

# COMMentary

January/February 2012 | Volume 2 | Issue 5

## Investigating Vernacular Memorials: Outside the Classroom

By Glen Stamp  
Department Chair

During the Fall 2011 semester, three Communication Studies' students were able to participate in an incredible educational opportunity outside of their home department. Seniors Clarissa Bowers, Rebekah Fehrman, and Taylor Walt were part of a Virginia Ball Center for Critical Inquiry project under the direction of Dr. Deborah Mix, an Associate Professor in the Department of English. The Virginia Ball Center allows faculty to design a project that "immerses" students in learning outside of the traditional classroom. For Clarissa, Rebekah, and Taylor, their experience was an investigation of "vernacular memorials" in Delaware County. Each received the equivalent of 5 classes (15 credits) during the course of the semester.

According to Clarissa, the goal of this project was to "share the stories and significance of vernacular memorials within the confines of Delaware County. These stories gave outsiders an in-depth view at the lives of those lost in the county through physical manifestations of memorial culture including road side crosses, memorial landmarks, graffiti, and numerous other expressive outlets." During the semester, the students investigated how people in Delaware County remembered their loved ones who had died. This resulted in a public exhibition at the end of the semester and the creation of a book detailing their findings.



Submitted by Ball State University  
**KITSELMAN HOUSE** — The Virginia B. Ball Center was built in 1927 for Muncie industrialist E. Faye Kitzelman. It was then donated to Ball State in 1956.

For Rebekah, Taylor, and Clarissa, the VBC was the culmination of their academic experience at Ball State. Each is a senior Communication Studies major set to graduate in Spring 2012. And each expressed how important it was to participate in an immersive learning project before they graduated. Clarissa, for example, indicated that "since my junior year I had been actively pursuing a VBC project, as I knew the incredible impact that the experience had on so many of my peers." Taylor was recommended for the project by Dr. Kristen McCauliff while Rebekah became interested when Dr. Mix came to Dr. Beth Messner's Persuasion class to talk about the opportunity. Once they found out about the project, each of them had to interview with Dr. Mix as immersive project participation can be very

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## "Pomp and Circumstance": Sarah DeWitt, Commencement Coordinator

By Beth Messner  
Associate Professor



Like hundreds of other Ball State University seniors, Sarah DeWitt (B '11) excitedly walked across the stage at the May 2011 commencement, shook hands with the Dean, and received her diploma cover. In an ironic twist, only days later, she would be organizing graduation ceremonies and ordering diploma covers for other students.

As Ball State University's new Commencement Coordinator, she was eager to begin her new job. However, she also knew that she had very big shoes to fill. She was hired to replace the recently retired Sharon Woodruff, a fixture of Ball State commencement activities for decades.

When Sarah was a student at Muncie Central High School, she envisioned a career as a school counselor or teacher, not a Commencement Coordinator. In fact, she began studying Psychology at Ball State in preparation for work as a counselor. However, like many students, she shifted her focus along the path toward gradua-

Submitted Photo  
**DEWITT** — Sarah DeWitt (B'11) is the new Commencement Coordinator at Ball State University.

**TANYA THOMPSON BENNETT (B'99; M'01)** - is a Senior Account Executive at Marriott International and lives in Baton Rouge, LA.

**AARON ESTABROOK (M'11)** - is a Business Analyst at Qorvis Communications, one of the nation's largest independent communications firms, and lives in Washington, DC.

**MAX NORRIS (M'10)** - is the Assistant Women's Tennis Coach at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and lives in Chapel Hill, NC.

**MATZINE SÁNCHEZ-GUTIÉRREZ (B'08)** - is a Sales Consultant at ProTrans International, a global logistics and supply chain management provider, headquartered in Indianapolis. She also is highly involved with the Indianapolis Hispanic community and has started a dining and traveling club called [IndyMagnifico.blogspot.com](http://IndyMagnifico.blogspot.com) to allow Indianapolis professionals to network.

**2ND LIEUTENANT ANDREW SKAROS (B'10)** - has returned safely from his deployment to Iraq. While in Iraq, he served as the Strength Manager and night shift officer in charge for the personnel office. He had physical accountability of over 1,000 Soldiers spread between 30 + daily. He also was the manager for the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation committee while deployed.

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If you are an alumnus of the Department of Communication Studies and would like to contribute information about yourself for a future issue of *COMMENTARY*, please contact Glen Stamp at: [gstamp@bsu.edu](mailto:gstamp@bsu.edu) or Beth Messner at: [bmessner@bsu.edu](mailto:bmessner@bsu.edu).

Please note the year you graduated and whether you received a Bachelor's or Master's degree, and any information about current employment, involvement in the community, awards/honors, or other life events that you wish to share.

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#### **Editor's Note**

Alumni notes are based on information received from the Alumni Association and individual e-mails. The Department of Communication Studies apologizes for any omissions or changes that have occurred since receiving this information.

## New Beginnings for a New Year

By Robin Phelps  
Graduate Student

The year 2012 brings a presidential election, unseasonably warm weather and a Super Bowl in Indianapolis. But for the graduate students in the master's Communication Studies program, of more concern are the new jobs, births, engagements and marriages the year brings.

For Charles Jones, second-year graduate student from Bronx, NY, and his new wife Marika McGhee, from Milwaukee, WI, 2012 marks the start of a new family with a marriage on Feb. 1 and the birth of son Charles Evans Jones, III on Dec. 23, 2011. Jones said he is happy about being a father.

"I'm thrilled, I'm overjoyed about Little Charlie," Jones said. "I finally have a buddy I can watch ESPN with. I'm just excited about what he'll be able to learn from me."

Also celebrating a marriage in 2012 is Marie Roth, who met her husband Timothy Roth in Peoria, IL. Marie said the nice weather in St. Louis, MO, made a beautiful January wedding.

"It was good for the week when we were together," Roth said. "Now we will be living five and a half hours apart for the next ten weeks. It's not the most ideal situation, but life has its problems."

Though several hours will separate Roth from her husband this year, she said she looks forward to cooking and visiting local parks once together with Timothy.

Another wedding may also be on the horizon as Mike Catlos, first-year Communication Studies graduate student from Youngstown, OH, said his August engagement to Beckee Milton, from Boardman, OH, helps him balance graduate school.

"I'm growing up, I'm making decisions. ... This falls in line with all the other pieces of the next big step of our life," Catlos said. "It's nice having that reliable source of compassion to come home to."

"Grad school's definitely way more intense than I expected, but it's definitely what I want to do."

While some graduate students transition to married life and parenthood, Sheri Niekamp, second-year graduate student from Coldwater, OH, adjusts to her new position as Executive Director of Muncie Animal Rescue Fund. After working at ARF for two years, Niekamp said she is looking forward to making a difference.

"With this job, I have the opportunity to give back to this community and make a positive impact," Niekamp said.

Like many of the graduate students facing new changes, Niekamp said her position involves much juggling and balancing, but she also said, "The department has been so supportive throughout this transition though and I truly appreciate that!"

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## Graduate Student "First Day Scholars" Fund Update

By Glen Stamp  
Department Chair

The October 2011 issue of COMMENTARY presented a story on the Graduate Student "First Day Scholar" Fund established by recent MA graduates James Atkins, Christine Thompson, and Kelley Stedman. The purpose of this new fund is to provide scholarships to incoming graduate students in the Department of Communication Studies. As James Atkins noted at the time, "upon graduating and accepting our first job, alumni will donate our first day's salary back to the department as a "Thank You" for guiding us in the pursuit of our Master's degree." James, Christine, and Kelley made the initial contributions to get the fund started, and other contributions have begun to arrive from graduate student alumni. As a result, we are intending on awarding our first scholarship this Spring to an incoming graduate student beginning the program in Fall 2012.

If you are an alumnus of the graduate program, and feel that your MA degree has been helpful to you in your professional life, please consider contributing to this fund. The donations are tax deductible.

Contributions can be made by mailing your check to the:  
*Communication Studies "First Day Scholars Fund - 08315"*  
*Office of University Development*  
*Alumni Center 249*

*Ball State University*  
*Muncie, IN 47306*

Or, go to the Ball State University [website](#) to donate online. Be sure to select:

*The College of Communication, Information, and Media in the first drop down box. Then the Department of Communication Studies in the second drop down box. Finally, write in Communication Studies "First Day Scholars Fund - 08315" in the space provided.*

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## COMM Club -- Seeking Assistance from Alumni!

By Beth Messner  
Associate Professor

COMM Club is planning its bi-annual Alumni Conference for Sat., March 24, 2012. This event is designed to help undergraduate Communication Studies majors network with alumni so that they can learn about the careers available to them as communication professionals. However, to successfully carry out its mission, COMM Club needs the help of our alumni!

COMM Club is seeking approximately 20 alumni who are willing to share their career stories with undergraduate majors. Alumni will be asked to discuss how they

became interested in their chosen career paths; what experiences prepared them for that career; and the joys, challenges, and pitfalls associated with their careers.

The conference is scheduled from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm in the David Letterman Communication and Media Building. Registration begins at 9:30 in the Letterman Lobby. Lunch, afternoon refreshments, and tours of the Letterman Building will be provided. Interested alumni are asked to contact Devanny Kuhn, President of COMM Club at [dkuhn@bsu.edu](mailto:dkuhn@bsu.edu) as soon as possible.

## SPEECH TEAM | tournament results

By Mary Moore  
Instructor and Director of Individual Events

The BSU speech team kicked off 2012 with a 2nd place team finish. The Cardinals traveled to Oxford, Ohio to compete at a swing tournament hosted on Miami University's campus.

Five students advanced to the final round at the first tournament held on January 14th. Sunday, Marshall University hosted a tournament on the Miami campus. Day 2 was an even more successful day for Ball State University. Seven students placed in a total of 14 events, bringing home a 2nd place finish for the team.

### EVENT:

■ Contact Mary Moore at [mkmoore@bsu.edu](mailto:mkmoore@bsu.edu) for more information on the IE Team.

### DAY 1: MIAMI UNIVERSITY

**Matt Marshall:** 6th place Informative Speaking

**Bree Nelson:** 5th place Persuasive Speaking

**Berkley Conner:** 4th place Persuasive Speaking

**Huy Pham:** 5th place After Dinner Speaking

**Lauren Chapman:** 6th place Extemporaneous Speaking

### DAY 2: MARSHALL UNIVERSITY

**Andrew Neylon:** 6th place Duo Interpretation, 1st place Impromptu Speaking, 1st place Poetry Interpretation, & 1st place Quadrathon

**Bree Nelson:** 2nd place Poetry Interpretation & 5th place Persuasive Speaking

**Huy Pham:** 6th Duo Interpretation & 6th place Poetry Interpretation

**Kate Shaffer:** 6th place Rhetorical Criticism

**Lauren Chapman:** 2nd place Impromptu Speaking & 6th place Extemporaneous Speaking

**Kathryn Overn:** 6th place Informative Speaking

**Berkley Connor:** 4th place Persuasive Speaking & 4th place Prose Interpretation

# GRADUATE STUDENT GAME NIGHT



## MEMORIALS | continued from page 1

competitive. All three of them pointed to their academic background as helpful in convincing Dr. Mix to bring them aboard. Taylor noted, “it helped to have a communication background. Another thing that I think stood out to Professor Mix was empathy. I feel that I can connect with people and make them feel comfortable enough to speak with us, even if it was about a difficult situation.”

Once the semester began, the classroom was the Kitselman Center, where the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry is housed. Rebekah noted that “during the first part of the semester we all worked as a team to really uncover the definition of a vernacular memorial. We spent a lot of time reading and researching about vernacular memorials.” Once the initial research was done, the class broke into teams. Taylor was a part of the group working on the book, which involved learning design programs, and figuring out how to fit all the pictures, articles, and everything else into the book. Taylor noted, “it was an incredibly unique experience, considering none of us had worked with design before!” Rebekah was part of the group working on the “Bodies” section of the project, which involved “working with the section that dealt with tattoos as vernacular memorials.” Clarissa worked on the book’s introduction, which pertained to “the history of Delaware County and the basics of vernacular culture.”

All three enjoyed collaborating with

other students on a multi-dimensional project. This was also one of the most challenging aspects of the class. As Rebekah noted “probably the biggest struggle of the semester was compromise! We all had our own ideas and dreams for this project, especially the book, and we had to learn to give and take. I think that was one of the biggest lessons I learned that I wouldn’t have learned within the four walls of a classroom. We learned to work together as a group, listen to each other’s ideas, and come to a common ground.”

One of the most rewarding, though challenging, parts of the experience was talking to families who had lost a loved one. Rebekah, Taylor, and Clarissa all felt their communication background was very helpful as they interviewed people about such a sensitive topic. Each noted how important it was to provide a comfortable atmosphere to the survivors so they could talk freely about their experiences. For Rebekah, “I loved meeting the family members that we interviewed, and I worked really hard to portray their story lovingly and respectfully. I wanted them to have something that they could keep forever, to help tell the incredible story of their loved ones that are no longer with them. Each story I heard was unique and incredible.”

As the semester came to a close, the group worked on finishing the book and putting together a showcase to display their work. Along with members of the VBC, Ball State faculty and students,

many of the family members interviewed attended this final event. The three of them were very proud of this final part of the project and found their communication background was again helpful. According to Taylor, “we interviewed family members about their lost loved ones and had to effectively communicate their story into our book. We also had to present all of our information at the end of the semester during our showcase, which utilized our public speaking skills.”

With the semester complete, Taylor, Clarissa, and Rebekah all felt the VBC experience had been one of the best experiences of their time at Ball State. For Clarissa, “this program was everything that I hoped it would be. I learned so much about the topic and even more about myself. I think it provides a great experience for personal and professional growth that goes unmatched by traditional coursework.” For Rebekah, “I believe that immersive learning has been one of the most worthwhile parts of my time at Ball State. In the classroom they teach us how to do and say the right things, but in immersive learning environments you actually do what you have been taught for so long.” And for Taylor, “this endeavor was extremely worthwhile! I loved it, even when I was hating it. You learn so much about yourself and about how you interact with others. I would recommend this and any Virginia Ball Center project to another student. It was an experience that I will take with me for a long time.”

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## DEWITT | continued from page 1

tion. Her study of psychology eventually generated her interest in studying the communication process. At the urging of a friend who was a Communication Studies major, she eventually declared a major in Organizational Communication.

While Sarah’s responsibilities often are much different from those of a school counselor, she does see some similarities in positions. Both involve working with students. Both involve celebrating students’ achievements or helping them address difficulties. Perhaps the most af-

firming moments for Sarah are when she is able to successfully guide students and parents through the complexities of the commencement process and congratulate them on their big accomplishment. But sometimes her job becomes more difficult and she has to address students and parents who are unhappy about a variety of issues, such as misspelled names in programs or missing diplomas.

Sarah’s training for her position in Student Affairs was fueled by some of her professional experiences as a Ball State

student. For three years she worked as a Student Administrative Assistant in the Office of Business Affairs. In addition to honing her office and organizational skills, she also regularly interacted with visitors and helped address their questions. Through her work in the Administration Building, she became acquainted with Ms. Stephanie Arrington, the Assistant to the President. This led Sarah to apply for an internship to the Office of the President. Her internship responsibilities included assisting with the planning,

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## FEBRUARY

SATURDAY | 18

**DEBATE:** NEDA at U. of Dayton

THURSDAY | 16

**Grants for Graduate Students: Identifying Sources**

LIBRARY, BL 225, 3:00-5:00 P.M.

SATURDAY | 25

**DEBATE:** Public Forum Nationals at Butler University

WEDNESDAY | 29

**David Letterman Distinguished Professional Lecture and Workshop Series: JENNINGS BRYANT**

*"Why'd I Just Watch That? Lessons from Entertainment Theory"*

PRUIS HALL, 7:30 P.M.

## MARCH

SUNDAY | 4-11

**Spring Break**

FRIDAY/SATURDAY | 9-10

**DEBATE:** NEDA Nationals at St. Peters College

TUESDAY | 20

**David Letterman Distinguished Professional Lecture and Workshop Series: BRAD LAUTENBACK**

*"Applied Storytelling: Lessons from the Road between New Media and Old"*

PRUIS HALL, 7:30 P.M.

SATURDAY | 24

**COMM Club Alumni Conference**

DAVID LETTERMAN BUILDING, Lobby  
10:00 A.M.-2:00 P.M.

TUESDAY | 27

**17th Annual Student Symposium**

L.A. PITTENGER STUDENT CENTER, 2nd Floor  
Poster Session: 1:30-4:30 P.M.  
Presentation of Awards: 4:30-5:00 P.M.

WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY | 28-31

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## COMMENTARY

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COMMENTARY is published monthly for the faculty, students and alumni of the Ball State University Department of Communication Studies. Any comments or suggestions should be directed to: [bsucommstudies@gmail.com](mailto:bsucommstudies@gmail.com)

**DEWITT** | continued from page 5

coordination, and execution of a variety of presidential events.

Based on her enjoyment of these experiences, Sarah discovered just how much she wanted to continue working on a university campus after graduation. Fortunately, Sarah's experience in event planning, combined with her degree in Organizational Communication, provided her with the credentials needed to successfully apply for the vacant Commencement Coordinator position.

As the Commencement Coordinator, Sarah is responsible for planning, directing, and executing three university graduation ceremonies each year, including both the main commencement ceremonies and individual college ceremonies. This is an enormous task given the number of people, facilities, and processes involved. She does everything from coordinating procedures with the President's Office and various Deans' Offices, to securing locations and equipment, to updating student data, to finding personnel to assist at ceremonies, to proofing names in the program and mailing diplomas. She also is quite busy in the month prior to commencement answering questions from students and their families.

Needless to say, Sarah's organizational and communication skills are crucial to her success. She has to be meticulously organized to manage all of the information and processes that comprise these complicated events. She also has come to greatly appreciate the importance of networking. There are hundreds of staff and faculty involved in commencement events. As

a newcomer to the job, one of her most important tasks is to learn who she needs to work with to coordinate various dimensions of the ceremony and to begin building relationships with those people.

Sarah also recognizes another important challenge facing her, one that at least in part stems from assuming the position of a revered member of the Ball State staff. She has to work hard to be seen as credible. As both a newcomer to the position and a recent graduate herself, she doesn't have the years of experience of her predecessor. She is literally "learning as she goes" when planning and executing complicated, highly public, high pressure events. Acquiring experience, demonstrating competency, and developing good relationships with key individuals are all important to creating the credible persona needed to succeed in her new position.

Despite the pressure she faces, Sarah loves her work as Commencement Coordinator and encourages others Communication Studies students to consider a career in Student Affairs. She believes it is an exciting career option for those who are passionate about working with students. Communication Studies majors already possess many of the skills needed to pursue this path including skills in public speaking, interviewing, and relationship building and maintenance. She also encourages students to hone those skills outside the classroom by seeking volunteer experiences and on-campus work associated with student affairs (e.g., Resident Assistant, Freshman Orientation Leader).



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