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Preserving Pieces of Catalan Literary and Cultural History

As an archival language researcher, Dr. Donna Rogers has a talent for working with historical texts and relating those stories discovered within. Dr. Rogers, Brescia’s current Academic Dean, is a historical linguist who, for most of her career, has immersed herself in the literature, language, and cultural history of Catalonia, a distinct region of Spain. Her research in this area accelerated in the spring of 2013 when she and her colleague Dr. Kenneth Brown, a Professor of Spanish at the University of Calgary, were awarded a SSHRC Insight Grant for their proposal entitled, “Conserving and disseminating modern-era Catalan-language manuscript cultural texts in the Hispanic Society of America.” The grant will allow them to travel to library archives housed at the Hispanic Society of American Literature in New York City where they can edit, transcribe, and digitally document 36 Catalan manuscripts.

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From the Schoolyard to the Corner Store: Exploring the Geography of Nutrition

Every day, people in communities across Canada interact with their physical environment in some way. They might use public transit to get to work, walk or bus to school, or drive to a grocery store for routine food shopping. But what do we know about the relationship between the built environment and our nutritional health? Dr. Colleen O’Connor, an Assistant Professor in the Division of Food and Nutritional Sciences at Brescia, set out to examine this relationship in more detail. As a co-investigator in a large study conducted by researchers at Western University, O’Connor focused on the nutritional behaviours of school children and what barriers might exist in their foodscapes to making healthy choices. “Given that childhood obesity is a growing public health concern, we wanted to look at how accessible healthy foods are to children and what the barriers might be,” O’Connor explains. Her research is one component of a larger study, jointly funded by the Heart and Stroke Foundation and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, entitled: “Identifying causal effects of the built environment on physical activity, diet and obesity among children,” led by principal investigator Dr. Jason Gilliland (Associate Professor, Geography, Western University).

Gilliland and his interdisciplinary team tracked the activity patterns of school children for two weeks using a personal Global Positioning System (GPS), accelerometers, diaries, and other tools to investigate how children use their neighbourhood environments and how that use affects obesity rates, levels of physical activity, and access to healthy and unhealthy foods. Gilliland and his team completed the final phase of their study this past fall.

O’Connor and her graduate students in Foods and Nutrition used qualitative research methods such as surveys and focus groups to gather data on the nutritional behaviours of a sample of school children in Grades 6 and 7. They initially investigated how the children’s physical surroundings and access to junk food played a role in their eating behaviours and nutritional choices. “Location and proximity of certain types of food outlets can be a significant factor in the quality of a child’s diet and overall health,” says O’Connor. In addition to interviewing the school children on their nutritional choices and patterns, O’Connor and her students investigated the effects of children’s daily commute between home and school (mode and duration) and parental food rules. O’Connor believes that the final results will help inform the public about the nutritional barriers people may encounter in their built environment. O’Connor and her students plan to further explore the disadvantages families might experience when they try to access healthy foods. She envisions the research will offer opportunities to strengthen health policy and inform dietary practice so communities can find a healthier path forward.

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Brescia faculty member explores the effects of therapeutic riding

Dr. Anne Barnfield studies the effects of therapeutic horseback riding, she volunteers with SARI, one of the region’s therapeutic riding centres, and she is an avid horsewoman herself. This active involvement makes her passionate about the research that she does as a professor of psychology at Brescia and as a mentor to the Brescia students who work alongside her.

For the past three years Barnfield and her students have been partnering with SARI to study the outcomes of participation in therapeutic riding (TR) for children, especially those with disabilities, both during their regular summer riding lessons and through their attendance at SARI summer camps. Dr. Barnfield explains, “For our first two projects, which we ran for undergraduates, we collected data from parent and child questionnaires, from researcher observation checklists, and through interviews with the parents of children who attended summer camp. The pre- and post-camp surveys showed that children, through riding horses, made observable gains in positive identity, social skills, physical skills, and positive values, especially in the summer camp sessions. We believe, therefore, that TR is beneficial to children of all ages. While our research is currently done exclusively at SARI, we are poised to extend our study to other parts of Canada. In fact, 20 other TR centres extending from Ontario to British Columbia, and even as far away as Bermuda, have expressed interest in being involved.”

As the researchers point out, “Our studies have found that therapeutic riding enabled children to try new activities, learn new skills, and improve these skills. It provides therapy, rehabilitation, and cognitive, psychological, and physical development for the children. TR is truly a unique therapy that provides skills for children with special needs that can be transferred into their everyday lives.”

Stuart Royal Forest administration shifts as priorities change

Dr. Sara Morrison, a full-time professor of history at Brescia, teaches courses on topics ranging from modern Europe to Queen Elizabeth I. Her passion, however, lies in a relatively new discipline in an area that didn’t exist when she first began her education – environmental history. Her research stems from an interest she has held since high school: what makes the English royal forests so important? Why were they the cause of so much political, economic, and social tension? This interest led Dr. Morrison to begin examining the royal forests and the forest law that governed them, to determine what exactly these laws mandated.

Currently writing a book entitled The Stuart Royal Forests: An Environmental History for the Royal Historical Society in England, Dr. Morrison focuses her research on royal forests during the Stuart period of the 17th century. Dr. Morrison takes a very integrative, multidisciplinary approach to her research. She considers not only the environmental, but also the political, social, and economic implications surrounding the royal forests and forest law.

Dr. Morrison’s work examines how the monarchy’s administration and use of the royal forests changed across the span of the Stuart age, which is characterized by high tensions between the monarchy and parliament, as well as the Anglo-Dutch wars. Splitting the era into three specific sections, Dr. Morrison examines how priority for land use shifts from recreation, for example hunting under King James I, to revenue generation — by selling off areas of the land under King Charles I — and to resource management in order to build up England’s first naval forces beginning under Cromwell. She also explores the many implications each of these shifts had on the environment and on society.

This research has informed a number of other research projects for Dr. Morrison. At her last conference (American Society for Environmental History), she presented a paper about pre-modern forestry and the differences between the practices of natural regeneration versus plantation. Her next project will be an examination of the Sherwood Forest and the reasons it became such a crucial forest during naval expansion of the late 1660s, when it lay over a hundred miles from the nearest dockyard.

By combining her passion and interest in history, environmental history, historical geography, and England’s royal forests, Dr. Morrison continues to develop, publish, and present work not only at Brescia, but also in the broader community of environmental historians. She is devoted to teaching as well and delights in the successes of her students. Two of her former students, Christine McMannus and Jessica Warzeka, made presentations at a recent Western University Conference, “From Here to There.” Christine presented conclusions from her Senior History thesis on Charles I and the importance of zoos and circuses in the popular culture of the Victorian period.
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Andrew Carey and Sarah Murray, both Brescia alumnae, along with Barnfield, co-wrote a paper entitled, “The Psychological Effects of Therapeutic Riding for Children.” (Scientific and Educational Journal of Therapeutic Riding 2012/2013). Their research further established that TR teaches children, primarily those with disabilities, how to care for another being (the horse), which, in turn, teaches them how to develop healthy relationships. Riding the horse, and in some cases caring for the horse, also increases their responsibility, autonomy, and communication skills. Through questionnaires and observational checklists, a total of eight constructs have been examined, which include self-esteem, independence, leadership, friendship skills, social comfort, peer relationships, physical skills, and positive values. A significant growth across the camp was observed in all eight of these constructs. Anecdotal evidence from parents, which was also heartening, included such comments as, “I think therapeutic riding is so beneficial to special needs kids because they can feel successful while riding. My son feels in control, when in life, he is not in control of very much.”

As the researchers point out, “Our studies have found that therapeutic riding enabled children to try new activities, learn new skills, and improve these skills. It provides therapy, rehabilitation, and cognitive, psychological, and physical development for the children. TR is truly a unique therapy that provides skills for children with special needs that can be transferred into their everyday lives.”

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