
UCF Forum

7-3-2019

Learning History Helps Us Understand Who We Are in Different Ways

Anjella Warnshuis

University of Central Florida, Anjella.Warnshuis@ucf.edu

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STARS Citation

Warnshuis, Anjella, "Learning History Helps Us Understand Who We Are in Different Ways" (2019). *UCF Forum*. 359.

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Learning History Helps Us Understand Who We Are in Different Ways

By Anjella Warnhuis
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, July 3, 2019

There's something visceral about walking the land that your ancestors once walked.



James and Ethel Parish, the columnist's grandparents, on their wedding day.

Confession: I hated history class. Thought it was boring. The only class I liked less was geometry. At least history was just facts. I didn't have to search for the answers.

If you had told me that I would spend hours now researching history or watching shows about history, I would have thought you were crazy.

I had a passing curiosity about my own family history. I asked a few questions but didn't get much information, so I moved on with my life.

Eventually I stumbled across TV shows such as *Finding Your Roots*, *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *Genealogy Roadshow*. I met a woman named Carol Mundy, a researcher of African American history, who shared stories of her adventures in finding and identifying cultural artifacts.

I once again started wondering about the history of my own family. I didn't get far before getting stuck, so I booked a computer lab on campus, asked Ancestry.com for free access and invited Mundy to lead the UCF edition of *Who Do You Think You Are?* at an event for Black History Month. She took attendees through the basics, told us some of the tips and tricks she uses when she hits a brick wall, and helped us understand some of the documents we were seeing.

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I was able to take my mom's side of the family back a few generations but still couldn't make it past my grandparents on my father's side. No one was certain what their parents' names had been. Eventually my father found and shared his parents' death certificates.

That information allowed me to take my father's paternal line back several generations, but I was still unable to find information on my father's maternal line because of a 1995 volcanic eruption that destroyed the capitol of the island of Montserrat and its historical records. At this point, I assumed that branch of the family would always be a mystery to me.

A few months ago I was staying with my Aunt Nita, my father's sister. She had also done some work on the family history. We started going through all the old photo albums and funeral programs she had inherited from her mother and sister. We found such treasures as a copy of my grandmother's substitute birth certificate, her degree from teacher's college, her marriage certificate, and a wedding photo.

I was busy scanning all this when my aunt hit the genealogical jackpot! She found a DVD that her cousin Victor had sent her 10 years earlier. We popped it in and burst into laughter as he admonished that if the person watching the video didn't want to know the family, then they should hold onto the DVD because one day someone would come to them with questions about the family.

He then started with the history of Montserrat and proceeded to walk us through five generations of family history ending with my dad's generation. Each section of the DVD started with a listing of the heads of household and all their descendants. Where possible it had labeled photos and videos.

I'm still working on processing all the materials from the DVD. I've been taking screenshots and uploading them to my family tree. I hope to someday go to Montserrat and see it firsthand.

There's something visceral about walking the land that your ancestors once walked. I felt it last year when I visited Puerto Rico – a sense of being at home in a place that I'd never been before.

I don't think history is boring anymore.

When I travel, I look not only for opportunities to connect to my own family's past but to learn more about history in general. I've visited places such as the Lorraine Motel in Memphis (the assassination site of Martin Luther King Jr.), his church in Atlanta, and the old Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, (site of a 1960 sit-in for civil rights). I share what I see and learn with friends and family.

Knowing and understanding history helps us understand who we are in new and different ways.

Anjella Warnshuis is the coordinator of administrative services for the University of Central Florida's Department of Political Science. She can be reached at Anjella.Warnshuis@ucf.edu.