Prof-Files:  
Making History Interesting

By Noelle Selb  
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Mark Metzler Sawin is addicted to “American Idol.” He wanted Kelly Clarkson to win in last year’s episode because she was from Texas and he didn’t like Justin’s hair.

Like many of his students, this professor of History likes pop culture. He’ll even go up to him, Homer Simpson might be the school mascot.

It is not widely known that the belching, donut-inhaling cartoon character was actually modeled after the grandfather of the show’s creator Matt Groening. Sawin revels in the fact that Homer Groening was Mennonite.

“See, that’s why I like Homer,” Sawin explains, “He’s Mennonite at heart.” This professor believes Homer is “a profoundly moral and good person although he has many bad habits. He is American [...] and he’s a far better college logo than that lion that I never get,” said Sawin.

Upon his arrival at EMU, Sawin continued to learn of things that were of interest to him. For example, he discovered that the history professor that had interviewed him for the position was his mother’s former boyfriend.

After spending four years at San Juan College and six years in grad school at the University of Texas in Austin, Sawin received his Ph.D. in American Studies. He liked this interdisciplinary program because it allowed him to explore the fields of history, literature, and religion.

Reflecting on his grad school days, Sawin says that he really enjoyed them. “It’s not too often that you can spend six years of your life reading books, writing, and hanging out in coffee shops, and at the end of it, instead of people thinking you’re a slacker, they start calling you doctor.”

Despite his impressive educational background, Sawin still does research for his lectures. He pointed out that “even if it’s something I know well, I still spend an hour or two researching it again to refresh my memory and to learn something new.”

His love for teaching is evident through his dedication to research and personal interaction with the students. “I’m enough of a performer that I like being up in front of students,” he admits, adding, “I also like the chance to mold the minds of tomorrow. It gives me some perverse pleasure.”

Learning from former school days, Sawin knows the type of professor he doesn’t want to be. “I had so many bad history teachers in high school, all of whom were named coach,” he lamented, “that I’m on somewhat of a mission to prevent that from happening to other people.”

To bring a different aspect to his class, Sawin sometimes strays from the usual history lesson plan used by many professors. This professor, who admittedly calls himself “scat-terbrained with lots of interests,” says he combines literature and culture into his lectures as well as PowerPoint.

“Something that keeps me relating well to students is that I’m not afraid to change assignments and the whole direction of the class midstream if it doesn’t look like something’s working. If I’m bored with the class, I assume they’re bored with the class and so I change things,” Sawin says.

Changing things has been an important part of Sawin’s life so far. After obtaining his bachelor’s, he took two years off to work as a chef and manage a coffee shop in Austin, Texas, in order to get residency.

In keeping with his ambitious nature, he was also the contributing editor for the Chicago-based culinary magazine Chef. He even continued writing for this periodical throughout grad. school to earn extra money.

Ever since the sixth or seventh grade, Sawin knew he wanted to be a teacher. By that time, he had realized that his childhood dreams of being a paleontologist, veterinarian, forest ranger, and, for a brief time, a lawyer, had been realized.

He has always admired the versatility of occupation exemplified by one of our nation’s Founding Fathers. “I would like to spend a day roaming Philadelphia with Ben Franklin because he was brilliant and an absolute nutcase. I think he would be really fun to hang out with,” Sawin commented.

His knowledge of this Bicentennial Man goes beyond the ordinary. This history professor believes that “among inventing things and establishing modern Philadelphia, the first library, the first water works, and experimenting with electricity, [Franklin] also was a nudist and believed in taking daily air baths where he sat naked in his window.”

Sawin’s own character might in fact be somewhat similar to Franklin’s own.

In high school, he was known for being somewhat contentious and enjoying being controversial.

Casually, he mentioned that he caused his high school Bible study group to break up when he refuted the leader’s idea that Gandhi was in hell.

Aside from this incident, Sawin explained about bad teachers in the school paper but insists he was still “a pretty good kid, just sort of mouthy.”

Sawin also enjoys spending time with his family (he has two small children), as well as friends. While students on campus spend their spare time socializing, this professor also meets with a “pot luck” group of fellow young professors with children.

The way his life parallels that of his students may seem unimaginable to some, but Sawin still remains individualistic in many respects. In fact, he says he still sees himself as a third grader. He explains, “That’s sort of where my self image has stayed—sort of a chubby third grader with big, thick glasses, but generally pretty smart, well-liked and still mouthy.”

But, to Sawin, mouthy isn’t necessarily bad. Some of the most profound advice he ever received were three simple words his grad. school professor said; he told his class to “Give a damn.” Sawin completely agrees, saying that he thinks “generally people are better off and certainly more interesting if they care passionately about something. "Apathy is a bad thing," says Sawin.

This professor’s outspoken interesting character stemmed from his grandfather. This man once gave Sawin’s father a piece of advice that is quite memorable: “Never stand on your head and pee into the wind.” While that may not be a lesson for the history books, students can still find lively discussions similar to it in the confines of Professor Sawin’s classroom.