Getting to know Heather Dillaway

Heather Dillaway received her PhD from Michigan State University, MA from the University of Delaware and her BA in History and Sociology at Cornell University. She began at Wayne State in August 2002, before even finalizing her dissertation at MSU! Not only is she Associate Professor of Sociology, she is Associate Dean of Academic Programs, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, and has previously served as Associate Dean of Master’s Programs in the Graduate School, Sociology Director of Graduate Studies, Director of Undergraduate Studies, and Interim Department Chair. Most recently she served as Acting Director of the Institute of Gerontology.

How would you describe your teaching style? Anyone who takes my classes knows that I still write on the chalkboard, and I love circle discussions (yes, I make students sit in a circle with me). I like talking with students and letting them share their opinions. I like the interaction between me and students, the students themselves, and the students and course materials. The more talking we do, the better!

What advice would you give to students pursuing a career/degree in Sociology? Everything about sociology is relevant for their lives. Sociology is all around them, in them, and helps them understand both their lives and others’ lives. Social problems are complicated and can’t just be solved in an instance. That society can block opportunities, and why. That it’s okay to pick apart something they love in the world and analyze it, and then use that knowledge to understand and navigate the world better.

What advice do you have for a student thinking about a graduate degree in Sociology? 1) Try not to pay for your degree out of pocket; 2) make sure you have a good faculty mentor; and 3) make sure you are realistic about your career options.

What is the most fulfilling part of your job? Students—having conversations with them and watching them actually do good all by themselves. Having an awesome thought while writing a paper (and actually being able to get it down on paper). Talking to random women during data collection. And, the rare moment when I feel like I can actually make change in something.

When you have 30 minutes of free time, how do you pass the time? Hang out with my kids, be outside, garden (I love trees and flowers), sleep late on weekends, stay up really late watching silly TV, listen to music, sew (yes, I was in 4-H for years), take nature photos.

What songs are included on the sound-track to your life? Well, life changes and so does the soundtrack but here are some for now: Alphaville: Forever Young; When in Rome: The Promise; Van Morrison: Brown-Eyed Girl; Erasure: Sometimes, Chains of Love, A Little Respect, and Take a Chance on Me; Dar Williams: Aging Well, Iowa, February, the Babysitter Song; Ani Difranco: any song! Willy Porter: Watercolor; Melissa Ferrick: every single one of her older songs; The Cranberries: Linger; Indigo Girls: Gallileo; Toad the Wet Sprocket: anything on the Fear or Pale albums; Abigail Stauffer: Beloved. Any 1980s monster ballad (yes, it is true); Pink: Dear Mr. President; George Winston: any song, any album; and anything acapella. I could go on and on, but folk music always makes me happy, especially if it has a little anger in it.

Who is your role model and why? Every middle aged and elderly woman. I love watching women in the process of living. I have also had tons of female role models in my life, and I owe much of my success to them. Some are in my family, some are acquaintances, and many are in academia. I am constantly struck by the power of women to survive burdens, persevere, and forge ahead.

What celebrity do you get mistaken for? I don’t think I dress well enough to ever be mistaken for a celebrity 😊

If you had to change your first name, what would you change it to? My mom was going to name me Sunshine (no joke), so I have always wondered what that would be like.

What was your first job or oddest job outside of academia? My first job was working as a front desk clerk for a small hotel at age 14. Other weird jobs: I fixed watches at JCPenney’s (and learned on the job, breaking a few watches in the process!). I wrapped Christmas presents at the mall. During college I helped run an agricultural leadership institute for farmers in upstate New York (which means to this day I can still name all the rural towns in that region!).

If you could witness any event past, present or future, what would it be? Past: Freedom Summer, Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Conventions; Woodstock. Future: Some day I will go see the Aurora Borealis in Iceland, Finland, or somewhere similar.