

The many layers of Ned Stuckey-French

by Ana Renee Rodriguez

Originally published in Florida State University's English Department's newsletter, **Scroll, Scribe & Screen**, written and produced by English students. Also appeared on the FSView and Florida Flambeau website.

A portrait of Ned Stuckey-French, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair and glasses, smiling warmly. He is wearing a blue and yellow checkered button-down shirt and has his arms crossed. A watch is visible on his left wrist. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green foliage and sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating a bokeh effect.

The many layers of Ned Stuckey-French

*Professor's unique experiences and lessons learned
along the way reflect in his teachings*

He is a different kind of man; a man who, at first glance, seems like an ordinary gentleman with graying hair, dressed casually and holding a few books. Sit down with him, however, and it quickly becomes evident that there is a story behind the gray hair—a unique perspective on life that peeks through those glasses and reveals that those books hold his own stories and those of his friends.

He is Assistant Professor Ned Stuckey-French.

In his classroom, Stuckey-French holds nothing back. He is open about his life, his opinions, his own writing—and he expects the same from his students. His path to FSU has had as many twists and turns as the stories he teaches.

Growing up in Indiana, Ned French dreamed of becoming president. A teenager in the 1960s, his formative years were set amidst a number of political movements that instilled in him a passion to be actively involved. Events such as the deaths in 1968 of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, for whom he had campaigned during his senior year in high school, drove him to pursue a career in politics at Harvard University. But as he began his studies, French had a

sudden change of heart and enrolled, instead, as an English major so that he could immerse himself in what he truly enjoyed.

"I thought being a government major would be like reading Plato's *Republic* and John Locke and Montesquieu and studying political theory," he says. "I found out it was a lot more like systems analysis and flow charts, and it just wasn't that interesting to me. I decided to do the other thing that I really liked to do, which was become an English major."

Upon graduating from Harvard and beginning his master's degree at Brown University, however, French was struck with another realization, one that would change his life entirely.

"It was the time of the women's movement, time of the civil rights movement, time of the students movement, time of the anti-war movement, time of the gay rights movement—all those things were happening, and it seemed like the real interesting political work was being done outside of standard or traditional party politics," he recalls. "I felt like [Brown] was not where the interesting things in the world were happening at the moment. It just seemed like there were more important things to be doing than

reading Chaucer."

After leaving Brown, French got a job as a janitor to try to organize a union at Massachusetts General Hospital, a then-unorganized industry, in addition to working with other community organizations. Then, in need of a change after 10 years at the hospital, French decided to go back to school to get certified to teach high school. Thus, he

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made the transition from Boston back to northern Indiana, where he had grown up.

There, he would meet Elizabeth Stuckey and begin taking the path that led him to where he is today.

Having recently left her job as a social worker, gone through a divorce and survived cancer, Elizabeth Stuckey was also in need of a



In the summer of 1976, Ned Stuckey-French (left) spent some time on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington. (Photo/Ned Stuckey-French)

change in her life. Though Stuckey and French had grown up in the same town, there was an eight year age gap between them, and they had never met—until one fateful night at a party. Shortly thereafter, the two married.

Elizabeth Stuckey-French began working on her M.A. in writing at Purdue University while Ned Stuckey-French taught high school for four years. Together, they then decided to continue their graduate work at the University of Iowa, known for its prestigious creative writing program, where she obtained her M.F.A. and he received his Ph.D.

By this time, they were raising two daughters

and decided to move to New York, where they both earned jobs as assistant professors at St. Lawrence University. At the end of that school year, both received several job offers at different universities, but they chose Florida State University because it provided the best package for the two of them.

Looking back on his life, Stuckey-French says that meeting Elizabeth was one of the most significant moments that led him to where he is today.

"Doing that together made the turn back to English more sure for me," Stuckey-French says. "We could support each other along the way—you

get a lot of rejections when you send things out, graduate school is long and hard [...], and then you get out there to apply for a job, and in the job market it takes two to three years to get one. Being with Elizabeth and seeing how much she loved writing, I was able to share that with her. We're each other's first readers for each other's writing."

An instructor at first, Stuckey-French taught an average of four classes per semester before earning a spot on the tenure track at FSU.

Early in his career at Florida State, Stuckey-French played a major role in developing the relatively new editing, writing and media (EWM) track.

"There was interest amongst some of my colleagues, especially in composition and rhetoric, for us to try to update the English program so that it was ready for new media digitization because writing for the Internet and writing for these new kinds of outlets was going to require a new set of skills," Stuckey-French says.

The department already had a certificate program in publishing and editing, and then it hired Professor Gary Taylor, who helped develop the History of Text Technology program, which received a large amount of support from the university from the beginning.

"We now had faculty who could teach courses from Gutenberg to Google—the history of publishing and magazines, publishing serialized novels, history of printing," Stuckey-French says. "It was a process that really started probably, in a way you could say, six to eight years ago."

Today, the EWM track is only three years old, but with help from dedicated professors such as Stuckey-French, it is thriving—having attracted more than 700 students as of February 2012.

Because we live in a digital age, starting a program such as EWM was practically inevitable, according to Stuckey-French.

"It's the air we breathe," says Stuckey-French,

smiling. "The change is here—there's no going back. We have to write that way. We have to find out how art is going to be constructed, built and created in those new kinds of media."

Aside from helping develop the EWM track, Stuckey-French has also written essays relating to our changing times. In Spring 2011, he presented his essay, "My Name Is Ned and I'm an Addict," at the Status Update: The Personal Essay in the Age of Facebook panel discussion at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs.

"I told my personal story of how I came to spend as much time as I do on Facebook, which I know is way too much time," Stuckey-French says with a laugh. "I've met a lot of essayists that I wouldn't have gotten to know otherwise. When my new book came out, "The American Essay in the American Century," I set up a Facebook page for it, and I met a lot of people who were interested in that book and interested in the same things that I'm interested in."

Facebook and the digital world have inspired him to do other things as well, such as create a digital archive of personal essays titled *Essays in America*. The focus of the archive is to view essays in the original rhetorical context in which they appeared.

By making it digital, Stuckey-French is thus allowing teachers and students to use it.

Students rave about how Stuckey-French blends his scholarly knowledge of the personal essay with his knowledge of history, politics and writing.

"I love the way Ned wove his interesting personal history into his lectures," says EWM student Renee Jacques, "and the way he was friends with some of the authors whose works we read. For example, he knows Scott Russell Sanders and Jo Ann Beard personally, so he could help us understand what prompted them to write the works they did."

Students also appreciate how approachable he is and that he encourages them to seek out their professors during office hours.

"Ned is the kind of professor who challenges his students, forces them out of their comfort zone,"

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says former student Rebecca Rodriguez. "He knows if you are hiding something. 'There's something else there,' he'd say. 'Face it.' During one of our meetings in his office, he saw past my flowery language and helped me confront my own insecurities; talking with him helped me become a more honest writer. Looking back on my undergrad career, I view him as the professor who propelled me forward, inspiring me to truly value the beauty and rawness of writing."

EWM graduate Emily Hudson, who works for the communications office of the FSU College of Education, also has praise for Stuckey-French.

"He sets the bar high to allow students to grow as writers/editors and produce quality techniques and style in their writing," Hudson says. "His classroom is entertaining and inviting, which makes learning exciting and desirable. Every aspect of writing and editing I learned from him is still with me and is applied to my current job. I'm fortunate to have taken his class."

With years of classroom experience behind him, Stuckey-French has found that teaching is an invaluable, rewarding experience.

"Henry Adams said 'A teacher affects eternity,'" Stuckey-French says. "I don't think we think about it that way. Teachers—it's like Rodney Dangerfield said, they 'can't get no respect.' You know, if you can't do, teach. If you can't teach, teach Phys. Ed., and I find that joke offensive. I think most everybody, if they're really honest, will be able to tell you a story about how the reason they came to do what they have done with their life, whatever it might be [...], that somebody mentored them. You're building the future. That's why it's rewarding."

Undergraduate English major Emily Ostermeyer appreciates Stuckey-French's devotion to teaching.

"Ned is one of the greatest professors I've had at FSU," Ostermeyer says. "His passion for his subject is contagious and inspiring. He truly cares about his students, too. He takes the time to know them and help them any way he can in their academic goals.

After taking one class with him, I was convinced I wanted to pursue a writing career, and it is in large part because of him. I approached him to be my thesis director for my honors thesis project, and he was more than willing to do so and has been incredibly encouraging."

As for what he'd like to pass on to students, especially those about to embark on the next phase of their lives following graduation, Stuckey-French says everything depends on students pursuing their passion. Only then, he says, can they be truly successful.

"I think that success and accomplishment—and by that I don't mean how much money you're making, but how fulfilled you feel—comes not from talent or inspiration or luck," says Stuckey-French. "Those are all factors, but it's about finding focus and finding what you really enjoy doing and making sure you do it. If you like to do it, you will do it. You'll find a way to do it and you'll find time for it."

Examining the life of Ned Stuckey-French proves he has certainly had an inclination toward pursuing what makes him happy. Rather than graduating from Harvard as a government major or setting out to make as much money as possible, Stuckey-French chose to pursue teaching and writing. He is proof incarnate that education comes not only from the classroom but from life itself.

