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CHEMISTRY AND SHAKESPEARE

WRITTEN BY KAITLIN SCHULER. PHOTOS BY SYDNEY FINE & RIVAN STINSON. DESIGNED BY CIERA CLAYBORNE.

A professor of English and a professor of chemistry may seem to have nothing in common, but both Professor Linda Gregerson and Chemistry Lecturer Kathleen Nolta agreed on one thing: they love teaching at the University. "I love the students," Nolta said. "I wouldn't do it without the students…and I really like the interactive nature of teaching." Gregerson loves teaching so much that she once skipped class to perfect her lecture notes. "I stayed in my office and class was at ten, but I was having such a good time that I convinced myself class wasn't until eleven. I just didn't show up because I was working so hard on my lecture." What she cherishes most, however, are the times when students open her eyes to something new. "There are often moments every semester…when students will change my mind (or) reveal to me something that I haven't thought about," she explained. "It's why this is such a lucky profession to be in. We're actually paid to keep learning. How lucky is that?"

Nolta, a native of Livonia, Michigan, is a University alumna with a BA in cellular molecular biology and chemistry. She later received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in biochemistry and now teaches organic chemistry and biochemistry at Michigan. She was not always heading towards a career involved in science though. "I started as an English major, so I don't think I ever put on blinders for one particular field," she said. "Every decision I make is based on if I'll have fun with it. If you're in a career that you feel trapped by, you're not going to serve your purpose or the people you're working with." According to current and previous students, Nolta manages to make her lectures interactive and exciting, even in classes full of hundreds of students. "I don't do anything to be memorable or interactive, I just like to have fun," she explained in response to this praise. Her most unique qualities as a lecturer are the fact that she always covers three blackboards in her organic chemistry lectures – every inch but never more – as well as never planning a written lecture. "It's in my head but it's never written. If I try to write it, I feel like it won't be new to me and that I'm going by a script. What good is that when someone asks a question that you aren't ready for?" As for the boards, Nolta commented that after the first term she taught in the 1800 Chem lecture hall, she knew her obsession would forever be to fill every inch of board from upper left to lower right. Although she loves lecturing and teaching, Nolta is not a public speaker. "I don't like to do (public speaking) at all, but teaching isn't that way," she explained. "People laugh at me when I say I don't like crowds…(and) my parents still think it's hilarious that I will voluntarily go in front of 500 students routinely." Sitting in on one of her classes while she talks passionately about chemistry and asks her students to do the wave, no one would ever guess that she was not a crowd lover. Nolta typically keeps her life outside of chemistry to herself, but she did mention her interesting tattoo obsession. "It's an addiction. I only put on tattoos that mean something to me, but not much of it shows. I remember getting my first tattoo and leaving thinking, 'Oh I know what I want to get next.' You're still feeling the pain but you want another." She has some that represent her children, though she explained that her children would never get tattoos. "I'm an eccentric but I have the most conservative children. They're both now at the age where I would've started it, too." She may be eccentric, but Nolta's eccentricity and passion are what helps her students make their way through some of the hardest classes offered at the University.

Gregerson similarly did not start off on the path towards English professorship. "I worked in the theatre for awhile and by the time I graduated from college I had started a Ph.D. program which meant I intended to teach," she explained. "I took a leave from that and worked in the theatre (again) for awhile, but I always had the sense that I would go back." Gregerson grew up in Illinois and has a multitude of degrees: a BA from Oberlin College, an MA from Northwestern University, an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop and a Ph.D. from Stanford. She has published two literary criticisms and five books of poetry, including one recently published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, *The Selvage*. On her published works, Gregerson said, "One is always supposed to love the most recent book of poems, though I do have a special place in my heart for my second book, *The Woman Who Died in Her Sleep*. Each poem individually had a real urgency about it – they weren't written because I thought I should write it, but because they needed to be written." Gregerson did not start of with a love for poetry though. "I was actually particularly frightened of it – I fled for a long time in the other direction. I had a very traumatic experience when I was in fifth grade: we had to write poems and I wrote a particularly stupid one. I (eventually) learned how to really read poetry – historical poetry – way before I would even touch contemporary poetry." Overcoming her fear has gotten her far though: she has received numerous awards for her work with Renaissance poetry and American poetry and she teaches classes in Renaissance works and creative writing. Her classes are largely discussion-based, but she challenges her students to ask questions and think deeply about their readings, although the readings are usually much different from what college-age students typically read. She said that she plans on continuing to teach as well as publish more works. She also advised anyone looking into publishing their own creative works to "read broadly, send to (places) you admire and where you would be in welcome company. Don't be discouraged if the poems or the story come back – you send it right out again."

Both Nolta and Gregerson represent the women that the University hopes to turn out into the world. They love their students and have passion for their area of study, and are always ready to help those students who are willing to ask for it. And Michigan can continue to proudly claim them as their own.

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