May 25, 2021, Governor Bill Lee signed into law a General Assembly bill banning teaching related to race and racism and gender in K-12 education. In collaboration with former UT Psychology Professor Jioni Lewis, Michelle Christian, associate professor of sociology, co-wrote an op-ed in the Tennessean challenging the bill and highlighting the importance of teaching race and racism. The legislation is part of the nationally coordinated and highly-funded conservative project to stop any form of racial equity pursuit in the United States that has achieved greater urgency in the last year due to murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmed Arbury and the dynamic activism of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Members of our sociology department are dedicated to continuing teaching, research, and advocacy related to racial justice in multiple ways. Below are a few of our commitments.

**BUILD OUR CONCENTRATION AREA IN CRITICAL RACE AND ETHNIC STUDIES**

We are deeply proud of the teaching, research, and student engagement emerging from our latest concentration area Critical Race and Ethnic Studies launched in 2017. We will continue to strenuously support this concentration and the work faculty and students are conducting. Each year the number of undergraduate students choosing this concentration grows and we are recruiting top graduate students from across the country who are pursuing cutting-edge and rigorous scholarship on the production and forms of racism. The undergraduate and graduate course pedagogy we developed centers a critical race approach that incorporates interdisciplinary scholarship that explores the historical, structural, and changing nature of race and racism. Our undergraduate courses give students a strong foundation in understanding how racism emerged, how it shapes people’s lives chances, and how it is built on the foundation of white supremacy. Similarly, at the graduate level, our courses highlight the foundational texts to critical race and Critical Race Theory, the global contours to racism, and how to best methodologically pursue empirical studies on racism. Students are learning, synthesizing, and applying the tools learned from a critical race approach to pursue a more racially just society.

**SUPPORT OUR FACULTY WHO TEACH ON RACE AND RACISM**

We are committed to support the teaching and scholarship of our faculty, particularly, junior faculty and non-tenure track, who are teaching courses, supporting students, and conducting research on race and racism. We have recruited several faculty over the last several years whose expertise centers on race and racism and its intersection in other domains. Our amazing faculty are conducting research in the areas of racism’s impact on families, environmental racism, The Movement for Black Lives, global racism, intersectionality and Black feminisms, Black place-making, racism and finance, race and policing, race and immigration, and many more. These faculty members have helped turn our department into a hub of cutting-edge critical race research that we continue to cultivate and grow.

**WHY CRT IS AN IMPORTANT SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN**

We will fight against the false and manipulative narratives against critical race scholarship and CRT specifically by using our social media platforms to highlight why CRT is important, what it tells us, and to spotlight the scholarship and work of our faculty and students.

**SUPPORT OUR KNOXVILLE COMMUNITY FIGHTING FOR RACIAL EQUITY IN KNOXVILLE**

At the heart of our department is a commitment to social justice. Several of our faculty and students are using their expertise and are working in partnership with community groups who are fighting against racism in Knoxville, including in the areas of education, policing, politics, and in the quest for transformative justice. Several are also working in collaboration with faculty across UT to create more racially just practices throughout campus. Faculty are also working directly with allies and community partners speaking out against and challenging the wave of anti-CRT legislation. We are proud of this social justice work and will continue to practice public sociology and advocacy in pursuit of racial justice.

Essentially, we will continue to be who we are, do what we do, and fight for a more racially just campus, city, state, country, and world.
GREETINGS FROM ROCKY TOP!

In many ways the letter I was hoping to write this year is not the one I am writing now. We had hoped that by now we would have weathered the worst of the COVID-19 storm and all would be back to (relative) normal. I was looking forward to getting together with all of you and pursuing great new directions in our department, led by a strong cadre of energetic and innovative assistant professors. In fact, I am still looking forward to our future, but sadly, we find that we cannot yet safely come together unmasked. As I write this, I worry greatly about the devastation that we are about to experience with the spread of the Delta variant, and I encourage everyone to stay as safe as possible.

However, in some ways this is the letter I anticipated writing in that it celebrates all our joys and successes of the last year despite the challenges of navigating a worldwide pandemic. While we were scrambling to move our classes online, teach via Zoom, figure out how to have a research career without access to participants, and learn how to work while being constantly interrupted by spouses, children, and pets, we still managed to amass a wide variety of organizations and on and off campus during her time at the university, including the Honors Leadership Program, SGA, Alpha Kappa Psi Business Fraternity, as well as SAA, and the VOLbreaks program through the JCLS. She also worked at the Garza Law Firm and some performed undergraduate research during her time at UT. Most notably, Urias received the Torchbearer award, UT’s highest undergraduate award, in March.

Understanding the Needs of Her Community

Maria Urias received her BA in sociology from UT this spring. Out of the classes I took prepared me to think of the world in many bureaucratic hoops required to replace it. After 30 years, our old one expired in a most dramatic way. While we were scrambling to move our classes online, teach via Zoom, figure out how to have a research career without access to participants, and learn how to work while being constantly interrupted by spouses, children, and pets, we still managed to amass a wide variety of organizations and on and off campus during her time at the university, including the Honors Leadership Program, SGA, Alpha Kappa Psi Business Fraternity, as well as SAA, and the VOLbreaks program through the JCLS. She also worked at the Garza Law Firm and some performed undergraduate research during her time at UT. Most notably, Urias received the Torchbearer award, UT’s highest undergraduate award, in March.

Urias was initially attracted to sociology as she believed it would provide her with an avenue to better understand the needs of her community.

“Sociology opened my eyes to the many structural issues we face in the United States today, as well as how to tackle these issues through listening to those impacted by them,” she said.

In the fall, Urias will be attending Vanderbilt University to pursue a Master’s of Education in Community Development and Action. This new path was shaped directly by her study of sociology, as she believes that community development is “an extension of how we understand society and community.” Ultimately, Urias hopes to work in nonprofit management, possibly specializing in rural issues. She desires to continue helping others and believes that what she has learned in sociology has given her the first set of tools needed to do so.

“What I’ve learned through Sociology at UT has shaped the way I view the world,” Urias said. “This degree equipped me to be a critical thinker of all the systems around me, how they impact people, and how our social systems form. I am so grateful to have attended UT, as the involvements I was in as well as the classes I took prepared me to think of the world in a sociological mindset.”

Joys and Success Despite Difficult Times

MESSAGE FROM STEPHANIE BOHON, DEPARTMENT HEAD

Last year was difficult, but after coming out of lockdown, we emerged to find babies everywhere! If I count correctly, we have eight(!) babies among our faculty and graduate students, and we celebrate the impending arrival of Hazel to Alex Moulton and his wife, Rose. Adding to that joy are two marriages: Alex (Pellegrino) Szmukto was married in June in Dallas, Texas, and AJ Knowles was married in July in Knoxville. We wish them great happiness.

While we are welcoming new babies and husbands into our home families, we also have some terrific new additions to our department family. Joining us in the front office is our new administrative and graduate program specialist, Nicole Stephens. She comes to us from the Office of Research and is already making everyone’s job easier. Joining the ranks of our full-time lecturers are Emily Landry, who started in spring, and Jeremy Smith, who will begin work this fall. You may recognize both as recent graduates from our PhD program. We are delighted to have them with us. Also joining us this fall as professor of sociology and african studies is Derrick Brooks, former professor and head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Cincinnati. His work examines Black men in urban environments with a special focus on education.

He is coming to UT as part of the transition of African studies from a program to a department, and we feel very fortunate to have him here among us.

Also new to the department is a shiny white refrigerator! Also new to the department is a shiny white refrigerator! Also new to the department is a shiny white refrigerator! Also new to the department is a shiny white refrigerator! Also new to the department is a shiny white refrigerator! Also new to the department is a shiny white refrigerator! After being cleared from PT, Ponder jumped into the world of endurance racing as the drive to support herself through the program. Since, she completed several obstacle races, long distance triathlons and her first marathon.

“I felt less pain and fatigue, more confidence, and the ultimate question…How can this be productive?”

Ponder conceptualized AIM after starting graduate school.

“During my first year in the PhD program, I started suffering mentally, emotionally, and physically,” Ponder said. “I began to gain weight, experienced pain, and began to feel sluggish. I discovered the realities of depression and PTSD. I began an exercise routine in an attempt to mix up my days at the desk and suppress the feelings of depression. That plan backfired when I landed in physical therapy. I learned that this is not uncommon among graduate students. Which leads to the ultimate question…How can this be productive?”

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“I felt less pain and fatigue, more confidence, and the work allowed for increased amounts of productive work time,” she said. “I want to share that with you.”

With signs of depression, anxiety and chronic illness soaring among graduate students and faculty even before the pandemic, Ponder’s work offers more than an “academic” contribution. She inspires and guides us in health and hope.

Rachel Ponder, a PhD candidate in sociology, is the founder of Academy in Motion (AIM), a program designed for graduate students to come together to put their bodies in motion and focus on healthy habits to live healthier, productive lives.

“Graduate school is an incredibly exciting time, but a time that is taxing on the mind and body,” Ponder said. “Often life for a graduate student is full of long hours reading and writing, skipped meals, and unhealthy coping strategies to the stresses and pressures of the program…our bodies are neglected, and our work suffers. Nearly 39% of graduate students are at risk of depression or other mental health conditions, and 75% report lower back pain. Graduate school is difficult enough without these challenges.”

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A New Path of Sociological Knowledge

Christopher Rogers is currently working on two projects. The first is a critical methodological paper with Michelle Christian, associate professor of sociology, that discusses researchers’ ethical obligations to their participants. The second project is for a special issue on media histories of care, which will discuss how organizations hold coercive power over various care resources and people’s response as an act of liberation and autonomy to build care-webs in their communities to meet the needs of the people. Furthermore, as currently titled “The Hospital Won’t Save Us: An Exploration of Racism and Care as an act of Liberation,” Rogers’s dissertation exists in the duality of exploration and imagination. Rogers explores how and why hospitals are sites of racial violence in which Black and Brown people will always experience various mistreatment, inadequate care, and death because racism is a permanent fixture in society.

Secondly, he imagines never healthcare infrastructures by developing a concept around care. Theoretically, reimagining what care is and how it should be administered to not only save lives but one day lead to building a world in which our social relationships are flexible, attuned to organizer and Black feminist scholar who will always experience various mistreatment, inadequate care, and death because racism is a permanent fixture in society.

“Chris is set to make immense contributions to sociology through his various projects,” said Christian, Rogers’s dissertation chair and mentor. “First, by challenging scholars to re-think the field as a site to build intimacy rather than distance with participants; second, by centering critical race theory tenets to understand hospitals as sites of racial harm and the need to build new forms of care outside of traditional forms. Chris’s depth and compassion run through everything he does. Chris is marking a new path in the cultivation of sociological knowledge.”

Rogers is also working with the UT Legal Clinic on racial justice listening project, where he helps the legal clinic cultivate sociological knowledge. "Everything he does. Chris is marking a new path in the cultivation of sociological knowledge."

Sociology in a Pandemic: Reflecting on our losses and our hopes

In March of 2020, the Department of Sociology moved nearly all of its classes, meetings, and work-life into a largely online environment, a massive technological shift for us and our students. We developed multimodal courses and curricula, studying up as quickly as possible to the urgency of the moment. That shift was accompanied by one where we and our students learned to teach, learn, and work from home, with our families and lives in the Zoom background and in isolation far away from friends and loved ones. We did the exhausting work of triage: teaching (our students, colleagues, and those around us and adapted on the ground to those needs as best as we possibly could. In the Fall of 2021, we returned to our classrooms, with the battle scars - more exhausted, more skeptical, but also more compassionate, more flexible, attuned to organizer and Black feminist scholar. "Hope is a discipline."

In this year’s newsletter, we want to honor the losses and celebrations of all of our lives in the midst of what was undoubtedly one of the toughest years in the history of this department and university.

LOSSES

Across these past few years, we have lost children, parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, friends, colleagues. COVID-related or not, the losses have ached that much more because so many of us could not be near our loved ones as they transitioned or accessed the support system we needed to heal in the aftermath.

Because we study the social, we remain committed to building a world in which our social relationships build the infrastructure of health, justice, and hope we so desperately need. Here we recognize those in our sociology community, many of whom came and went too fast.

Troy Dowdy (BA, sociology ‘94) who rarely missed a Vols football game, died this summer, leaving behind his wife, the children whom he loved to cook for.

Evans L. Weissman, associate professor in food studies and public affairs at Syracuse University’s Falk College, passed away unexpectedly this summer. Professor Weissman earned his PhD in geography from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. His dissertation, “Cultivating the City: Urban Agriculture and Agrarian Questions in Brooklyn, NY” explored the tensions between the stated goals and outcomes of urban cultivation. He earned a master of arts in social and minor in environmental policy from UT, and a bachelor of arts in environmental policy, administration, and law from Binghamton University. As an educator, mentor, scholar and friend, Professor Weissman was committed to the human condition, always problem-solving to build better communities. He inspired those around him to advocate for equity in the food system and beyond. Alumnus Andrew Gurnee wrote: “Evans was a significant influence on me during his time at UT and was a major reason I shifted to sociology. What a tragedy.”

Our dear friend and colleague, anthropologist Rebecca Kienck, passed in late fall of last year. Kienck was a key actor in our global studies program and the UT disaster, displacement, and human rights program. She did research and organized field study in Himalayan India and Appalachia around her research areas of critical theory, poverty, globalization, and environmental degradation. She offered courses that many of our students moved through, or the topics as gender and globalization, South Asia, Bollywood cinema, and the cultural anthropology of mountain environments. She loved being outside and linking the lush landscape of East Tennessee. She raised a beautiful son Aaron with her husband Dan Klingensmith.

Regina Benedict (1970-2021) by Lois Presser

Our friend Regina (Gina) Benedict passed away at the age of 44 on March 31, 2021. She was a UT sociology alumnus, a talented professor of criminal justice and coordinator of the criminal justice program at Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee.

Prior to joining the doctoral program with a criminology concentration at UT, Benedict earned her MA degree from East Tennessee State University and BA from Mississippi State University. At ETSU, Benedict was honored as Most Distinguished Graduate Student in 2000. At UT she received the Excellence in Teaching award from our department in 2008. Rooted with her family in Knoxivle, Benedict continued to teach classes to UT students for some time after she earned the PhD.

Benedict had every intellectual gift that the work of a professor demands. She was a superb instructor. She had, through her own careful research, absorbed a great deal of insight about patterns of harm. That insight, and her own manner of authenticity and dry wit, drew and resonated with students. Benedict was also a talented writer. For her superb doctoral dissertation titled “Giving Back Not Giving Up: Generosity among Older Female Inmates,” which I had the privilege of supervising, Benedict conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 29 women, most of them 40 and older, who continued on page 6...
were imprisoned in the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women in Shelby County, Kentucky. She found, in her own words:

“The women I spoke with reported engaging in generative behaviors during incarceration. Unable to guide their children, older inmates often ‘adopt’ younger inmates. They pass on values, experience, and wisdom to the younger inmates in hopes of improving their futures and preventing them from coming back to prison. They offer cautionary tales – encouraging them to ‘do as I say, not as I did.’ Furthermore, generative inmates plan to continue giving back upon their release. The women in my sample were almost consumed by thoughts of community service upon release – seemingly stemming from a desire to give back and make up for what they took. The women I spoke with were also concerned not only with how they would be remembered, but also whether they would be remembered at all.”

Benedict had compassion and respect for all people, remembered at all.”

His legacy in the Department of Sociology is durable. As I learned from him and other colleagues, Don immensely contributed to the development of our three areas of specialization, namely, political economy, criminology, and environment. Particularly, he left his intellectual fingerprint on the area of political economy by creating and teaching courses such as the modern world system, political sociology, and comparative poverty and development.

DON’S INTELLECTUAL ORIENTATION was human-centric and egalitarian. He was anti-orthodoxy on intellectual, cultural, and social issues. I believe that those qualities enabled him to be a critical thinker and true internationalist. Don was truly a global citizen who refused to be limited by cultural and nation-state boundaries. Furthermore, as an organic intellectual, he tried his best to cultivate liberation knowledge in the minds of individuals through challenging knowledge for domination and maintaining status quo. In this sense, he was truly revolutionary.

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Our mission is to create a learning environment that emphasizes research, teaching, and outreach to understand everyday social behavior and the structural factors that contribute to social injustice.

Read more news from the department at sociology.utk.edu