

JOURNEY

along a well-lit path

BY KASSANDRA PATTERSON, '12



Kassandra Patterson is a 22-year-old junior from Sevierville, Tenn., majoring in mass communications. She was asked to contribute a feature story about the importance of lifelong learning. Along the way, she grew to believe that the secret lay in finding the right mentor. And in discovering this, she found her own. This is her story.

A painted window in the front parlor of the Shambhala Meditation Center inspires curiosity and quiet respect from its onlookers. Depicting the Great Eastern Sun, its most prominent detail is a bright yellow orb that glows with diffused light and subtle warmth emanating from its natural counterpart.

When I first saw it, I didn't want to break my gaze. Its beauty was obvious, but that's not what made me want to linger there; it was more about the way it made me feel. I wanted to study its meaning and somehow benefit from the enlightenment it had to offer. As it turns out, the lure to this beautiful work of art is normal. The Shambhala Buddhists believe that the Great Eastern Sun symbolizes the expression of human goodness, gentleness and openness, a triad of traits depicting spaciousness. But they take it a step further by "following" the Great Eastern Sun in their personal journeys to contribute to an enlightened human society. The journey could end as the Sun goes down, but the Great Eastern Sun never sets. The individual must choose to constantly follow its well-lit path.

I went to the Shambhala Meditation Center in Lexington, Ky., and learned the significance of the Great Eastern Sun's imagery while on assignment to observe one of Union College's newest trustees and 1969 graduate, Dr. Sonya Jones, as she taught a world religions course. Union felt it fit to honor Dr. Jones, not because of her new distinction in leadership, but because she has demonstrated great passion for lifelong learning, a tradition that Union College takes seriously enough to include in its core values.

I witnessed it in action that day at the Shambhala Meditation Center, where Dr. Jones led discussions and offered information to her students, who hurriedly took notes. This scenario is fairly typical except for one defining detail: No one in the class was younger than 50.

Victor Meenach, a 1970 graduate of Marshall University, was an active participant in class that day. Victor isn't working

toward an advanced degree, and earning scholarly honors doesn't interest him. He is interested, rather, in knowing more about things that intrigue him. He's not unique in this respect. There is a large and expanding community of adults, 50 years of age or older, who are eager to broaden their knowledge base on a myriad of subjects. The Bernard Osher Foundation, which offers Dr. Jones's class and many others, is designed specifically for people like Victor. Most of these students hold at least a bachelor's degree, yet there are no prerequisites. There are also no final exams or assessments of any kind, and professors aren't on the payroll. They all show up—professors and students alike—simply because they want to. They are lifelong learners.

Along with her Osher classes, Dr. Jones also teaches traditional college students. In addition to her responsibilities as professor in the Honors Program at the University of Kentucky, Dr. Jones accepted an invitation to be a Union College Distinguished Alumni Scholar this spring. I had the pleasure of being in her traditional class for a course I couldn't resist: "The Holy Spirit: An Exploration of the Sacred Energy in the World's Religions," which covers much of the same content she presents to her Osher class. World religions courses aren't required for my major, but I knew it was a must-take class to continue absorbing the knowledge she extends experientially.

The students who gather at the Shambhala Center share my sentiment. "It wasn't just any class, but this class in particular, that appealed to me," Victor says. Apparently, he's not alone. Appealing to many, the course filled up within a few hours of registration opening. A waiting list was started, which generated so many names, an additional section of the class was offered. The second class quickly reached capacity and led to yet another waiting list.

Dr. Jones was happy to meet the demand. "The Holy Spirit as she appears in all the world religions is one of my major interests, and I never tire of leading discussions which deepen our knowledge of the great, universal energy," she says. From experience, I can vouch that Dr. Jones





shares an arresting enthusiasm with her students, both traditional and nontraditional. This energy is not a product of happenstance. Rather, she attributes it to several key influences: her Methodist foundation, her study of Siddha Yoga as well as Shambhala Buddhism and her Union College mentor, Dr. Frank Merchant, who pushed her to succeed and to continue her education. The impact he made on her life was so profound, in fact, she launched and sponsored The Dr. Frank Merchant Scholarship at Union, endowed in 2010.

"Dr. Frank Merchant and the English department at Union are due a debt of gratitude for their positive influence on my life and work," Dr. Jones says. "Dr. Merchant, in particular, turned a bright young woman who was more interested in partying with the MOB, writing poetry and agitating for peace into a serious scholar."

Could it be that Dr. Jones is to me what Dr. Merchant was to her? My story is still evolving and is now in the early chapters, but I can feel the impact she has made on my life. She first made an impression on me when she spoke at the homecoming banquet in 2010 as an Educators' Hall of Fame inductee. As I listened to her speech, I could tell she was not just a woman of scholarship; she was a woman of great wisdom, and someone I should listen closely to. As if on cue, it was then announced that she would be teaching the world religions course that I've

been discussing here.

Later, I learned of the opportunity to visit the Shambhala Meditation Center as the semester's end was approaching. About a week prior to the visit, she presented the same content to my class at Union that she was due to deliver that day at the Shambhala Center. I was excited nonetheless. I was particularly eager to observe this class because of the spiritual energy I was bound to pick up on, considering the venue. Upon walking through the front door, Dr. Jones greeted me and asked me to remove my shoes, as is the Buddhist custom, and we toured the house before students arrived. It was during this tour that she introduced me to the Great Eastern Sun, the calming effect of which set the tone for the hour that followed and provided stark contrast to the campus classrooms to which I had been accustomed.

I learned only a few new things from the content she presented that day, but I discovered many new things about Dr. Jones, most notably her keen audience awareness. What I found most impressive was that she is able to take one block of information and present it in two entirely different ways to separate student groups. Her traditional college classroom approach is more assessment-driven. Because we had exams and papers to turn in, she lectured in the traditional sense, and we took notes. To help us retain that information, she shared

Lifelong Learning

Opportunities available nationwide

Opportunities abound for nontraditional students who are interested in learning just for the joy of it. The Bernard Osher Foundation, for example, currently funds 117 Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes on university campuses nationwide, with at least one program in each state.

While some Osher students enroll to hone career skills, the vast majority of the senior students—many of whom have retired or are approaching retirement—are there to be lifelong learners.

Programs and coursework vary at each Osher Institute, but they must all adhere to certain criteria. As defined on the Osher Foundation's Web site, requirements are:


- Programs are non-credit
- Programs are developed for adults who are at least 50 years old
- Programs must have university connections and support
- Programs must have robust volunteer leadership
- Courses must be intellectually stimulating

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute's first endowment was awarded in California in 2001, and a national expansion began the following year. For a complete list of Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, as well as course information and other details, visit www.osherfoundation.org.

Road Scholar, formerly known as Elderhostel, Inc., is another organization that offers adult learning opportunities. Though the program name has changed, the tag remains appropriately the same: "Adventures in Lifelong Learning."

Dr. James Garrett of Union's English department has been involved in this program for several years.

"As part of Lincoln Memorial University's Civil War (Road Scholar), I perform three or four times a year at Pine Mountain, usually on a Wednesday night," Dr. Garrett says. "My program consists of traditional Civil War music combined with occasional readings from period and contemporary sources. The entire program lasts around 75 minutes."

For more information, go to www.road scholar.org. 



personal anecdotes. She shared personal stories with the group in Lexington, as well, but on a much deeper level. At one point during the class, she shared with students personal experiences from her spiritual journey. She encouraged discussions and questions from both classes and allowed the older learners to guide where the discussions or questions might lead. Dr. Jones gave a part of herself, to different degrees, to students in both classes to help each one succeed according to his/her own definition of success, whether it be earning a specific grade or knowing enough about a subject to gain personal growth.

The students at the Shambhala Center made commitments to be lifelong learners. Dr. Jones, who committed herself to the same concept years ago with the encouragement of her mentor, is helping each of them fulfill it. I have gained inspiration by being her eager student.

So the answer is yes. Dr. Jones will be my Dr. Merchant, and serve as my mentor while I continue my journey toward becoming a lifelong learner. Along the way, I'll eventually define my personal success, whether it's an advanced degree or soaking up knowledge solely for self-fulfillment. Whatever the case, a love for learning will guide me like the symbolic Sun that refuses to set, so that I may choose to forever follow its well-lit path. 