

A Shared Spotlight and a Shared Experience: Serving Veterans on the North Coast

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By Loren Collins, Kelly Fortner, and
Savannah Sonia

A Shared Spotlight and a Shared Experience: Serving Veterans on the North Coast

While quoting Professor Emeritus Steve Jenkins from the Department of Religious Studies (RS) at Humboldt State, Dr. Sara Hart reflected on the value of community-engaged learning practices: “I can teach you a lot of things with books and readings and slides and even guest lecturers. I can enrich this curriculum through reflective assignments, as well as research. But if I tried to teach you all about the history and culturally embedded significance of the handshake, that’s something you’re not going to learn until you shake someone’s hand. And probably not until you do it a few times.” Hart has been a lecturer with the religious studies department at HSU since 2008 and has been leading her students in community-engaged work since 2014. Through dedicated pursuits based on concepts like these, Hart and the religious studies department continually strive to bring learning beyond the classroom.

The religious studies department has valued community engagement and experiential learning opportunities for decades. The department connects students with speakers and lecturers from local religious and spiritual organizations and hosts a substantial offering of embedded religious experiences. For example, for the past 30 years

the department has hosted the innovative opportunities known as “Experiential Weekends,” workshops that provide a platform for students to engage in participant observation with local religious communities (see [Redwood Roots’ Spring 2020 edition, page 26](#) to read all about these valuable workshops). Among the multitude of sites of engagement for religious studies students is the Arcata Veterans Hall. “The Veterans Hall has offered an extraordinary opportunity for students to practice civic discourse, and to see what it looks like in action,” Hart said.

One recent HSU alumni, Samuel Dorsey, who graduated with both a political science degree and a religious studies degree, has been an active participant with the Arcata Veterans Hall. Both Dorsey and Hart spoke about the invaluable learning experience that the Veterans Hall has provided to them in their work. For Dorsey, the benefit of working with the veteran population in Arcata helped him learn how to “interact with veterans in their space, on their terms, with their projects.” Dorsey shared that a majority of the service work that he participated in throughout high school was purposely political, but that his time with the Veterans Hall in Arcata expanded his understanding of community engagement. “[The work] wasn’t for a specific goal,” Dorsey said, “It wasn’t because the experience would be politically expedient, and there was no kind of second motivation towards it. This was just interacting with people on a human level.”

Hart shared a similar sentiment when she expanded upon the kind of knowledge that students gain by working in the community in this capacity. She said, “It’s really humbling to recognize that all of the learning that [my students and I have] built up over the years... wonderful and excellent and enriching though it is, in a lot of ways it doesn’t hold a candle to the experience of these communities.” Not only can these experiences be an opportunity for Hart’s students to interact with their classroom material in an authentic way, this is also a time for students to understand themselves and the folk in their community on deeper levels. This type of understanding, as Dorsey noted, is integral to the role Service Learning can play towards connecting student populations and the broader community. Dorsey said, “Service Learning is a really powerful tool in improving the relationship between the student body and the town itself.”

One of Hart’s volunteer projects, which involves cleaning Veteran graves at the Greenwood Cemetery, exemplifies the value of the knowledge students gain when working with the community. Dorsey mentioned that his initial interest in cleaning the graves came from his experience and background in politics. Yet, as he started to do the work and interact with people from the community, he began to cultivate a deeper understanding of the complex topics involved in the religious studies coursework that he was learning in class. He explained, “Being a part of that community, cleaning graves, and seeing religion in real life with real people is way different than just learning about it in a book.”

Hart asserted that these connections between students and the veteran population have been incredibly important to form within the community of Arcata because of the nature of many college campuses. “Veterans seek communities like Humboldt County because of the peacefulness that it offers,” said Hart, “but they often feel isolated from the political realities on college campuses.” Hart recognized that HSU’s Veterans Enrollment and Transition Services (VETS) program, even in the midst of budget cuts, has worked hard to create a community on campus and a home for our veterans. Hart acknowledged that any environment where veterans feel marginalized exacerbates the fact that many veterans have been recruited from minority communities, creating overlapping intersections of marginalization. This is a key reason why Hart collaborated with the American Legion and the Arcata Vets Hall as community partners for her classes; Hart was seeking a meaningful way to extend community and inclusivity.

Another enriching opportunity for religious studies students was when the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI) offered Hart a mini-grant to bring United States Marine Corps veteran Ehren Tool to Humboldt State. Tool, the ceramics studio manager in the department of art practice at UC Berkeley, [makes ceramic cups that are decorated with images about war](#), images that he hopes will open up more conversations about war and its considerable impacts. There are currently about 200 of Tool’s cups held in a permanent collection of the Smithsonian Museum. Hart invited Tool to



lead an engaged experiential workshop with students, where they were also able to host a veterans panel at the Arcata Veterans Hall.

Hart spoke about the way in which the Veterans Hall, unlike many other volunteer organizations, has the incredible ability to dramatically alter perceptions. “The students walk in expecting something and expecting the kind of people they’re going to meet there,” said Hart, “and that expectation is just destroyed by the degree to which they encounter humans who are working with the same operative values, towards very similar goals.” Dorsey added that “As a student you don’t interact with veterans very often, unless you yourself are in that community already or have some sort of natural connection to it.” He explained that taking the time to speak with veterans, to hear their stories and hear their feelings about what they were fighting for, was a profound experience.

Hart would like to express the gratitude that she and her students have for Commander Jeffrey Sterling of the Arcata Veterans Memorial Building. They are also deeply grateful to the Greenwood Cemeteries Board who have supported and welcomed the students into their space. Hart and her students appreciate HSU’s institutional commitment to veterans and they are very excited about the new Director of the VETS program, Clifford McMasters. McMasters has been working with Commander Sterling, Dorsey, and Hart to continue to build partnerships between the campus and the community, especially through the lens of respect toward the veteran population.

Student Spotlight: Samuel Dorsey

Samuel Dorsey came to HSU as a politics major with extensive experience in politics and serving in the community. He later added a religious studies major after taking a class that exposed him to the faculty and the discipline. “I really liked politics, but I realized that, especially with how polarizing it was, that I wasn’t doing what I wanted to do in the way that I wanted to do it. I took a religious studies class just because it filled some requirements and I noticed that everybody was really excited to be there. The teachers were extremely involved and passionate and excited about it, and I was like, wow, all these people are really invested in this and they’re all happy.”

Dorsey completed a number of Service Learning and Experiential Workshops with the religious studies department, as well a political science Academic Internship with a congressional office prior to his graduation in 2021. While at HSU, Dorsey worked with Dr. Sara Hart to expand Service Learning opportunities. He found community partners, mapped religious sites, and created a survey for religious studies students to gather information that could help Hart connect her students to the most meaningful opportunities.

Dorsey shared how his experiences connecting with people, and truly serving them, changed his outlook. “Veterans are people that I care about now in a real way, not a superficial



way like a lot of people. I don’t think it’s their fault, it’s just lack of exposure. It’s kind of the culture that we have—to let it go over your head, don’t think about it, it’s just how it’s always been. But, Service Learning and the experiential workshop, One Nation Under Gods, profoundly changed how I thought about veterans and how I thought about America’s role in war and the human cost of our endeavors abroad.”

He continues to serve in many of the same ways that he did in his time with Dr. Hart—with compassion, openness, and a commitment to shaping, and contributing to, the community in positive ways. He cites his time at HSU as one of the reasons community service has taken a place next to civic engagement in his work. He spoke of cleaning gravesites as a contemplative experience that resonated with him. “I found that I really liked it, and I did not expect to like it, because it was just cleaning concrete. I expected it to be kind of a burden. But I really enjoyed it...being part of that community and cleaning graves and seeing religion in real life with real people is way different than just learning about it in a book. Graves are long term things and cleaning people’s graves, who you’ve never met, while you’re interacting with the curriculum of Death and Dying and talking to other people is interesting.”

Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Sara Hart

Dr. Sara Hart is a professor of religious studies whose thoughtful student and community-centered approach to teaching continually inspires students, staff, faculty, and community alike. Hart grew up in the rural farm town of Valley Center, California, in northern San Diego county. She



graduated from U.C. Santa Cruz in 2000 with a double major in literature and philosophy, with a concentration in religious studies, and a minor in classics, with an emphasis in Latin.

What initially brought Hart to religious studies was literature and art. “I wanted to understand the stories and the poems and the paintings and the music.” She explained her history growing up with experiences of different religions. “As a kid I had been sort of taken on a spiritual tour by my dad. We went to almost every church, temple, and mosque in San Diego County for a while, while he was seeking. So, I had been exposed to a great deal of different religious environments, as a child of a person who was in crisis and spiritually seeking before he landed back at his childhood home of Irish Catholicism. I was fluent with what religion looked like in a pretty touristic, superficial way, but I was not fluent with the religious traditions or able to understand the poetry and the music and the art.” After graduating from U.C. Santa Cruz, Hart went to graduate school for religion and literature at Boston University. She began teaching at HSU in the fall of 2008.

Hart’s specialty in the field of religious studies lands outside of what many would typically think of as religion, and she is most interested in the way that people “engage religious impulses outside of our institutional worlds.” She expressed that “I’ve always been interested in the way that religious impulses are expressed outside of the institutional balance of religion, so I’m most drawn to the ways that, as individuals and communities, we understand and embody a sense of meaning, values, and purpose outside of our institutional religions.” Her teaching often focuses on the rituals associated with literature and American Civil Religion.

With a passion for doing work in the local community, Hart explained that this likely came from her father, who was a marine combat veteran. She said that her father “always saw service as integral to who he was... service was a part of who he was and he, mostly through veterans organizations, helped to bring Stand Down [a resources and support services event for veterans] to Humboldt County from San Diego.” She first got involved with Service Learning at HSU in 2014 after she had a conversation with Stacy Becker, Community Partner Coordinator with the Center for Community Based Learning, during a professional development day. Hart explained that Becker gave an “impassioned plug about the degree to which Service Learning can help students to integrate themselves into professionalized roles as self-determined members of a community whose learning reaches beyond the classroom. That plug really struck me from my experience as a teacher and as a parent—that this is something that we’re missing in our very standard classroom curriculum that the students have a need for.”

Hart appreciates the opportunities community-based learning practices give students to develop their professional skills. She stated, “These experiences give students a chance to practice professionalism, to be able to look somebody in the eyes and say hello...to introduce themselves and articulate what it is that they offer and what it is that they need.”

Hart has been integral to developing community-based learning experiences for many of the major’s classes and states, “Much like Professor Steve Jenkins said, you’re never going to understand a handshake until you shake a few hands, and maybe during the pandemic it’s an elbow bump but, whatever it is, you’re never going to understand those basic mechanisms of human engagement without engaging other humans.”



Dr. Sara Hart