you teaching five classes each semester.

LD: Yes, it was no joke [laughs].

TS: So did you feel like you were being supported? Anybody teaching and going through a doctoral program must be half crazy by the finish.

LD: Yes, it was nuts. In a big institution like this you can feel really lost if you think of it just as an institution. All of us who were trapped in the system got really angry because the BOR would say one thing, and KSU would say another thing. We could never get a straight answer. We got all these meetings and a different answer every time. But if you find your people, it makes the institution become human, and then you can survive. So I think that's what I did. I just found shelter in a couple of people who really believed that I could do this, who said, "Don't cut yourself short. We see the potential in you. We don't want to see you without a doctorate being hobbled the rest of your career." So that was really good advice.

TS: George [H.] Beggs [one of KSU's original division chairs and deans] used to say that we would have severe morale problems if we did not finish our doctorates.

LD: Yes, it is true. I see people who have gotten in that position, and it is just tough, so, yes.

TS: One of our old faculty members called it the "union card."

LD: Yes, like it or not, it is. It didn't matter that I was already doing great work in the classroom. I mean, it mattered, but it was never going to trump [the lack of a PhD]. So I had to get it done.

TS: That is what is frustrating, isn't it, when you know you are doing a good job, but you still have to have the paper certification?

LD: I was super excited this year when I won the award. They recognize two finalists and the award winner. One of those finalists [Tyra Burton], I don't know if she has a doctorate

or not,¹ but I saw that she was in a senior lecturer position [in Marketing and Professional Sales]. I was so happy to see that we are not just limiting what we are thinking about quality teaching on this campus to people who are either in a tenure or tenure-track position because most of the people who are doing the teaching are not, frankly, these days. So I was really happy to see that.

TS: Certainly not for many people teaching in the general education courses.

LD: Yes, so clearly they honored the kind of teaching she was doing, and I was really happy about that.

TS: That's great. Well, your dissertation is entitled "Sensory Coding in William Faulkner's Novels: [Investigating Class, Gender, Queerness, and Race through a Non-visual Paradigm.]" How did that come about? Why that topic?

LD: Did you know Lindsey Tucker [Linda J. Tucker] in the English Department? She knew I had some Southern Studies interests. She had personally applied for one of those NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] summer institute grants. So I did that and got that. It was funny. I think that there were only two of us in that summer cohort that got [accepted] who didn't already have a PhD, me and this other guy. Again, it was just this thing like, "I really need this doctorate because all these people are doing this work, and I want to do that. I need a doctorate." So I did this summer institute, and it was great. An historian actually ran it, Don [H.] Doyle.

TS: I've heard him speak before. He is at Vanderbilt, isn't he?

LD: He was at Vanderbilt, but by that point he had moved to the University of South Carolina. That's where he is now.

TS: And that is where you went for the NEH institute, to South Carolina?

D: Yes, we were in Columbia, the hottest summer of my whole life, even hotter than Nashville. It was just hot. He was really interested in bringing together literary scholars and historians to talk about Faulkner. He felt that all these historians were doing Faulkner studies from a history perspective, and we were doing it from a literary perspective. What can we learn from each other? And that was my wheelhouse because, again, I almost was a history major. Lindsey was so excited about this. She really encouraged me to apply. So did Laura Dabundo. They wrote me some letters and stuff, and I got in, much to my surprise.

TS: You didn't get to teach that summer though, I guess.

¹ Editor's note: According to her campus website, Ms. Burton has an MS from Georgia Tech and additional post-graduate work at Georgia Tech and the University of Limerick.

- LD: I didn't. That was the one summer out of my whole entire time at Kennesaw I haven't taught [laughs]. It was the only time. I've taught every other summer. So, yes, because they gave me some money to attend.
- TS: Okay, so the workshop was primarily on Faulkner?
- LD: It was Faulkner and Southern History; that's what it was. It was great. I should email Don and tell him that this changed the trajectory of my life. I highly doubt he knows that or would even remember me.
- TS: Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" [from *Requiem for a Nun* (Random House 1951)].
- LD: Exactly, yes. So I should email Don and say that about him in my life.
- TS: Sure, he'd probably appreciate that.
- LD: I'm sure he would; he's a great guy. I doubt he'd remember me, but he was so nice. He took us all over the South. We went to Oxford and drank whisky by Faulkner's grave. He knew all these people who knew Faulkner. We would go to these podunk little places, and he'd pull out, "This is so and so who was in the third grade with Faulkner." It was really fun. He brought in all these speakers. One guy took us to all these Confederate monuments and told us the history of them. The crux of the whole thing though was he brought in this speaker who had just written a book, Mark [M.] Smith.
- TS: Oh, Mark Smith was from the University of South Carolina, wasn't he?
- LD: He was, and so they knew each other. Mark came in, and he talked to us about his book, *How Race Is Made: [Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses]* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), which is all about smell and race. I was hooked from the minute that man got ten minutes into that talk. It's funny. My friends and my family would make fun of me because I have this really acute sense of smell. I have always thought of the world in terms of my nose. I can't help it. It's funny because my four-year-old is the same way. You already see it happening. It's amazing how genetics works. For me smell has always been really important in the way I feel about people, about places, about food, about everything. And that is what his book is about, how people think they can smell race. He went through tons of archival research about smell and how for years it affected what white people believed about black people.
- TS: I guess before underarm deodorant and daily baths, people and even their clothes reeked of their smell.
- LD: So many things. You should read that book, if you haven't read it. You would like it. I know what your work is; you would like it. You have to get back to me and tell me what you think about it. Let's have coffee in six months or something. I mean, you're retired; you don't have to get homework assignments from me [laughs]. But if I were to give you

a homework assignment, that's what I would say is go read Mark Smith because he told us, "I'm going to talk to you today about smell. And after I talk to you today your world will never be the same"—he is a confident fellow—"because you will notice this everywhere. You have never noticed it before, but after you start thinking about it, you will notice it everywhere." He was like, "You can't escape it." And he was right.

I had not even started my PhD program at that point, but as soon as I started, I already knew this was what I wanted to write about. And he is a historian, not a literary person. I remember somebody raising a hand and saying, "What about Faulkner?" I think it was Don maybe. Don was saying, "Have you thought about this work in terms of Faulkner?" Mark said, "That might be interesting," and Don said, "That probably would be interesting." And I thought, "That would be *really* interesting, and I am going to write a dissertation on it."

TS: So what did you conclude?

LD: It's complicated, but Smith's work is all about how white people have these ingrained prejudices against black people, and they write about it. It's all through the historical record. It's this idea of contagion, the way that black people smell and why they smell this way and all this stuff. If you go back to the lectures Faulkner did at the University of Virginia, you'll find him talking about his nose and his sense of smell and how the sense of smell for him is this really key thing. There are some really interesting studies out now [about smell]. My brain is wired this way, and I think Faulkner's brain is wired this way. His cognition is wired to the sense of smell in odd ways. He talks about it, and he writes about it and how it had shaped his whole life. I had come across this quote when I was researching Smith and smell. I thought, "We always use optical metaphors; we use the word "viewed." But if he smelled the world this way, the way that I smell the world this way, it has to be in his fiction.

So I wanted to look through the whole fiction and see what sort of unconscious prejudices were there in terms of how Faulkner wrote about things like race, gender, and even sexuality, which I didn't think would be there, but it was—and class; class is definitely there—through the characters' noses: what they said they could smell and what they gleaned from what they said they could smell. So there is a lot of work on Faulkner where people do work on the sense of smell as a metaphor, like the short story, "An Odor of Verbena" [in *The Unvanquished* (Random House 1938)]. There is this odor of verbena that pervades this whole story. People said, "Well, verbena stands for courage; it stands for masculinity." But I didn't want to talk about what the smells stand for. I wanted to talk about who is smelling whom and how much, and what they are saying about that. That's what the dissertation is about. What you find through all of Faulkner is that women are never given the power to smell.

TS: Really?

LD: No. They are in the kitchen all the time! But they're never ever given the power to smell. You can only find out of that voluminous prose...

TS: What would Faulkner know about what women smell?

LD: He thinks he does. He never shies away from telling you what women think, so I don't think he was leaving it out because he didn't think he would know what they smelled. I think it is just that smell has a power to it. Men have all this power to smell out all these really weird things. There are all these plot-hinges in Faulkner where the plot would fall apart if people didn't know that infidelity was going on. So you've got two people who are sleeping together who are not supposed to be sleeping together, and the whole plot hinges on the fact that they've been found out.

Like in, say, *The Wild Palms* [Random House 1939], or a novel like that. They've been found out. But the way they are found out is people smell it. All these white men can smell that these people are having an affair, and it's not questioned. I looked for critical response after critical response, and nobody questions the entire plot of this novel. Everybody understands that the plot of the novel centers on the fact that the infidelity has been discovered, but nobody has remarked on the fact that nobody has stumbled upon these people in a hotel room in a risqué way.

TS: So it was discovered by smell?

LD: By smell—they could smell it; they reeked of infidelity. There's just moment after moment like that. There are all these weird assumptions. Men can smell the power of time in Faulkner.

TS: The power of time?

LD: Time, yes, they smell how time smells and how time passes and how time works. They can smell infidelity. The white men can smell other men and whether they are cowards or not.

TS: Okay, so it's white men, but black men can't and women can't?

LD: Right, exactly, and white men's noses are very powerful. They are super powerful, because they can smell whether you're black or not.

TS: That's about as racist as you can get.

LD: Oh, yes. It's really sexist, and it's gendered. It's just really interesting is what it is because there are all these weird assumptions. So then I went back through and found all these county and town ordinances about smells. There was a sort of anxiety about smell and racial mixing.

TS: What are the ordinances? Did they try to regulate smell?

LD: They did. They tried to buy all these contraptions that would make the town smell better, like air purification, and it becomes all encoded in racial purification. It's really interesting. So for me, it was a recognition that ...

TS: That's pretty depressing stuff, isn't it?

LD: It is! But it is interesting because you see it still happening today. While I was writing this dissertation at Georgia State and involved in seeing how there is all this racism and sexism, [I noted that] nobody really remarks on it. I think when he is writing about so-and-so smelling this or smelling that, they think he is just giving background information or something.

TS: Just an observer?

LD: Yes. I think this comes from [Michel] Foucault in a lot of ways [*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Random House 1975)]. We think about the optical as being connected with intelligence, right?

TS: I remember. I did look at your dissertation.

LD: Oh, you did? You are a trooper! You are quite the researcher.

TS: I was not familiar with Foucault

LD: Foucault says that modern society is being regulated by constant surveillance. And, of course, he dies before you have smart houses and smart phones. I think he has been proven right. He talks about society as being like a panopticon, where the modern day prison is the fact that everybody is looking at you all the time. There's no privacy; there's always vision. Foucault has shaped so many other scholars that we get saturated in the visual. Of any of our senses, we attribute the visual to intellect. But these other senses get talked about over and over again in so many different ways as being more like the more earthy bodily senses—like smell; it's about the body; it's gross. We smell gross things; we smell how people stink. So it's not related to the intellect. People don't realize that the things we are taking into our nose are also shaping our perceptions about race and gender. That is what really interests me. While I was writing the dissertation at Georgia State, this flyer appeared all over [the GSU] campus and caused this huge uproar. It said that you could not have smelly food in the library. You could have food, but not smelly food. And then it listed ...

TS: How did they define smelly food?

LD: They defined it along ethnic lines, for example, Indian food. It defined all these things. It was very clear that the persons who wrote it thought that their cultural food doesn't have odor, but that other people's cultural food has odor. So it was like this big uproar.

- TS: I recall when all the groups from Europe were coming into America a hundred years ago, they talked about how you go from an Italian neighborhood to an Irish neighborhood, and the smells of the food, predictably, would change as you went from one neighborhood to another.
- LD: Absolutely. And it's not that there's not truth in it. It's just that we assign these moral goods to it, like, your food is too stinky for the library; it might distract other people; but my hamburger may not. So there was this huge uproar. I'm like "Wow! Here it is. This is a perfect example of what I am trying to talk about."
- TS: Did anybody confront Georgia State?
- LD: Oh, yes, it was an uproar; it was a big deal. So history repeats itself. And right about that time when I was writing this you started getting a lot of studies about sexuality and homosexuality, where they were getting people to wear these sponge pads underneath their arms for two or three weeks at a time and not shower. Then they would put these sponge pads that obviously reeked by this point in front of other people, blindfolded, to see if they could smell somebody's sexuality or race or gender. If you look it up, you'll see tons of these studies trying to figure out if there is a biological basis to these things, and we're still trying to go back to smell. So there were all these current-day things. We think this is in the past, but it is not. So wives were able to smell their husbands. Actually, there is some truth to it, like you can smell sexuality. Straight women reported being more attracted to the smells of these pads that they didn't know if it was a gay man or a straight man, and there was a measurable difference. Isn't that interesting?
- TS: Whether someone is gay or straight by the smell?
- LD: Some of these studies were showing a little bit of a measurable difference.
- TS: Do you believe that?
- LD: I don't know because I think science is never free like we think it is of our racial and gendered prejudices and our prejudices about sexuality. So I don't know. But it just interested me that this is still going on.
- TS: It looked to me like maybe there was only one article that you've done out of the dissertation?
- LD: Yes. That showed up in the *Faulkner Journal* ["The Smeller's (Almost Always) a Feller: A Sensory Studies Approach to Examining Gender and Sexuality across Nine Faulkner Novels," *The Faulkner Journal* 28, 2 (Fall 2014)]. What has it been, five years since I did the dissertation? I had two kids in three-in-a-half years, so the scholarship slowed down considerably.
- TS: That slows you down, doesn't it? I understand. So you're still going to do some more work with that?

LD: Probably. I would like to do a book-length project on that, really, if I can ever find time and sleep to do it. I'd like to trace it across. In the dissertation I pulled in *The Help*, which is that Kathryn Stockett novel [G. P. Putnam's Sons 2009]. It is not a novel I really like, but to compare with Faulkner. Faulkner is doing all this. What if we took a modern day writer, even if she is writing about the past? Is she going to also unconsciously start layering all these weird ideas about smell that people never question, that we never seem to know that we have? And she does, big time. That whole novel is about contagion and going to the bathroom, and there is all this weird stuff about smell in it. So I would like to do that, like look at maybe four or five other southern writers and see if it is there.

TS: What about some of the African American writers?

LD: It's there, but it's different. It's white people do it more and black authors ...

TS: Alice Walker for instance.

LD: It's there. I haven't done like a line-by-line study so much. What I've looked at more is in African American writers who are writing about lynchings, so nonfiction, like in newspaper reports and things like that. What you find is that in white newspaper reports of lynchings there is a lot about smell and how you could smell the bodies burning. That is depicted as an appetizing smell and as barbecue—over and over again. It was really disturbing to talk about, but it is there. In people writing letters and things like that what you can find from black writers is that the smell is a warning to go hide. If you are a black person, you don't want to get close enough to a lynching to know that a lynching is happening; you might get lynched. So you are relying on your other senses and your networks of people. But the smell of smoke was often the first sign for African Americans to go into hiding.

TS: So you finished the dissertation in 2011. You get promoted and tenured.

LD: Somewhere around in there; it is all a blur.

TS: Why don't we talk a little bit more about your teaching?

LD: Okay, yes.

TS: You got the award in 2017. I'd like for you to talk about your philosophy of teaching. I must confess that I did look online to the ratemyprofessors.com.

LD: Oh, my! I try not to look at that stuff. I have no idea what you saw.

TS: I didn't use to look at it when I was teaching because it can be so distorted, people that are very happy with you or very angry. But I was trying to pick up some words to describe your teaching. They were saying things like “caring, passionate, fair” ...

LD: Well, that's good.

TS: "Great motivator, well organized, wants students to do well, thought provoking." You know, some nice thoughts about what goes on in your classes.

LD: That's good; I'm glad. I'm sure there was some bad there too.

TS: I think ratemyprofessors.com tends to put the bad at the very end. I didn't get that far. But it gave me some idea of what is probably going on in your classes. Plus, a lot of the evaluations were for online sections. Why don't you talk a little bit about your philosophy of teaching?

LD: Okay. It is always hard because people want that in a little blurb, and I don't know if I'm good at that. I'll just tell you what I like to do, and maybe you'll glean it out of there somewhere. I overtly set out in my life not to be a teacher. It wasn't like it just didn't occur to me. It was the one thing I said from when I was five and six years old that I would never be. I *did not* want to be a teacher.

TS: Why not?

LD: Because my entire family is made of teachers, and they all talked about how they never had any money and how it was so difficult. I would hear their war stories at home.

TS: You haven't talked about teachers in your family. Your mother was working in a hospital and your father a lineman. So where are the teachers?

LD: I grew up really almost living with my grandmother for my early formative years. My parents were like 19 and 20 when they had me. They were very involved and still are very involved in my life. Don't get me wrong. But they were working a lot. My grandmother would keep me all day, and I just wanted to stay.

TS: Is this your mother's mother?

LD: My dad's mom.

TS: And she was a teacher?

LD: She was. Her name was Jane Carter Davis. So I grew up listening to her stories. She was a hoot. It was just the two of us for a long time. I would sit and listen to her stories. She was a great storyteller. She would have never said that about herself, but she really was. She had this one sister; her name was Saralu. So Jane and Saralu were these Georgia farm girls. I grew up hearing their stories about living on the farm. Their mom was a teacher, my great grandma. It was this family lore that she in the late 1800s was teaching in this one-room schoolhouse in Georgia—right around the turn of the century.

TS: Do you know what county it was?

LD: It was Elbert County. That's where they all were. The county seat is Elberton.

TS: Elberton, that's east of Athens.

LD: Yes, granite capital of the universe.

TS: I've been over there. Corra Harris [Corra Mae White Harris, Georgia writer and journalist] came from there.

LD: Oh, I did not know there was a Corra Harris link there. I did not know that. That's interesting. That's why you should talk to historians. All I know about Elberton is I used to visit all the time as a child. I don't know if this is still true, but at the time my dad would say, "They export more tombstones than anywhere in the world"—because they have so much granite.

So Saralu and Jane grew up on this farm, and their mom, in addition to helping their dad run the farm, was a teacher. She got a teaching certificate and she progressed up to being the principal of the school. Growing up in the socioeconomic class that I was in, so many of my friend's parents had never gone to college. Most of my peers are the first people in their family to go to college. But in my family I had this line of women going back to 1900 who all had an education.

TS: Did they have college degrees?

LD: She got what was called a teaching certificate, which would have been more education than most women had. Then she was determined that her children, Jane and Saralu, were going to college. Everybody thought this was nuts. Their dad died, her husband died, and she worked the farm to put these girls through college. This is the 1930s and 1940s, so the Great Depression hits. She worked a job in town, and she worked the farm. Then she sold the farm, and the money from the farm went to pay for my grandmother to go to Georgia State College for Women [Milledgeville], with Flannery O'Connor by the way. They knew each other, and Flannery O'Connor is in my grandma's yearbook that I still have. When I started writing my thesis, I said, "Did you ever hear of somebody named Flannery O'Connor?" And she said, "Do you mean Mary?" You know, because Mary Flannery O'Connor is her name. So it is amazing.

TS: So she knew her by the name of Mary?

LD: Yes. She said, "Do you mean Mary Flannery O'Connor? I heard she wrote some books after we graduated." That's what she told me. I said, "Yes, she did. She wrote some books [laughs]."

TS: A lot of short stories.

LD: Yes, I don't think she ever really knew the extent of the fame there. It was just this woman she knew in college. She remembered seeing her peacocks and knew all this stuff

about her. So my grandma got a college degree, and then her sister got a college degree, and then her sister went on and got a master's degree. They both became teachers. So I wasn't even the first person in our family to have a graduate degree. So, yes, all these women; the men didn't really have degrees, still don't. So I grew up listening to my great-aunt Sara. My great-aunt Sara never had kids, so she was like another grandma to me.

TS: Now your father, did he go to college?

LD: One year, like a semester or something. It was not for him. He is a really smart guy. He just didn't like the classroom. But I grew up listening to them talk about teaching. So this gets back to my teaching. In my award application, I wrote about them. They talked about teaching, and how it's hard and how it's hard when you're a woman. They didn't get opportunities in some ways that other people did, but you don't give up, and it's so much fun. I don't know. They just had this joy about teaching, and they taught me all the time. I would come down here and spend summers with my aunt Sara. My parents would just put me on a plane. I was six years old, and they put me on a plane. You'd never do this now. They would put little wings on you, and I would come and spend summers with her in Tucker. She would just teach me. They were teachers in their bones; they were teachers.

TS: But you didn't want to do that?

LD: No, I thought that was this magic gift that they had because they were magic! They were magic; I still say this. I just lost my grandma last year, and they were just magic. They could make you learn anything and make you happy and excited about it.

TS: So they become the models for your teaching?

LD: Yes. I would say this. I think my teaching is about joy. If this is not passionately fun for you in my classroom, this is failure for me. [Being here] is amazing. [I tell my students], "If you are a woman, and you're a person of color, and you're the first person in your family to go to college, one hundred years ago I wouldn't have even gotten to be here; you wouldn't have gotten to be here. Look at this opportunity that we have. What are we going to do with it?"

TS: You say "person of color." Want to explain what you mean?

LD: Yes, I think I gravitate towards students—and my teaching is like this—towards students who often haven't had the same exact opportunity [as others]. A lot of my students who are of color—I'm going to use that broad term, because they identify in many different ways and seem to prefer for me to use a broad term, but a lot of the students we have here who identify as non-white are the first person in their family to go to college. Their families have been structurally kept away from opportunities that allowed them to build up wealth over the generations. This history matters. Sometimes in sitting and having conversations, not all, certainly not, but so many students, male or female, of all races

really don't have the support in their family to navigate this system. A lot of them just don't. They don't know how to apply for scholarships. It was hard enough for them to figure out applications. They didn't have a mom or dad who sat down with them and figured out how to do all that paperwork the government makes you do to get scholarships and things like that. I'm interested, too, in my adult learners.

I guess I just really gravitate towards people who are here, and they're trying, but they're structurally dispossessed in some way. And like, "How do we fix that? How can I pay attention to you in ways that maybe the system is not paying attention to you to figure out what gifts and intellect you have to give, so we don't lose you from this institution." That's so important to me in topics that I teach, so that people who maybe aren't visible in our curriculum are suddenly visible. That's just so important to me. So I think, first of all, that inclusivity and diversity: how do these things come beyond buzzwords that everybody wants to use? How do they work in a classroom? It is so important to me. Secondly, joy: "We're going to have a good time at this whether you like it or not." And humor, we laugh a lot in the classroom because I think it helps people get over fear. Then finding ways where they are responsible for their own learning. It's really hard. My classes are rigorous. We read so much!

TS: I was picking that up. I saw on your syllabus one ENGL 2110, World Literature class that read eight books.

LD: Yes, yes, and I make them read really long books. There are three- or four-hundred-page novels in those World Lit classes. So how can you get people so excited about their learning that they don't mutiny when you hand them a four-hundred-page novel? That's the crux for me.

TS: When I taught Georgia history, I always used some novels, but I don't think I used as many as you do.

LD: Whom did you teach? I'm just curious because we like a lot of the same things, I bet.

TS: Well, we read Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* [Houghton Mifflin 1966] to generate discussion about slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.

LD: Yes, fun.

TS: It wasn't exactly Georgia, but I liked to use Tony Grooms' *Bombingham* [Free Press 2001] when we were discussing civil rights.

LD: Yes, we're so lucky to have him here [at KSU].

TS: And a lot of short stories. They always had to read a Flannery O'Connor story.

LD: Yes, they should. Totally.

TS: And different novels, Terry Kay, especially his first novel, *The Year the Lights Came On* [Houghton Mifflin 1976], which was great for the rural South of the immediate post-World War II era.

LD: Oh, okay. Wow, all right. See, historians and English people—we should like each other. It does add so much to the class when you put in history or fiction and put them together. That's so cool that you did that. You were teaching that with Dede [Yow], right?

TS: Well, we started team-teaching Georgia history/Georgia literature, and she would put in a lot of literature. Then even when I was just teaching by myself I'd continue to use novels and short stories.

LD: Yes, she'd always say, "You need to meet Tom Scott."

TS: Oh, really?

LD: Yes, and I think I did somewhere along the line, but then you retired, and I never really got to know you. So my teaching philosophy is this: Students can do more than they think they can. You can hold them to extremely high rigorous standards and push them in ways that they did not know they could get there, if you do it in ways that scaffold things so that they grow in confidence a little bit by a little bit, and if you are warm and connected to them and help motivate them and understand how motivation works. That's not fluff. You go to some teaching conferences, and they're talking about, "It doesn't matter if students like you." Actually, it does. And the reason it does is because we can make direct links with really good studies that if they like you, they're happy to be there. And if they are happy to be there, they feel safe and comfortable, and then their brains can learn. It matters. It matters a lot. That doesn't mean that we need to pander to students and make them like us, but it means that they need to see in us something that makes them interested and passionate about being there.

I did this CETL [KSU Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning] workshop on Motivational Teaching and it changed everything. It was one of those faculty learning communities where you meet with a group of faculty around a topic. I signed up for this thing in my spare time, ha-ha! It was a faculty learning community on motivation, and it was great. It was. I learned so much. We looked at the NSSE, National Survey for Student Engagement, on what makes students drop out and what makes them feel engaged? It is fascinating reading. Every teacher should read this, because they actually go to 18- and 19-year-olds, and they say to them, "Why did you quit college at 18 or 19 years old?" And what they say will surprise you. They would say crazy things about our teaching. It's really interesting. They were asked, "What makes a teacher 'good' to you?" The things they'd say were not the things I thought they would say.

TS: What did they say?

LD: They say the typical things that you'd think they'd say about enthusiasm and "cared about me." It's really heavy on "cared about me." But they also talk about your clothes, which is really interesting.

TS: Was that more for women than men?

LD: No, it's not, like they talk about bright colors and whether you're neat, and whether you look prepared and dressed to be there.

TS: Well, that's something that is going away, I think, on our college campuses.

LD: I know, it is. On the flip side, though, they also talk about whether you wear clothes that look like you're approachable. So that's interesting because there are some mixed messages there, right?

TS: What do "approachable clothes" look like?

LD: I don't know if that's jeans, and you look like them. But then they also appreciate the suit and tie because it says that you cared about them enough that you dressed up to be there and that they're important. So the clothing thing is all through the NSSE, which is really interesting. And they talk about physical touch, which is really odd.

TS: Touch? Do they want to be touched?

LD: Yes! No, you have to be careful with that one.

TS: Absolutely.

LD: But, "My teacher touched my shoulder and said that I did a good job," or a physical action, not always touch, like, "She stood and held the door for me." It's these really minute things that they translated into "she cares."

TS: So women maybe can touch more than men.

LD: Probably. That's sad, but true, probably true. I don't know. I don't even remember seeing a gender component to it. But it's really weird. I might have done more [touching] than I thought I was. And the only reason I knew that is because when I moved into the online environment my teaching fell apart.

TS: So you had to relearn how to connect with students?

LD: Right, exactly. I had to learn to teach without the physical body present.

TS: I noticed discussion boards came up in some of the evaluations. How exactly did you use discussion boards? Did you give them questions to talk about?

LD: Yes, often they give each other questions.

TS: I never did online teaching, but with D2L I had students discuss certain things electronically. One of my concerns was that students would be really nasty to each other in ways that they wouldn't be when they were sitting in classrooms looking at each other.

LD: Yes. Teaching online, or using an online component, is like relearning your teaching because different things happen that you don't expect. I always say I came to online teaching kind of like C. S. Lewis, who wrote *Chronicles of Narnia*, says he came to Christianity. He came to Christianity because he wanted to disprove Christianity, like he was a skeptic. And I would say that I came to online learning [as a skeptic]. I'm one of the first people who taught online on the whole campus.

TS: So you wanted to disprove it?

LD: Yes, I thought it was a terrible idea. And I didn't feel like I had credibility to go around crusading against it unless I had done it. So I did it, and I fell in love with it. That's how I came to online teaching. I taught the first-ever literature class that was offered online on this campus. I taught the first Asian Studies class that was ever offered online.

TS: How did you get into Asian Studies?

LD: That's a long story. I'll tell you about that later. I taught the first ever Gender and Women's Studies online class that was ever offered on this campus. So you can see I was pushing.

TS: Is half your teaching online or what?

LD: Now, it's fully online. I have not been in a physical classroom in probably four years.

TS: You're kidding?

LD: No. And I think it is a big, big deal that I won the teaching award, even though that's true. I think the thing I'm the happiest about this teaching award is I feel like it's not about me. It's about this watershed moment for equality, for people respecting online teaching. Because I think six or seven years ago, if I'd applied for this award, even if my other credentials were all the same, but yet I was a fully online teacher, I don't think I would have gotten the award. But I think where some of us are chipping away so hard, trying so hard to get people to understand that you can do this and do it well, finally those attitudes are shifting and changing. My friend Linda Stewart who works at CETL [as assistant director for graduate student support]—the first thing she said to me when I won this award was, "This is a big deal for online teaching." Like she didn't say it was for me.

And I said, "I *know*," because we've talked about this for years that there is this prejudice against it. The person who won last year—I'm sure you talked to her—Nita [A.] Paris,

does quite a bit of online teaching, but not fully. It has probably been four or five years for me, and I'll go easily at a stretch years without actually being in a physical classroom. And the fact that they still gave me the award is a big deal. I'm excited about that.

TS: Well, my impression was that it's a lot more work than teaching in the classroom.

LD: It is. It's a lot of work. It's a whole lot of work. But I think I came to it at this moment when I was really burned out by teaching because I had been [in the doctoral program] at Georgia State. I had been doing so much. I came into it thinking this is going to be a terrible idea. But you know this. You have to have new challenges in teaching or else you get stale because you get complacent. And I think I was complacent. I had taught 5-5 loads, and I was just doing the same things over and over because those are the tricks that work.

TS: What's your load now?

LD: Now it's 3-3, which is a much more livable life. But yes, I just got complacent. Then when I got online, I was a disaster. Teaching has always come easily for me. It's something that I think because of my family, my grandma always said, "You're going to be a teacher." I think that's why I didn't want to be a teacher.

TS: But you can't see, smell, or have any of the senses online.

LD: Anything, right. So suddenly I thought, "Well, this is a whole different animal." I had to change completely who I was as a teacher in order to be successful because I had never had students drop out of my class. My attrition rates were really good—maybe one withdrawal or something. You go into online classrooms, and it's very typical that we lose half. That's the national standard that you'll see. And I lost more than that.

TS: Well, they're losing a lot of money if they sign up and withdraw.

LD: I know. It's a really big problem. So that's been the focus of my life, actually for five years now, is how do we fix this problem?

TS: So it's harder to motivate online?

LD: Yes. So that's where it goes back to the CETL thing.

TS: They can't see your enthusiasm.

LD: They can't. And I think that's where that CETL thing changed a lot for me. I just thought, "Oh, I'm a good teacher because I know O'Connor, and I know about this." That wasn't what they [the classroom students] were picking up on at all. They were picking up on all these cues I was giving them with my physical presence that I was excited, warm, happy to be here, fired up about this, wanted them to succeed. How do you make that translate? It's easier now because there's all this video. You can do video

in the online classroom. But when I started, we didn't have the capability to do that. So it was all text based. So how do you do that? And that's been a key. That was a key thing I was thinking about for the book that I wrote with my friend Linda [*Teachers as Avatars: English Studies in the Digital Age*, edited by Laura Davis and Linda Stewart (Hampton Press 2011)].

TS: What is Hampton Press?

LD: It has a very pedagogical focus.

TS: Hampton University?

LD: No, it's not. But they do a whole lot of teaching scholarship, like a lot of teaching oriented series and stuff like that.

TS: Why avatar? Is it like channeling the gods into what you're doing?

LD: Yes, well, we thought we were real clever using that word because nobody ever used that word at the time. This was before James Cameron's movie [*Avatar*, 2009 film]. James Cameron ruined our lives. We thought we were really clever. I had just been out to the Indian temple in Lilburn [BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, place of worship, inaugurated August 2007]. Have you been there? You should go.

TS: Oh, no, I haven't.

LD: It's amazing. You should go. More homework; I'm sorry. I keep telling you things you should do. But it's so cool. It's this huge temple, and it has all these Indian deities in it. And so, yes, they're considered avatars. These figures are the avatars of the god mate to life or whatever. So Linda and I were talking about how this is what teaching feels like in the digital age, that you aren't necessarily embodied in present in your students. So how do you project who you are into the avatar? When Blackboard and D2L and everything started, you had this weird, little teacher head shape assigned you. So when you would comment in the discussion board, this weird little shape was beside you, and that was supposed to indicate to the students that that was the teacher. It was just like a round head with a triangular body. But this was your avatar, and they called it your avatar.

I told Linda, "This is so interesting that they're using this word." The word avatar is getting taken over in digital rounds in terms of gaming and in terms of online education, when really it's this spiritual word. It comes from religion. And people who are in the gaming world don't seem to understand that it has these religious roots. So this is why we thought this word has a lot of power and needed unpacking. And then James Cameron just made it into little blue people and just took all the power right out of it because our book came out about two months after the movie. So it looked like we were just on the bandwagon when we'd been working on it for four years. But what can you

do? For a brief moment in time, though, if you searched Amazon for avatar, the movie would come up, and so would our book, which is pretty fabulous.

TS: I guess so.

LD: But how do you project who you are and the passion you have for your subject or your teaching into a digital realm? Are humanities people giving up the digital realm? Shouldn't we be there? So many of my colleagues in English at first would be like, "This online stuff is more for the math and science people. It's more for techies. We're not techies." They didn't identify themselves that way. But a computer program is a language, and it's about creating a humane world. So we have to have humanities people in these worlds. That's how online teaching happened for me. I was so bad at it that I decided I had to do it again to figure out how you do this right.

TS: So how did you figure it out?

LD: I went and took this class at Georgia State. What I found out is that the people who know how to do this are advertisers. It's Coca-Cola. The people who know how to make you have all the feels about something, but they're never really in front of you, are people who write commercials for the Super Bowl. That's who these people are. When I kept finding sites for "how do you motivate people through text or whatever," all the hits that would come up would be about marketing and advertising, which is sad, but true. So I thought, "Well, how can we take this marketing evil to use it for good? How can I make people love Flannery O'Connor as much as they love Coca-Cola? How do I do that?" It's about design.

TS: And early on you didn't want to be in marketing.

LD: I know. Then there it comes back. Your life always comes back to you. It's weird. But yes, actually I took some lessons from that. There is some really good research that shows the choice of font you use in online teaching matters a whole lot in terms of whether students will stay in the class or drop out. [The research is on] what they think it says about you, even at an unconscious level. Students will perceive fonts like *Times New Roman* as business; [it says] you're structured. But they have a list of what they consider friendly fonts: "My teacher likes me. She cares about me. She's chatting with me." Those fonts are the ones that people always hate because they look fluffy, these script looking things.

TS: I was just getting nervous because I always use *Times New Roman*.

LD: That's okay. People will think that you mean business and you care about why you're there. It's not that any of these fonts are bad. It's that I realized that you should use them effectively for rhetorical purpose. A color matters a whole lot. First of all, a huge percentage of our male students are colorblind. You should never put things in red for the online classroom, meaning "this is important; read this," because about 20 percent of your students aren't going to be able to read it, because they're not going to see it. So

these things matter. Again, it's like all these are things you don't have to think about in the classroom. So the visuals, graphics, how you choose to take a picture of yourself and what picture you choose to upload; are you behind a lectern; is the picture from far away, is it up close; are you smiling; are you holding a book—all these things send messages to your students unintentionally that you're probably not meaning to send about your approachability, about whether they're going to like you and be motivated by you.

So I went and took a class on visual rhetoric and graphic design at Georgia State because I was woefully inadequate in these things. I learned a whole lot about how to format a page so that it makes people want to read it. Because I'm an English person, my pages look like that: text, single-spaced. Now that's all changed in my online classroom. There is color, there is motion, there is good design, and there is accessible design. It matters a lot. The last time I checked, my withdrawal rates are much better than our regular online withdrawal rates in my department, and they are actually better than our face-to-face withdrawal rates. I've come that far. It is what matters. Again, it goes back to that lady [Ayne Cantrell] who taught me how to teach: "every detail matters." Well it does.

TS: And it probably says something too that some faculty members probably think, "If a lot drop out, there are fewer papers to grade." But you think the opposite. You want them to stay.

LD: I do. This is why we do what we do, right?

TS: Yes, exactly.

LD: I want them to be there. I want them to know me, and I want them to know each other. It's so funny. They think they do. If you were to read my evaluations, they are all about, "I felt like I knew her. I felt like she knew me. I felt like I knew my classmates better than I do in my face-to-face classes." When I hear things like that, I know I've won because people stay places they feel welcomed and connected. That is why they are not leaving because everything in the course is designed so that they know I'm a real person and that I think they are real people and that they think their classmates are real people.

It is all designed to maximize the problem you were talking about. It's a problem at first, but it's also an opportunity. When they were mean to each other and when they will say things that they wouldn't normally say, if you can learn how to harness that, that's great. Especially if you're talking about race and gender and sexuality, these are topics that people don't want to offend people around. They don't want to say the wrong thing because they're worried about being perceived as a racist or sexist or homophobic. If you can channel that correctly in the online environment, you can start to really get under the surface and have real conversation. That's what I love about it.

TS: I would think too that shy people would be more likely to say what they think online.

LD: Yes, they are. That's the thing. My friend Stacy [K.] Keltner [professor and coordinator of Gender and Women's Studies] started having kids and didn't want to teach online, but she quickly came to realize that having online classes was going to be the only way she saw her kids. So she said, "Tell me how to do this. I know you do this. I know you say it's good." She has put this everywhere. I was reading her promotion folder for full professor, and it is in her narrative. I'm like, "How did I say this thing that had such meaning for you, but I don't even remember saying it?" I have no memory of it, but she says that she gave me a litany of all the things she thought she was going to lose in the online classroom, and I said, "Everything you think you're going to lose, you're actually going to gain more of in the online classroom." And that's true, whether I said it or not. It is true because now there is so much more depth. In a face-to-face classroom when you're meeting two days a week, probably 30 percent of the people say something. They see each other twice a week. In my online classroom we talk every single day. So we've gone from exposure to me two days a week, to seven. Poor kids! Poor students!

TS: And poor you having to read all their postings.

LD: I don't know. It's pretty great. We can touch base with each other any time we want. We do, and they do. They talk, talk, talk, talk, and also every single person has to participate. So I hear every single person's voice. And yes, the depth that we can get to with this literature! When I'm back in the face-to-face classroom now, honestly, it feels so surface and shallow to me because I can't get there.

TS: How much time do you spend on campus when you're doing full time online teaching?

LD: It depends on my committee assignments that year. This year I've been here a lot because I'm on T&P [the tenure and promotion committee], and I'm on a search committee. In the summer I don't come at all. I teach two classes in the summer, but really I'm not here that much. It just depends. We're not invisible though. The committee work is so intense here. You know how it is. You're not going to be able to just disappear.

TS: Bill Hill [G. William Hill IV], when he was director of CETL, always wanted us to ask about master teachers. How do you define a master teacher?

LD: Master teacher? Probably as somebody where students will walk away from that class and be so happy they took it because they don't think they even worked hard, but fifteen years down the line, they'll still have the books, and they'll still be thinking about it and talking about that class and still be seeing a way that it connected to an everyday moment in their lives. To me that's a master teacher. Somebody learns something, and they didn't even know they learned it, and they didn't even know they were still going to know it fifteen years from now.

TS: That's a good definition. And you were talking about your impact on Stacy Keltner. It sounds like you're doing mentoring of other teachers?

- LD: Actually, I think she's a master teacher. I think she probably mentors me, versus the other way around, but I think I've had well over twenty teachers by this point who have taken my online class. This is the great thing about online classes—not officially, but I can add anybody to my online classes.
- TS: Just to learn how to do it?
- LD: Yes, because in face-to-face we go to see each other's teaching, and we should do that more often, but we can't go everyday. But in online they can. A colleague is in my class right now.
- TS: That's great.
- LD: She's been in there all semester. I do think that that's important to teach other teachers that online doesn't have to be the end of the world. I'm not a big proponent that everybody should have to do it if you don't want to do it. If you don't think it goes to your strengths, well, don't do it. But if something comes up in your life, like children, or caring for aging parents, or an illness, or something that means you can't be in a classroom, but you still want to teach, I can help you do this in a way that will honor the teacher you are. You can bring your strengths into this environment. I promise I can teach you how to do that and you will still feel connected to your students.
- TS: Is there a gender breakdown on who does online teaching? Are women more likely to do it than men?
- LD: I don't know. That is a fascinating question. I don't know, and I want to know. I don't know. I'm going to have to find out. That's my homework.
- TS: Well, just from the motives you've listed, like children or elderly parents.
- LD: Yes, although it's shifting, I think.
- TS: Of course, it's stereotypical that only women do these things, isn't it?
- LD: It's changing, but, no, it's true. I don't know why my male colleagues ... I think one of the really accomplished early adopters and really good online teacher in my department is David [M.] Johnson [professor of English, recipient of KSU's distinguished teaching award in 2007 and distinguished professional service award in 2013]. I don't know what his reasons for teaching online are. He has young children. I don't know why he does that. I'd have to ask him.
- TS: He's done a lot with English as a second language.
- LD: Yes, and he is developing all those linguistic classes online, which I think must be hard.

TS: I think actually it might be easier for English as a second language online than having to figure out people's accents.

LD: Yes. For that reason I get a lot of those students. I'll tell you the other thing that is interesting is that in my gender studies classes I get more men online. I want more men who are willing to take those classes.

TS: They'd be embarrassed to be in the class where people can see them?

LD: Yes, they feel more comfortable taking it online. It is not a lot, but it is a noticeable bump. One semester I had an Intro to Gender Studies class where I had a whole bunch of young men who took that class. I don't get a whole bunch of men who usually take that class, but they did so because they were all enlisted. They all got deployed. They had to have an online class, and mine was the only one they could take.

TS: I was wondering, how many of the students that take the online courses are actually students here and how many of them are in Australia or in the military or whatever?

LD: I can't swear to you this is accurate because I've never really counted. I'm just giving you an off-the-cuff gut instinct. I'd say about 20 percent of them are not in the State of Georgia.

TS: Do they have to pay out-of-state tuition?

LD: I don't know. I really don't know. I don't think so anymore.² I think there's a way they can be fully online and waive some of those other fees. A lot of them are military. I think the most interesting class I ever taught in my whole life was that Intro to Gender and Women's Studies class because about half of them were young men in the military, and half of them were women who were staying home with their kids, who were 30 something. So that's an interesting dynamic to talk about gender, race and class. But it was great! That is again, these are spaces that teaching online opens up opportunities you might not have.

TS: I saw one reference to an activism project in GWST 2000, Intro to Gender and Women's Studies. What is an activism project?

LD: Everybody who teaches that class is required to do that. It's a required component of the class. It's because as a field gender and women's studies didn't start as an academic unit like, say, English. It started from women's movements and activism movements, and then kind of made it's way onto campus as a recognized academic discipline. We want to honor those roots and keep a component of activism or community engagement,

² Editor's note: In the FY 2018 academic year e-tuition for online courses at KSU was the same regardless of residency status.

whatever you want to call it, some type of service or engagement with the community. These words are all loaded. They all mean different things to different people.

TS: It sounds very political.

LD: Yes, and I'm not going to shy away from that. It doesn't bother me at all because I think it was a political movement—gender and women's studies—to start with; from the get go it was a political movement. We want to teach students that it was and is a political movement. Students do what we call an activism project. They can do that in a variety of ways depending on their passion. They have to get out in the community and do something. I used to make them volunteer with an organization that was overtly doing something around the topics of gender and women's studies. I've recently stopped that because at the end I was always asking them, "What did you learn in this class that you think tied into the work you're doing?" But that's too easy. It's so easy to say, "Well, we learned about gender; they're doing gender work." Instead I prefer to let them follow their passions. I say, "Volunteer for an organization that means something to you."

We start with the question of what makes you angry. "What makes you angry in this world? What would you change if you could?" Then, "What is an organization where people are similarly angry or frustrated around the same thing who are doing work to change it?" That's how we get them to choosing. Now they can choose whatever. If euthanasia makes them angry or pets, then they do a lot about dog rescue, things you wouldn't overtly think have anything to do with gender. That is okay with me. Then what I ask them now is not how does this organization's work tie into this class, but if this organization is not focused on gender, based on what you've learned in this class about gender issues, how would this organization be able to do its job and its mission better if it also thought about gender? That's a better assignment. The students have come up with really good answers and really intriguing thoughts. That's what they do.

TS: It sounds like you've done a fair amount of scholarship of teaching and learning. I saw one publication: [Christy Price, Lynn Boettler, and Laura Davis], "A Seat at the Table for EVERYONE: Exercises in Valuing Diversity" [in *Getting Culture: Incorporating Diversity across the Curriculum*, edited by Regan A. R. Gurung and Loreto R. Prieto (Stylus Publishing 2009)]. Do you want to talk about that?

LD: Yes, that has been awhile. I've got a new one coming up that I could talk about better. I did "A Seat at the Table" with a couple of colleagues who were both interested in diversity in the classroom and basically helping teachers who might not have an interest in diversity or have an interest, but don't have a background in how to do it and do it well. We did a series of lectures and invited workshops to other campuses on how to do this. Then we wrote a chapter on what are some easy exercises no matter what your disciplinary focus that you can do to help bridge some of the gaps in the classroom so that you can get to a deeper level in the subject matter that you're teaching. Not just diversity for diversity's sake, but diversity so that your disciplinary learning becomes better in the classroom.

TS: You said you have one about to come out.

LD: Yes, with a colleague, Beth Giddens [Elizabeth J. Giddens, professor of English and Interdisciplinary Studies]. She wrote the festschrift for Betty Siegel [Elizabeth Giddens, editor, *Wintering into Wisdom: A Festschrift for Betty Lentz Siegel* (Kennesaw State University Press 2007)] when she retired. Beth and I team taught a class together like you and Dede did. That was the first time I ever team taught a class. It has its own interesting challenges too. That was the last time I was in the face-to-face classroom. She wanted to do that face to face. We taught a class called ecofeminism, which is about bringing in students who have passions about ecology and sustainability issues, which is what Beth teaches. That is what she is really into. She didn't feel comfortable teaching a gender class, and I didn't feel comfortable teaching a sustainability class. We came together. She taught the sustainability focus, but also how those things intersect with gender.

The vast majority—I think over 80 percent—of people who are food insecure because of ecological disasters or similar issues are women and children. There are very overt ties between the two fields, so we taught this class together. It was really interesting. What does it mean if a corporation comes in and takes your water source, and you have to walk five more miles to get your water? What does that mean differently for women than men? There was suddenly a rise of rapes. Rape went through the roof because women were walking five more miles alone to get to the water. All these things are connected. What does it mean that our EPA bases workplace safety standards in terms of chemical exposure on somebody your size, a male, versus me, who is five feet tall? I'm going to get poisoned faster than you are. All of these things matter in ways that people don't think about. That's what the class is about. We just wrote a chapter on how to team-teach a class raising ecological sustainability and gender awareness. That was fun to write. Some of our students wrote with us. That was really fun. I've never done that before.

TS: It sounds like you have stayed busy on scholarship both in your discipline of English and also in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

LD: Yes, I like to write about teaching more than anything else probably.

TS: You have been here fifteen years now.

LD: That's crazy. How did I get that old?

TS: Let's talk about the intellectual climate at KSU and how KSU has changed in the fifteen years you've been here.

LD: Yes, the thing I am saddest that we have lost is an identity as a target school for adult learners. I think you will have seen that from how long you've been here. The thing that I'm happiest that we have gained is a vast shift in our racial makeup here. Where I have been able to find my adult learners is by moving online because they're there. They are

still here; they're just online. What has happened is that in my classes we now can finally talk about race and gender intersections, and it is so great that the whole classroom is not white. Those are the things that have changed that make me happy.

TS: I did an interview this summer with Arlethia Perry-Johnson. I went back to check on enrollment for the last decade, and just about all our growth has been diverse growth, African Americans and Hispanics and Asians rather than non-Hispanic whites.³

LD: Yes, you can see it just walking around. I think that has changed. I think the intellectual shift I've seen—and I don't know that my colleagues have experienced this yet, but I do—is the integration [consolidation] with Southern Polytechnic State University [SPSU]. It has really changed the intellectual climate in my classroom. The reason I say it has for me, but not some of my colleagues, is, for the most part, those students are still taking classes on their campus [the Marietta campus]. We are still having the same students taking classes here [on the Kennesaw campus]. When you are an online teacher, fully online, that goes out the window. I probably had like fifteen or sixteen engineering students in my World Lit class last semester. That's great! They bring a whole other different way of thinking.

TS: I did an interview recently with Christina [R.] Scherrer [professor of Systems and Industrial Engineering] on the Marietta campus. She talked about the number of students riding BOB [the Big Owl Buses] up here to the Kennesaw campus.

LD: That's good; so it is starting to happen.

TS: But I'm sure you are right.

LD: They find the online teachers faster. Even that first semester where they were still even using the Southern Poly name, I think, all of a sudden I was like, "I've never had an architecture student before. I've never had a chemical engineering student before. This is great because it is totally different." I start my World Lit class actually with a scientist, Tielhard de Chardin [1881-1955]. Most people haven't heard of him, but I thought you might because the title of one of Flannery O'Connor's books⁴ is taken from Tielhard de Chardin. He was her favorite writer. He was Lillian Smith's favorite writer, which is very interesting because they're very different writers. But they both loved him, and he's a scientist. I actually start my World Lit class with a scientist, and suddenly I'm getting all these Southern Poly students because, I guess, word has gotten around. They are afraid to take a literature class, the same way I would be afraid to take a math class. A lot of them are afraid because ...

TS: Of stereotypes?

³ Editor's note: According to the Semester Enrollment Reports of the Board of Regents, between fall 2007 and fall 2017 KSU and the pre-consolidation Southern Polytechnic State University saw an increase of 8,972 minority students but only 893 non-Hispanic white students.

⁴ Flannery O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (Farrar Straus Giroux 1965).

- LD: Yes, stereotypes. “Oh, this is going to be a humanities class.” And they’re like, “This teacher starts with a scientist.” We start with science, so I think they’ve been more comfortable in my class. He is a paleontologist and a Catholic priest. Interesting [combination].
- TS: Well, that explains Flannery O’Connor. I don’t know how Lillian Smith got into it.
- LD: Because he writes a lot about racial integration, in ways that are about paleontology. He has this famous quote that Smith loved: “For an organism to survive, it takes the combined growth of all the branches.” And she really talked about that in terms of segregation in the south. *Strange Fruit* has a scene that’s based on Teilhard de Chardin.
- TS: Great!
- LD: The political climate [at KSU]—I’m so glad to see that we are shifting in terms of our racial composition here. And I do miss the adult learners.
- TS: Yes, I think they’re still here, but have been overwhelmed [numerically] by the traditional-aged students.
- LD: Yes, they are here, but they are really big in the online classroom. I get a lot.
- TS: What about when you go up for promotion? Are we becoming more research oriented [in terms of the requirements for promotion]? Have you sensed that, or is that not a problem?
- LD: It really does upset me, in some ways, not because we’re getting more research-focused. I’m into my own research, too. But because there are subtle ways where we are suddenly changing from the Betty Siegel era, where I think there really was a passion about teaching. That’s not faked from her. She really had a passion for that, and it trickled down to the whole college. When I go up for full professor, I will have to get three letters from outside people reviewing my scholarship. That’s fine with me. A lot of people kicked about that, but that’s fine. But people are arguing about that in terms of rigor: “We’re not a R1 institution. Why do we have to get these letters?” Whatever. I don’t mind that. I don’t mind us pushing rigor in our scholarship. But what does it say that we’re not also asking for two letters evaluating people’s teaching? It says that we value research and creative activity above the teaching. And that’s what I don’t want to lose. That’s what’s upsetting to me is the insidious, subtle ways that we are now not making teaching as important. The good news is the new guidelines say that in order to get promoted or tenured, you have to be noteworthy in two out of the three areas, and meeting expectations in the third area. And I was really afraid that that meant everybody would make themselves noteworthy, and scholarship ...
- TS: And teaching could be the third?

LD: I was afraid it was going to be like that. There was some pushback, and now you have to be noteworthy in teaching, and then you pick from the other two areas. I'm like, "Yes!" That is sending a message that teaching still matters here.

TS: I remember when there would be big debates about, "What does notable or noteworthy mean?"

LD: It is still all very slippery and ambiguous. But it's scary to me that we have, as a president, somebody who has not been a teacher. I don't like that. I was opposed to that simply because it didn't follow protocol, not because of him as a person. It's not a personal problem. But we should follow protocol, and there should have been more input. So that was problematic to me. But if I'm looking at a candidate, him or anybody else, the fact that somebody hasn't been a teacher really bothers me because I think that you need that experience to keep teaching as a value on this university's campus. But we are where we are.

TS: Well, what have we not talked about that you think should be in this interview?

LD: I don't know. We've probably talked about way too much. I'm glad that I took a chance and came to this institution. I never would have thought that I would be here this long.

TS: So what has kept you here?

LD: Well, I'm married to somebody who has tenure here. We're not going anywhere.

TS: Oh, whom are you married to, if you don't mind saying?

LD: No. We'll claim each other. I don't know that you would know her. Her name is Lynn Boettler. You asked me a bit ago.

TS: Oh, sorry.

LD: No, it's okay. You didn't use a male pronoun, which is interesting. She has been here about fifteen years, too [joined the KSU faculty in 2004]. And you said "you got married somewhere along the line," but it wasn't legal for me to get married, so I actually only got married a year ago because it wasn't legal for us to get married, even though we've been together for twelve years.

TS: So how did the children come about?

LD: We used a donor, and we have two little kids that I carried, and they're one and four.

TS: Now Lynn has done a lot of work with CETL hasn't she?

LD: She has. She is a big teaching-and-learning person. We met at CETL actually. So we're not going anywhere because we both have tenure here. There's that, but I think also it

has been fascinating to watch Kennesaw change, and I want to see where it goes. I want to be a person who shapes where it goes because I'm afraid of places it could go, but I'm also excited about ways that it can go. I hope we don't lose our identity as a teaching institution. It's just really important.

TS: I've always been concerned about that too.

LD: Yes, because we could so easily lose that, and it's such a rich part of the heritage here. There are so many good teachers here. I feel so stupid getting this award because how can we say that one person is the outstanding teacher in a place like this? You know?

TS: All you can say is you're one of the good teachers. There are others that are certainly worthy, but ...

LD: There are so many, yes. I have this picture framed from the day I got the award, and it's me and two other people who are really dear friends of mine who have also gotten this award. When I look at it, I think the thing about it is not that I'm so proud of my teaching, but the fact that as a unit we've helped each other be better teachers. I've been so lucky that these brilliant teachers have taken me under their wing because they've both been teaching longer than I have. Nita Paris is in that picture, and so is [Kimberly S.] Kim Loomis. We're in this picture together, and it's like, "Oh, these people made me such a better person, first of all, but second of all a better teacher." And wow; to get to stand in the ranks with them meant something to me, not the award, because those are the teachers I always wanted to grow up to be. And like, "Oh, I've maybe gotten there a little bit, just to be in the same ranks with some of these people."

TS: I have interviews with both of them.

LD: Yes, there are just so many brilliant teachers here. But I do think coming here as a twenty-five-year-old to Cobb County and being a gay person has definitely shaped the students I fight for in my classes and shaped my empathy. It is a different path. I wouldn't say that it's the same, but my empathy for students, for anybody who's been dispossessed in any way, because of identity factors that they can't change, whether that's race, or gender, or whatever. You'll laugh. I can't believe I'm about to say this in the archives, but I'm a lesbian, vegetarian, daughter of Southern Baptist deer hunters. That will give you a sense of humor because you have to have a sense of humor to survive that context, right? I am very weird in my cultural context. The people I grew up with didn't have a college degree. I never thought I would have a doctorate. I never thought I'd be married to a woman. I never thought that I would be a vegetarian. I come from Southern Baptist, small town roots, and I've always felt like an odd duck. And so when I see other odd ducks in my classroom, I care so much about making sure they're successful here.

TS: That's great.

LD: So I don't know. I guess that's everything. Is there anything else you want to ask about or need to know?

TS: I think I pretty well went through my list of questions. There are some other things we could talk about, but I think we've covered the important things.

LD: Okay, good. I don't mean to imply I don't care about all my students. I do. But I do think some struggle in ways that they could get lost and be invisible, and when we can make them visible ...

TS: Those are the ones that need the support the most.

LD: Yes, then they stay.

TS: Thank you very much.

INDEX

Acworth, Georgia, 13

Angelou, Maya, 3

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Lilburn Georgia, 31

Beggs, George H., 15

Board of Regents, University System of Georgia, 8-9, 14-15

Boettler, Lynn, 37, 41

Brantley, William O., "Will," 12

Burton, Tyra, 15-16

Cameron, James, *Avatar* film, 31-32

Cantrell, Ayne, 5-6, 33

Carter, Saralu, 23-25

Chardin, Pierre Tielhard de, 12, 39-40

Clendenin, Thomas E., 14

Columbia, South Carolina, 16

Dabundo, Laura S., 7-8, 12, 16

Daniell, Beth, 7

Davis, Jane Carter, 2, 23-25, 30

Davis, Laura R.

Undergraduate education, 1-4

Parents, 1-2, 4, 24-25, 42

Grandmother, 2, 23-25, 30

Great-grandmother, 2, 23-24

New faculty orientation at KSU, 2

Decision to major in English, 3

Mentors, 3, 7-8, 10-11, 34-35, 42

Odd jobs while working in Nashville, 4-5

Middle school coach and decision to become a teacher, 4-5

Master's program and thesis at MTSU, 4-6, 12

Teaching composition classes at MTSU and KSU, 5, 7-8

Year in Oregon writing thesis, 6

Job application to KSU, 6-7, 12

Teaching World Literature at KSU, 8, 26, 39-40

Teaching load, 8, 12-13, 15, 30

PhD program and dissertation at Georgia State, 9, 11-14, 16-22, 30

Tenure and promotion, 9-10, 14, 40-41

Involvement with Interdisciplinary Studies

Introduction to Gender Studies, 10-11, 29, 36-37

Coordinator of Gender and Women's Studies Program, 11

Joint appointment in English and Interdisciplinary Studies, 11

Asian studies online course, 29

Marriage and children, 13-14, 41-42

Online teaching, 14, 23, 28-36
Teachers as Avatars: English Studies in the Digital Age, 14, 31-32
 Clendenin Scholars recipient, 14-15
 Recipient of Outstanding Teaching Award, 15-16, 22, 25, 29, 42
 Summer NEH grant on Faulkner, 16-18
 Publications from dissertation, 21-22
 Philosophy and observations about teaching, 22-34, 42-43
 Participation in CETL workshops, 27-28, 30
 Professional service, 34
 Definition of master teachers, 34-35
 Scholarship of teaching and learning, 37-38
 Reasons for staying at KSU, 41-42
 Doyle, Don H., 16-18

 Elberton, Elbert County, Georgia, 24

 Faulkner, William, 12, 16-20
 Foucault, Michel, 20

 Georgia State College for Women, Milledgeville, 24
 Georgia State University, 11-13, 20-21, 30, 32-33
 Giddens, Elizabeth J., 38
 Grooms, Tony M., 11, 26
 Guglielmo, Letizia M., 7

 Hampton Press, 14, 31
 Harper, M. Todd, 7
 Harris, Corra Mae White, 24
 Hill, G. William IV, 34

 Johansson, Patricia, 3
 Johnson, David M., 35

 Kay, Terry, 27
 Keltner, Stacy K., 34
 Kennesaw State University
 New faculty orientation, 2
 Dr. Betty L. Siegel Student Recreation & Activities Center, 2
 English Department, 6-8, 11, 32-34
 Tenure track instructorships, 6-10, 14
 Senior lecturer positions, 9
 Interdisciplinary Studies Department
 Gender and Women's Studies Program, 10-11, 29, 36-37
 Asian studies, 29
 Cultural and Regional Studies Unit, 10-11
 KSU Center, 13

Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), 14
Clendenin Scholarships, 14-15
KSU Foundation, 15
First-generation college students, 25-26
Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning (CETL), 27-30, 34, 41
Intellectual climate, 38-42
Adult learners (non-traditional students), 38-40
Increased diversity, 38-40
Consolidation with Southern Polytechnic State University, 39-40
Kirby, Dawn L., 11

Lewis, C. S., 29
Lieberman, Robbie, 11
Loomis, Kimberly S., 42

Maine, Barry, 3
McHaney, Pearl, 12
McHaney, Tom, 12
Mecklenburg County (Charlotte), North Carolina, 2
Middle Tennessee State University, 4-6, 12

Nashville, Tennessee, 4, 16
National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), 16-17
National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE), 27-28

O'Connor, Mary Flannery, 12, 24, 26, 30, 32, 39-40
Oxford, Mississippi, 17

Paris, Nita A., 29-30, 42
Perry-Johnson, Arlethia, 39
Price, Christy, 37
Pynchon, Thomas R. Jr., 3

Rice, Herbert W. "Bill," 11-12, 15
Robbins, Sarah R., 10-12

Scherrer, Christina R., 39
Siegel, Betty Lentz, 1-2, 38, 40
Siegel, Joel, 2
Smith, Lillian, 12, 39-40
Smith, Mark M., 17-18
Stewart, Linda, 14, 29-31
Stockett, Kathryn, 22

Texas Christian University, 11
Tierce, Michael T. "Mike," 13, 15

Tucker, Lindsey (Linda J.), 16

University of Georgia, 12

University of South Carolina, 16

University of Virginia, 18

Vanderbilt University, 16

Wake Forest University, 1-4

Walker, Margaret, 26

Yow, Dede, 7, 27, 38