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## Communicator, June/ July 2016 News

Western Michigan University

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## Communication prof receives Professor of the Year award

contact: Cara Barnes  
April 11, 2016 | WMU News

LANSING, Mich.—Western Michigan University Professor **Sue Ellen Christian** has been recognized as one of the state's three recipients of the Michigan Distinguished Professor of the Year award, which recognizes the outstanding contributions and dedication exhibited by the faculty from Michigan's 15 public universities to the education of undergraduate students.

The Academic Affairs Officers of the Michigan Association of State Universities will recognize the nominees and recipients of this annual award during a Friday, April 15, luncheon held at the Lansing Center. The other two winners are University of Michigan Professor Brian Coppola and Grand Valley State University Professor Matthew Boelkins.



*Christian*

**Sue Ellen Christian**

Christian is a professor of communication with a dual appointment in the School of Communication and Department of Gender and Women's Studies at WMU. She earned a B.A. in English from Hope College and an M.A. in Journalism from the University of Michigan.

She has received many awards and grants since arriving at WMU in 2001, including the College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Achievement in Teaching Award in 2009 and the WMU Distinguished Teaching Award in 2014. She has used many of these grants to support taking her students into local high schools and the community for experiential learning about journalism, multimedia, diversity and bias, and she advises students through journalism internships and the Student Media Group board.

"Professor Christian demonstrates a commitment to her discipline which extends well beyond the role of instructor and greatly benefits the Kalamazoo community and Western Michigan University," says **Timothy J. Greene**, WMU provost and vice president for academic affairs.

Her book, "Overcoming Bias: A Journalist's Guide to Culture and Context" is used in newsrooms and classrooms as a guide to addressing implicit biases in news practice. Christian continues to serve as an active journalist, writing news and opinion pieces for outlets locally and nationally. Her previous staff positions as a reporter include The Detroit News, Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune. She has been vital in updating the undergraduate journalism curriculum at WMU since her arrival in 2001 and has developed a new course titled "Global Media Literacy," available to students across campus through the general education program.

"Professor Christian represents the very best of teaching, innovation and dedication to student success," says Dr. **Daniel J. Hurley**, CEO of the Michigan Association of State Universities. "With her real-world experience and involvement with students, she symbolizes excellence in higher education for which Michigan's public universities are globally renowned."

## Michigan Association of State Universities

The Michigan Association of State Universities serves as the coordinating board for Michigan's 15 public universities, providing advocacy and fostering policy to maximize the collective value these institutions provide in serving the public interest and the State of Michigan.

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## WMU student wins honorable mention for documentary

contact: Mark Schwerin  
April 5, 2016 | WMU News

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—A Western Michigan University student in the School of Communication has received an honorable mention in a highly competitive, nationwide competition.

**Tirrea Billings**, of Saginaw, a senior in the film, video and media studies program, won the award in the 2016 Broadcast Education Association Festival of Media Arts in the Student Documentary category. A record number of 1,538 total submissions were received this year for the entire competition. As an award winner, she is invited to take part in the BEA 2016 Annual Convention April 18 in Las Vegas, Nevada, and will receive an honorary plaque.

"This is a national competition which is very, very competitive," says **Dr. Jennifer Machiorlatti**, professor of communication in the film, video and media studies program, who has worked closely with Billings. "She earned this award for a really wonderful documentary."



*Billings*

## About the Project

Billings' film is titled "Painting Dreams: The Story of Johnson Simon." It tells the story of an inspirational, kind-hearted, motivated WMU student who does not look at his cerebral palsy as a setback, but, rather, as a reason to be even more dedicated in pursuing his dreams. It recounts Simon's journey from a youngster relegated to special education classes to a successful college student and gifted painter, who graduated from WMU in December 2015.



*Billings and Simon*

The documentary actually began as an assignment in an English class, Thought and Writing. Students were asked to undertake a project, but could choose the genre. Billings chose documentary.

Billings had met Simon in a Bible study group called Collegiate, Black and Christian. She became familiar with his inspirational story and had been impressed with his perseverance and positive attitude in the face of monumental obstacles as well

as his use of art to overcome them.

"When I was thinking about what I wanted to do my documentary on, Johnson instantly popped up in my head," she says. "It was definitely an emotional experience, going into more detail about his life and how hard it was for him growing up."

Simon grew up in West Palm Beach, Florida, and his school lacked the accommodations needed for a student like him. He was placed in special education classes and basically forgotten about, even though there is nothing lacking in his intelligence. It wasn't until he was allowed to go to a special art school his senior year that he blossomed as a student and artist.

## 'Never give up'

The documentary gives Simon the opportunity to convey his message to "never, never give up," shows him at work on his art and interviews University staff and students about what an inspiration he has been to them.

Billings took the original 30-minute documentary she created for her English class and, under Machiorlatti's guiding hand, honed it into a powerful, 10-minute short documentary.

Billings graduates this fall and hopes to work as a production assistant, probably in Chicago or New York, and also has applied for an internship at the TV Academy in Los Angeles. Ultimately, she hopes to create and direct her own documentary films.

As a WMU student, she has worked as an intern with the Public Media Network in downtown Kalamazoo and with Bronco Productions, shooting Bronco sporting events. She now works as an employee for Bronco Productions, mainly filming soccer games and doing instant replay for basketball games. She also is interning as a production assistant for ImageStream-Creative Communications in Portage.

Her time at WMU has given her ample opportunity to pursue her ambitions, and she credits Machiorlatti with shepherding her along the way.

"I asked her for guidance and advice, and she's been a big help," she says. "She always critiques my work. She's definitely my favorite professor and biggest mentor."

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