SU professor speaks at Smithsonian about community outreach and heritage

Faye McMahon, a Syracuse University professor known for her work with local immigrant and refugee folk artists, recently gave an invited lecture at the Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies in Washington, D.C. McMahon’s address, “Facilitation and Collaboration Working for Cultural Democracy,” was part of a public series held in recognition of colleagues working in the fields of community outreach and heritage. The Aug. 11 event occurred in the National Museum of African Art and was co-presented by the center and the Smithsonian Heritage Months Steering Committee.

“It was an honor to be invited to speak,” says McMahon, a research anthropology professor in The College of Arts and Sciences and Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, as well as an instructor for SU’s honors and Soling programs. “It was also a great opportunity to stress the importance of creative cultural exchange. The arts go a long way toward creating community cohesion, as immigrants and refugees adjust to their new homeland.” McMahon was accompanied by Benjamin Kamar Virgilio, 24-year-old Sudanese-DiDinga refugee who spoke and performed the “Nyakorot,” a traditional dance of celebration.

For more than a decade, McMahon has used the arts to bridge the gap between the growing population of immigrants in inner-city Syracuse and Utica and the broader Central New York community. From 2005 to earlier this year, she served as founding director of SU’s Folk Arts Initiative, helping resettled refugees from Burma, Bosnia, Congo, Kosovo, Liberia, Russia and Sudan. Out of this initiative grew other projects, including the
popular Folks Arts Series, devoted to local refugee and immigrant music and art, and an honors course in ethnography, taught in conjunction with last year’s Syracuse Symposium, the theme of which was “migration.” A renowned author and folklorist, McMahon recently won the prestigious Chicago Folklore Prize for “Not Just Child’s Play: Emerging Tradition and the Lost Boys of Sudan” (University Press of Mississippi, 2007). Earlier this year, she established a community lending library at SU with more than 650 of her own books, journals and videos on folklore and folk arts.

“Public performances expose audiences to unfamiliar art forms, increasing their mainstream acceptance and fostering an understanding of different cultures,” says McMahon. “These performances also benefit new immigrants, bolstering their self-esteem, increasing family stability, building a sense of community and ultimately easing their integration into American society.”

McMahon is a former Fulbright Scholar who earned a Ph.D. in folklore and folk arts from University of Pennsylvania.

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