

PROFESSORS' OUTREACH 'The world is one family'

By Philip Walzer



Three faculty members recently won awards for their service to the community. Here's what makes them special:



Amy Milligan - Urban League of Hampton Roads Community Leader Award

On Oct. 29, Amy Milligan organized a ceremony on Kaufman Mall to remember the 11 victims of the synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh. Five weeks later, she helped lead Old Dominion's first public celebration of Hanukkah, at Webb University Center.

The common thread: The initiative and participation of students.

Their voices, "raw and emotional," dominated the remembrance, she said. And students were the ones who advocated the Hanukkah celebration to "pull light from the darkness."

Milligan holds many titles: Batten Endowed Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies and Women's Studies. Director of the Institute for Jewish Studies & Interfaith Understanding. Adviser to the Hillel group.

"This is my dream job," said Milligan, who also received the John R. Broderick Diversity Champion Award.

In her research, she zeroes in on "voices on the margin" - "women's voices, Jews of color, disabled Jews, LGBT Jews, small-town Jews."

Her first book, "Hair, Headwear, and Orthodox Jewish Women," argues that Orthodox women are "far more empowered than they're given credit for," inventing "new ways of practicing Judaism within the traditional context."

Milligan's second book, just released, is titled "Jewish Bodylore: Feminist and Queer Ethnographies of Folk Practices." And she's at work on a third, "The Last Jews of Selma, Alabama," to be published by the University of Alabama Press. Six Jews are left in Selma, she said. The plus side: "You have to get really invested in a small community. Some things you have to learn to do yourself."

To focus on students, Milligan writes only in the mornings, when most are still sleeping. She wants to tighten connections between Jewish and other students on campus, as well as the relationship with Jews in the community.

Her advice to students after the tragedy in Pittsburgh: "We need to acknowledge the fear and when it hurts, but we cannot let it control us."



Narketta Sparkman-Key - Urban League of Hampton Roads Community Leader Award/ YWCA South Hampton Roads Woman of Distinction

Almost every parent has experienced it: The sulking teenager in his room, with the door closed. Keep knocking to re-establish contact, advises Narketta Sparkman-Key.

"You want to keep the door open and let them know you are there to talk to, even if they come back a week or a month later for the conversation," says Sparkman-Key, an associate professor of counseling and human services.

That approach could help address one of her concerns - suicide among African-American youths. She recently gave a TEDx talk on the subject.

According to Ohio State University researchers, the rate is double that of white children between 5 and 12. "Parents need help, and we need to be speaking about it more," she says.

But it's not her only focal point:

Pregnant teens - This month, she made her sixth spring break trip, along with ODU students, to counsel pregnant teens and their families in Jamaica. "Our biggest impact is giving them hope," she says.

Homeless people - Volunteering at the Union Mission Ministries led her to organize quarterly empowerment sessions with women at the shelter. "Often, I was the one who was empowered."

LGBTQ community - Her research shows that assessments given by some organizations "don't capture the issues" facing LGBT clients. "Therefore, they may not be adequately serving them."

Sparkman-Key has won ODU's John R. Broderick Diversity Champion Award and Kate Broderick Faculty Award for Excellence in Promoting Educational Accessibility.

She tells others, "You have to know how to advocate for yourself and not use what you have been through as an excuse." She knows.

Sparkman-Key divorced young with two children. Earlier, she lost funding for her graduate studies. She found another grant and completed her doctorate. "You just have to push through," she says.



Alok Verma - Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities Humanitarian Award

Growing up in India, Alok Verma learned the Sanskrit saying "The world is one family." It's been his driving philosophy ever since.

In his 40 years in Hampton Roads, all associated with ODU as a graduate student or faculty member, Verma's goal has been not just to unify the local Indian community, but also to educate and improve the region.

That's why he helped the World Affairs Council arrange a speech by India's UN ambassador. And why he was instrumental in the adoption of Kochi as one of Norfolk's sister cities. Both, he said, are port cities with military hubs and flooding problems, so they can learn from each other.

Verma received his master's degree from ODU and began teaching in 1981. The Ray Ferrari Professor in engineering technology, he specializes in initiatives to improve manufacturing productivity. Verma has written nearly 100 papers and launched such courses as Nontraditional Manufacturing Processes and Lean Engineering.

His honors include the John R. Broderick Diversity Champion Award and the Provost's Award for International Education.

He served as president of Asian Indians of Hampton Roads three times and also as treasurer and secretary. He now directs public relations for India Fest, which will be held at the Virginia Beach Convention Center in the fall.

The growth of the event, which began as a much smaller festival at Webb Center, mirrors the expansion of the Indian-American community. Since he arrived here, it has grown from 400 to 5,000 families. "Families are constantly calling me about moving to the area," Verma said.

He's not done spreading his message. "We need to understand each other's point of view and not get so agitated that it polarizes the country. If people really thought about that phrase in Sanskrit, 'The world is one family,' we wouldn't have all of these wars and differences."