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K-STATE COURSES ON CRIME AND CRIMINALS ATTRACT MANY STUDENTS AND PROVIDE INFORMATION USEFUL IN REAL-LIFE AND EXTREME-LIFE SITUATIONS

MANHATTAN — When Kansas State University graduate student Lindsay Weber-Rowley was held hostage in her home this fall, she used her knowledge of the criminal mind to escape the situation unharmed.

Weber-Rowley, who studies lifespan human development, said her calm demeanor and tactfulness in the situation were derived from knowledge she gained in undergraduate criminology classes taught by K-State's L. Sue Williams, associate professor of sociology. Williams teaches several popular courses on topics in criminology, including classes about serial killers and the death penalty.

Though everyone might not face extreme situations like Weber-Rowley did, the professor said her classes are applicable to all of her students.

"In the courses, we see that there's not a lot of separation between us and the people we call monsters," Williams said. "That's a really big awakening for the students. We learn that criminals are people, and we too often think of them as objects that we don't want to deal with or confront."

Weber-Rowley and her husband were at their house in Dover on Sept. 12 when a man who was wanted for multiple crimes invaded their home. Weber-Rowley said she thinks her knowledge of criminals allowed her and her husband to convince the man to go to sleep so they could escape.

"I understood the man who broke into our home," she said. "One of the things we tried hard to do was get inside his head and, without him knowing it, we wanted to take control. We had him trust us, and I believe that this came from my knowledge of how violent criminals think."

K-State offers a criminology emphasis for students who major in sociology and also graduate coursework in criminology. Williams said some of her students plan careers in criminal justice, but other students attend her classes because of the alluring subject matter.

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"I think fascination draws students to the courses," Williams said. "The subjects are different, intriguing and mystifying. They're something students don't know very much about, but they've heard small bits of information, much of which is inaccurate."

She said students often are surprised to learn that criminals are not criminals all the time and that they might even be doing good deeds in their communities. By learning about the criminal mind, Williams said students also learn much about themselves.

"We often have very similar backgrounds to the people we call serial killers, but nevertheless our situations in life have been somewhat different," she said. "We have been able to rise above those situations – not simply by individual will, but also because we have been incredibly lucky."

Because her subject material can contain graphic details, Williams said students are sometimes horrified when they learn about different crimes and criminals. However, she has been teaching classes on crime and serial killers for 10 years and said students continue to be fascinated by the subject matter.

"I think it is part of our natural curiosity to want to know about the unknown," she said. "Once we get in the classroom, we find some very surprising knowledge, not just about killers but about human beings and human interaction and how important ties to other people are."

Williams' other classes include a course on crime, media and culture where students learn about the myths of crime and criminals, as well as about the people who create those myths. She has experts in various fields of criminal justice present their perspectives of criminals to the class. A new course she will be teaching in spring 2010 centers on the construction of the criminal mind and will look at the debate of nature versus nurture.

One of Williams' favorite classes to teach is about women and crime. For the class, she has the students do a project where they write and correspond with a female inmate, and toward the end of the course the students meet the inmate to whom they have been writing. She said students are often anxious about meeting inmates.

"They're frightened of the inmates and frightened of being uncomfortable or of knowing a criminal," she said. "They're also frightened because they find out the line between inmates and themselves is very thin. Anytime you erase the 'us and them' barrier, you have to deal with the even more difficult issue that there really isn't such a hard separation between good and evil."

Williams sometimes does a similar writing project in her basic criminology class, which Weber-Rowley participated in. Weber-Rowley, who would like to get a doctorate in forensic psychology and then pursue a career with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, said her knowledge from Williams' courses has helped her understand criminals, not just by the crimes they commit but also through other aspects of their lives.

"You can't pick out a criminal just by looking at them," Weber-Rowley said. "They look just like you and me. They work with us, go to our church, go to our schools and protect our communities. So many good people in this world make bad decisions, and these classes taught me to put myself in everyone else's shoes. I truly learned the meaning of empathy."