Greetings from the Department Chair

How long has it been since you were on campus? Join us this fall for two top-notch literary events—poet Dana Gioia reads on October 31 and Native American poet Ofelia Zepeda reads on November 13 to honor the SDSU Common Experience theme "Water" and Native American Heritage Month.

While you’re here, stop by the Department office, say hello, and let us know what you’ve been up to. This newsletter shares accomplishments from our talented students, alumni, and faculty, who are taking literature into the community in powerful and transformative ways. Their efforts are possible because of the support SDSU receives from its alumni and community members like you. Thank you.

Joanna Brooks
Chair and Professor

Events

Reading by Poet and former Chair of the NEA, Dana Gioia

Thursday, October 31, 3:30 p.m. in the Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center.

Dana Gioia is one of the most renowned voices in contemporary American poetry. After earning an MBA from Stanford and working as a marketing executive at General Foods, Gioia began a career dedicated to poetry. A celebrated essayist, educator, critic, editor, and librettist, Gioia served as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts from 2003-2009 and launched several exciting initiatives, including The Big Read, and Operation Homecoming, which provided writing workshops to U.S. soldiers and their families.

This event is also supported by the Hugh C. Hyde Writers Endowment, the IRA Fund, and the MFA Program in Creative Writing. Accommodations provided by the Bahia Resort Hotel.

Reading by Poet Ofelia Zepeda (Tohono O’odham) for Native American Heritage Month

Wednesday, November 13, 7 p.m. in Love Library 430.

Literature has the power to change the way we think about the environment. Research shows that when literature is woven into public exhibits on conservation, understanding of the importance of conservation is boosted by 48%! In November, distinguished Native American poet Ofelia Zepeda will share with us the power of poetry in shaping the way we appreciate water. Zepeda is a member of the Tohono O’odham nation, whose homelands are the arid deserts of southern Arizona. Supported by the departments of English and Comparative Literature, American Indian Studies, Anthropology, and Undergraduate Studies.

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SDSU Creative Writers Offer "Miraculous" Workshop for Local Refugee Youth

This fall, faculty and students from our MFA Creative Writing program offered a community writing workshop at San Diego’s Sudanese Youth Center. We received the following letter from Center Director Carolina Mbali:

I am profoundly humbled and moved by the transformation that I saw in our kids today. What you accomplished was nothing short of miraculous. I have never seen so many kids at an event. They do not usually come. Also, I was pleased with the number of girls and young women who came because unfortunately, in their culture most of the opportunities are given to the boys and the girls are expected to stay in the home cooking and cleaning. But these young women have lived here now, and they see what their lives can become. They want more for themselves.

Refugee youth usually do not let outsiders in. They are afraid to trust people due to the trauma they have experienced and continue to experience. I have never seen them open up to anyone the way I saw them open up to you and your staff. With you they became alive, engaged and transformed. Art heals and art empowers, and that is what you did so beautifully today by creating a safe place for our youth to be who they truly are. They don’t have many opportunities to fully be and to express themselves and to stand in the power of their own light.

One of the parents on the way home, upon hearing his child describe difficult feelings she was having, through the poem she had read, reflected on the tough time she has had. And hearing her voice this for the first time had a tremendous impact on him.

Some of the youth had shared with me how scary it was for them to stand up and read their poetry. I reminded them how much courage it took for them to conquer their fears, and they beamed with pride at their accomplishment. One of the young women who had written a brilliant poem said that going into this she was skeptical because she didn't like poetry and didn't think she was good at it. Now, she says she loves poetry and believes that she is good at it.

I want all of you to know, especially your brilliant grad students, what a difference they made in the lives of these kids.

Warmest Regards,
Carolina Mbali

"What you accomplished was nothing short of miraculous. I have never seen so many kids at an event."
SDSU English alum Jessica Graham (BA, 2004) was named one of San Diego Unified School District’s Teachers of the Year for 2013. Jessica teaches English at Kearney Mesa High School.

What were most important things you learned from your SDSU English major?

I learned what good teaching looked like. Great instructors exposed me to writers outside of the traditional canon. This is so important because Kearny High is made up of a diverse student body and I believe it’s key for my instruction to reflect the culture of the kids I’m working with.

Did you have a favorite faculty member

and or favorite class while at SDSU?

Victoria Featherstone was one of the best instructors I had. I took as many courses with her as I could, including Native American literature and creative writing.

Do you have a favorite book or author?

I’d have to say Ceremony, by Leslie Marmon Silko. I read that in one of Victoria Featherstone’s classes. My favorite book to teach is probably Things Fall Apart, by Chinua Achebe. I also love teaching The Kite Runner, by Khaled Hosseini.

What is one of the most important things you try to teach your high school students now?

I was a first generation college student. SDSU opened up a world of opportunities for me. I try to give my students the support they need to go for their degree: to let them know that no matter what their circumstances are in life, they can follow their dreams.

One of my students was a Gates Millennium Scholarship recipient. She faced a number of significant challenges that would make even the toughest adult want to give up, but she overcame every single obstacle and now she’s an engineering major at SDSU. It makes me proud to have helped many students to remain in San Diego and attend SDSU.

Pitt and Virginia Warner Honored for Generosity to SDSU

In September, the Department renamed its suite in honor of Pitt Warner and his late wife Virginia, an SDSU English alum. Thanks to the Warners’ generosity, the Department has created an annual award to honor faculty who produce outstanding innovations in research, teaching, or program development.

After immigrating to the United States from Canada, Pitt enrolled at SDSU as a returning student, completing his college education after working in local industry. During his career as an elementary school teacher, Pitt shared his love for literature with thousands of San Diego public school students.

He is also a gifted photographer of outdoor California, and his work is now proudly displayed in offices throughout the College of Arts and Letters at SDSU. And he has a long career as a jazz percussionist and a photographer of jazz artists. His generosity is much appreciated.

Department Chair Joanna Brooks and Pitt Warner
Harold Jaffe's futurist novel *Othello Blues*, published in a limited edition in 1996, has been revised and expanded and will be published by the Journal of Experimental Fiction Books in December 2013. His 1983 novel *Dos Indios* was translated into French by the French publisher 13e Note and is scheduled for publication in Fall 2014.


June Cummins has been selected to write introductions to the soon-to-be-re-released Sydney Taylor children's books series *The All of a Kind Family*, a wonderful and enduringly popular set of young adult novels about a Jewish-American family, soon to be released by Lizzie Skurnick books.

Michael Borgstrom will lead with Associate Vice President for Faculty Affairs Edith Benkov SDSU's new LGBTQ Research Consortium. He has received a Teaching Innovation Award from the Department for developing a new General Education course in LGBT literature and has an article forthcoming in the leading edge journal *Pedagogy* about the intellectual challenge of teaching this class.

Congratulations to children's literature faculty and graduate students for founding the new on-line children's literature journal *Unjournal*.

Ilya Kaminsky has been nominated for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, one of the most important prizes in the field of world literature. His book *Deaf Republic* is forthcoming.

Jennifer Minniti-Shippey's poetry, *Earth's Horses and Boys* was published in a chapbook by Finishing Line Press. Professor Minniti-Shippey has also grown ENGL 576 into a seminar in practical publishing, with graduates going on to internships with Harper-Collins, IDW Publishing, and the NY Summer Writers Institute. We are proud to offer this professional apprenticeship to our students.