

# THE NEIU ENGLISH DEPARTMENT— BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME!

NEIU ENGLISH DEPARTMENT ALUMNI NEWS

Spring 2021

## From the Chair...

Sure we “look forward” to face-to-face programming and events this fall, but as you will see later in this issue, our students’ DESIRE to get back to normal, and their wisdom in availing themselves of the vaccine has us feeling something like “back to normal” even in the middle of May, as 35 to 40 of us met at Peterson Park, vaxxed and unmasked, to celebrate English Department graduates. It was a wonderful sign of this department’s durability, creativity, and community.

No doubt the challenges were real. By my estimate, a solid 15% of our majors “stopped out”—and for all kinds of reasons. For some, losing work hours made it financially impossible to continue for the time being (a problem we’re raising an endowment to alleviate in the future); for others, “remote” learning was either just too exhausting or “not for them;” for all of us, it has been psychologically trying and physically challenging, so I’m sure some just simplified their lives for a time. **Come fall, we are ON again, full speed.** Read in this issue, how we managed in the last months of this historic trial, and how the pandemic has led to new initiatives to alleviate some ongoing problems it revealed.

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- Tina “Mama Bear” Garcia testifies to need for Compassionate Learning in TED Talk at NEIU
- The 82 and Creative Writing sponsor ZOOM readings
- A New Program: Alumni Mentors and Partners
- English Department Celebrates 2020 and 2021 graduates at first “post-COVID” outdoor event!
- A Fast Start for our English Dept Support Fund Endowment Initiative
- Alumni News and Accomplishments—Despite it All...

## THE BIG NEWS

### New ENROLLMENT INITIATIVES

What better inducement to enroll at NEIU than the offer of **free tuition for first-time full time freshmen?** And for transfer students, what might be more convenient than getting a **free 3-credit course** for those taking six credits or more their first term on campus?

These new offers, organized under the moniker NEIU for YOU, and the designed by **Associate Provost Frank Gaytan** and Vice President Manish Kumar, are meant to jump-start our enrollment post-COVID and take full advantage of CARES Act and other government support.

“Access to education has become even more critical for our students at this unprecedented moment in history,” said Northeastern President Gloria J. Gibson, commenting on this initiative. “It’s also a critical moment for education institutions to do better at providing that access.”



Frank Gaytan



Stef Hernandez reads at The 82 Student Salon on April 29

# READINGS from The 82

## Press on, via ZOOM



Julia Shimada

Our Creative Writing Program's Reading Series, The 82, continued strong this spring with its event on April 6, featuring Chicago writers Tara Betts, Audrey Petty and Michael Zapata. On April 29, the Student Salon edition of the 82 brought us the work of Xochitl Garcia, Hailey Jurasek, [Estefania Hernandez](#), Sabi Reza, and [Julia Shimada](#), with both events well attended.

As anyone who performs will tell you, having an audience in front of you changes or even produces the performance, and so I'm sure both readers and attendees will be relieved and pleased to have our creative writing in person this fall. That said, the ZOOM era has reminded us of a possibility we've had since, well, "Skype" has been around—to allow audiences like the one reading this newsletter—our alumni—wherever they happen to be—to join us at these events. Most of our Readings take place in the late afternoon or evening, but if you're still at work, and the boss "catches" you listening to this sort of ear-porn, well, it will be worth it.

Look on our Social Media for ZOOM links to our next event, if you can't make it to campus (On Facebook, NEIU Creative Writing, or NEIU Alumni and Friends, Bringing it All Back Home; on Instagram, @NEIUEnglish)

**The Stage is Set!**  
April 29 at 5:00 pm  
via ZOOM (email Olivia Cronk for link)  
o-cronk@neiu.edu

**THE 82:STUDENT SALON**

Xochitl Garcia  
Hailey Jurasek  
Estefania Hernandez  
Sabi Reza  
Julia Shimada

Lincolnwood Town Center  
McCormick 3400W  
Kedzie 3200W  
Devon 6400N  
Kimball Brown Line 4800N  
Belmont Blue Line



# The 82: Writers

## Reading

TUESDAY, APRIL 6, 2021  
ONLINE AT 5:00 PM



TARA BETTS



AUDREY PETTY

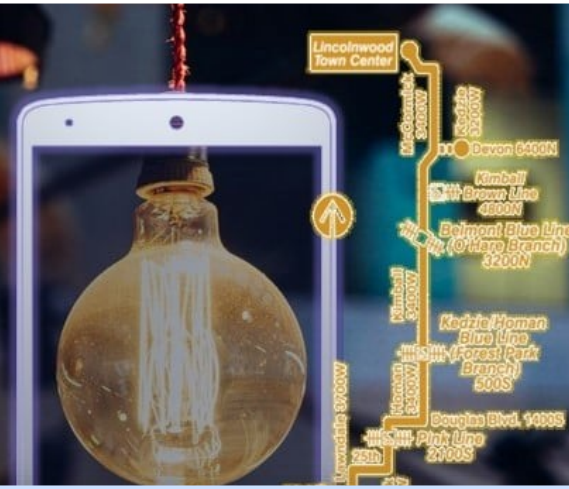


MICHAEL ZAPATA

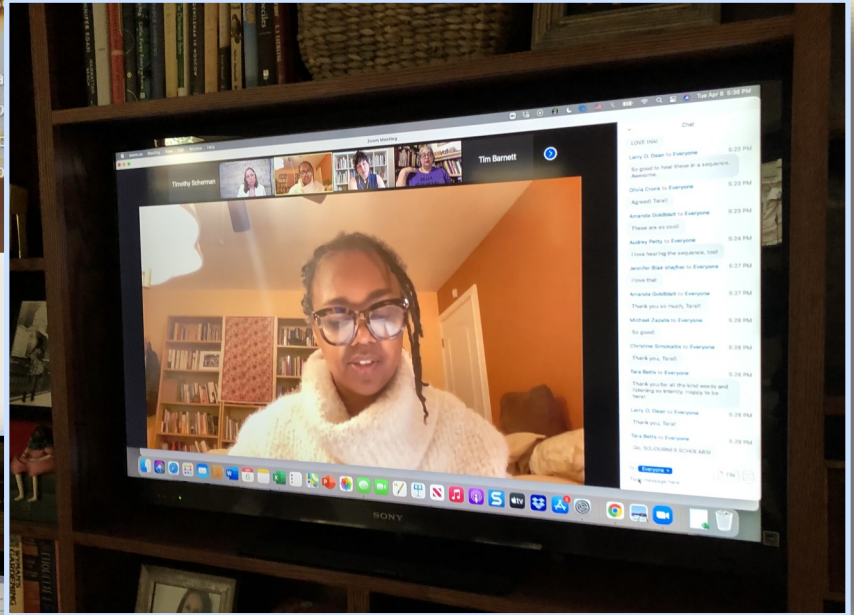
Tara is the author of *Break the Habit*, *Arc & Hue*, and the forthcoming *Refuse to Disappear*. In addition to her work as a teaching artist and mentor for young poets, she has taught at several universities, including Rutgers University and University of Illinois-Chicago.

Audrey Petty writes fiction, poetry and creative nonfiction. Her stories have been published in such journals as *African American Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Callaloo*, and *The Massachusetts Review*. She is the editor of *High Rise* and *Voices from Chicago Public Housing*.

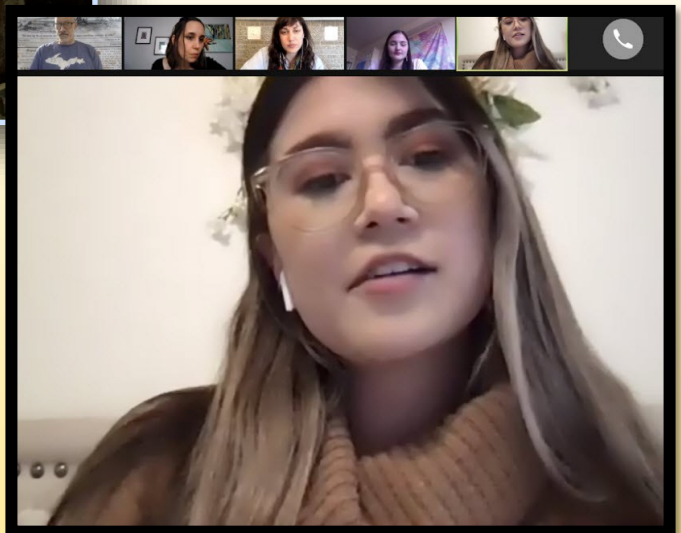
Michael Zapata is a founding editor of *MAKE Literature Magazine* and the author of the novel *The Lost Book of Moreau*, winner of the 2020 *Chicago Review of Books* for Fiction. He is on the core faculty of *StoryStudio* and the MFA faculty of Northwestern University.



Author Michael Zapata



Author Audrey Petty



Estefania Hernandez

# Alumni News!

We continue to follow :

**Katrina Underwood '20** has a new job, writing “I'm excited which is kind of surreal. I'm working for **Books4Cause** in Skokie with Nick Pecucci who also graduated from the English Department--I'm pretty sure you know him. He and I specifically go through the antique, rare and first editions that are donated to research and price them. We donate kids/young adult books to schools in Africa and locally, so I'm working to connect with CPS schools. We have a free book store in Avondale where anyone can come and take a book or people are welcome to come and volunteer. Last time I checked, my boss was still looking for someone to start for 2021 at Avondale, if you know anyone at NEIU that would be interested the info is below. This is a perfect job for a student who's doing night classes or someone who is looking for something a little more laid back.”



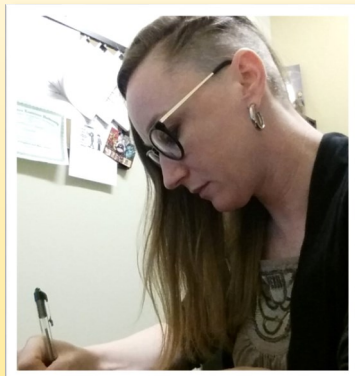
Clif Frei

I always wondered why one of our best writers, **Clifton Frei '21**, has taken such a leisurely path toward the degree. Or I guess I knew he had a job, but not until last January did I get the details. Sounds as if this is a very solid position, but one he may be moving on from sometime soon: “I am the Client Development Manager (soon to be Director) for a small recruiting firm (headhunters). It's basically my job to reach out to companies and sell them on our services, negotiate contracts, discuss and refine their hiring needs, and disseminate information to the rest of the company. I do a bunch of other stuff, but that's the gist of it. I think I could do the same sort of thing for a nonprofit or something like it while I consider what I want to do next for school.”

It was great to catch up with **Dawn Justice '99** through a former colleague in History, George Gerdow. Dawn now lives in Amherst, VA, and celebrated 30 years of marriage just this March (congrats!) . She and her husband have raised eight (count'em) children—homeschooling them all—now ranging from 6 to 23 . Her eldest, Noah was married last May and is studying mechanical engineering. The couples' ministry is called “Awesome Science Media,” and has produced over 24 science DVDs from a Biblical worldview. The best part of the work, Dawn writes, is traveling as a family in their 36-foot RV. In seven years, they've driven more than 80,000 miles to national Parks and other venues to interview “ologists” of all kinds.



Dawn has been busy writing as well, with a self-published reflective journal entitled “Rachel Weeps, Refusing to be Comforted” now available on Amazon, and a blog entitled “Summer Came Before Winter Was Over,” on the journey of losing her mother to early onset Alzheimer's, which is in the process of formatting for publication.



Chrys Hart Albarado

**Chrys Hart Albarado '08** got back to us in March, admitting “I have been terrible about keeping in touch with the department, but I think about y'all often and really can't put into words how much I still appreciate the time I spent at NEIU and how grateful I am that I stumbled into my English major. I can't believe how long it's been.” Catch that “y'all?” Chrys has been pursuing a PhD at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and has been hugely involved with their annual Grad Student association. Her work on the Graduate Student Conference there, The Global Souths, and the **Rougarou** Fabulist/Speculative Fiction contest sounds fascinating. She reminds us: General submissions for **Rougarou** are open for poetry, creative non-fiction, flash fiction and visual arts: <https://rougarou.org/submit>

Susan Landwer MA '20 sent us a new update in March as well, sharing her experiences teaching in COVID and new duties she's been assigned: "This semester I'm teaching Foundations in Rhetoric. I have 19 students with some students on-line via Teams due to student quarantine and most in-person Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:30-1:45pm. I'm really enjoying it. Next semester, I have been slated to be the liaison between the English department and the Business/Engineering departments to facilitate an interdisciplinary relationship to include humanities in their course content both for undergraduates and post-graduate business training. With my business background, it seems to be a natural transfer of my skills. This will replace teaching next semester, but should make me more competitive after graduation. We have a second meeting tomorrow, which I'm preparing for today. That's pretty much all for now! I spoke with Elias Cepeda '20 a couple of weeks ago as well and am thrilled about his acceptance into Southern Illinois!"



Susan Landwer

Carolyn Aguila BA '20 checked in with Brad Greenburg in February with an update on her new position at **2nd Story**, where she is managing partnerships with corporate, nonprofit, government and education sectors. But there was more: "I'm also writing to share that I've recently been a panelist for the State of Illinois Artist Fellowship in Poetry program. The Illinois Arts Council rotates its panelists, and I was asked to recommend individuals for upcoming grant panels. If you're interested, I would like to add your name to this list. As a published writer, I think you'd add a world of perspective to their fiction program."



Sonia McCallum

Last year, newly tenured Professor Ryan Poll offered students a place to publish in **PopMatters**. More recently, former English Chair and now Associate Dean Tim Libretti reached out to students to publish their work in a new Medium.com site, **Engendered**. One of the first to take Libretti up on the offer was Sonia McCallum '05, whose [essay on "The Legacy of Disrespect"](#) was published there on January 5. Sonia has been the "Executive Wordsmith" at the professional writing boutique firm [The Word Yard, LLC](#) since 2015.

Lots of us in the department fondly recall the days when Michelle Emery '13 greeted students for us in the English Department Main Office (was that before Pat?), but we caught up with Michelle on LinkedIn in April. "I do miss working in the University environment and with students," she writes. "Hope you and all the other instructors/professors are surviving this odd time we are living through." For the past four years, Michelle has been at **TherapyEd** as course coordinator for the OT/OTA department. [ok what's that] "So I deal directly with students, instructors, prep course information for our prep books," she explains, "and also do a variety of admin and customer service tasks, all sorts of things really. Our company is a publishing company for 5 study textbooks and we also offer exam prep courses for OTs and PTs. You can still catch Michelle on Facebook, where she's usually posting pictures "about wilderness adventures" she's still having—though as I recall, this Montana woman had never seen a moose? She's still looking for the time and opportunity to return to us for courses toward her MFA.

Also caught up with Matt Kiefer '06 via LinkedIn, who let us know "one of my career goals is to get involved helping undergrads get into journalism. I'm hoping to teach someday, but I'm open to helping out in other ways where I can." As you can see on [page 9](#) of this newsletter, Matt, we definitely have ideas for you this fall!

Kris Over heard that Ryan Day '06 is coming to Milwaukee for the Midwest Modern Language Association conference this coming November and will be in Chicago on either end of his visit. When we get the final dates, an alumni panel of scholars may be in the offing! Stay tuned.

Nadia (Askar) Mustafa '13 has long offered her advice and her contacts for jobs in trade publishing, but she will be leaving her position with BNP media before this newsletter goes to electronic "press." "They are a great place for experience, and will promote you quickly in terms of job title," she reports, "but I'm still making the same amount I was seven years ago." That's a shame, but well, at least there's some really wonderful news to share too (pictured here)—congratulations to Nadia and her family.





# VAXXED AND UNMASKED: Students and Faculty Get BACK together at May Peterson Park Event

To be honest, heck, I didn't know if we were ready.

But with serious prodding from Ryan Poll, Emily Garcia and Julie Kim, and ready aid from Office Admin Hilary Jirka, we found a venue, ordered food, sent out an RSVP and held our breath. Would anyone be ready—here in May—to come out to a graduation celebration, undisguised (aka, unmasked)?

Well heck yeah. The “yes” votes came trickling, then pouring in, and with the CDC blowing the “well it's OK outside if you're fully vaccinated” all-clear, we went ahead with the motto, “trust the science, and trust each other,” and a fine time was had by all.

Emily Garcia came up with the capital idea of a PIÑATA on which our graduates might vent their COVID resentment, and each of our attending grads from 2020 and 2021 took a good whack at the thing, until mild-mannered military veteran Marty Davis (that there, as you remember, is called “alliteration” my friends) blew the striped COVID stand-in to pieces. Each grad received an NEIU English T-shirt, blazoned with our ensign, the Turtle, for their pains in the activity. (And more English Dept merch should arrive this fall for those interested!)

Tim Scherman made some pizza to supplement the Domino's selections decided upon, and he got carried away with the number as usual, leaving some of the commercial boxes untouched to go home with the last of the lingerers.



## Tina García Advocates for Reflection and Compassion in Graduate Level Teaching

“Today I’m talking about grad school, but really I’m talking about any experience...entering an environment that is known to be challenging, draining, and capable of getting you to question your own worth.”



So begins Tina García, now Associate Dean, College of Communications and Behavioral Sciences at Elgin Community College, at her [TEDx talk last month](#). Her inspiration was her experience, after finishing her Ph.D. dissertation, of losing all the adrenaline that had carried her through grad school, only to crash completely, exhausted. Why?

“Grad school has a compassion problem,” Tina explains. “If you ask someone in grad school what it’s like, [you’ll find] it’s become synonymous with struggle, and suffering.... It’s almost as if you’re not having the real experience if you aren’t nearly falling apart.”

What made Tina realize things just don’t have to be this way was her experience

“in recovery” of sorts, learning the martial art known as Wing Chun. While she expected her experience of this challenging practice to test her physically and mentally, the teaching she observed there was a model of both discipline and compassion that led to a new awareness of her capabilities, not a constant reminder that she must be better, no matter where she started from, her goals, or her background. Their attitude was “this is challenging...what you feel is valid...and you will improve over time.” “This is not what I expected, but I’ve come to realize, this is exactly what I deserved,” she says.

Contrasting this experience with what she experienced in grad school and what many others are testifying to across the country—especially people with multiple intersecting pressures on them—people with families, people with full time jobs—people of color—highlights the need for graduate programs to take a hard look at their present practices.

“What could grad school look like if it was more compassionate?” she asks. “I’m not talking about reducing academic rigor or letting people skate by if they are unwilling to do the work, but what if we treated compassion not as a luxury but as a matter of equity? What could it look like?”

Tina’s “wish list” for graduate education requires institutions to resist the usual urges to present the usual excuses to avoid change:

- 1) Develop mental grading policies and inclusive learning design—are your current policies still valid?
- 2) Consider reasonable reading and writing workloads—are students retaining information? Are they using it?
- 3) Set aside dedicated time for students to reflect on their experience, ask questions and voice concerns
- 4) Provide access to faculty and staff willing to share their experiences with challenge—vulnerability can be a life-line
- 5) Communicate the message that it’s not IF you will finish but WHEN, and that you’re fighting alongside your students.

# Helping Students With JUST THAT MUCH NEED

As we announced in our last newsletter, we've begun a campaign to ENDOW a fund—the **English Student Assistance Fund**—to help students in need. Specifically, this fund is designed to provide stop-gap support for those students who for whatever reason are, for example, close to graduating, but missing a few credits and behind on their tuition bill, or through some family difficulty, unable to pay the remainder of a bill and thus not able to register—forcing them to stop out for a term.

So many times, even \$500 means the difference between a student forced to stop in their tracks and one who can press on to their degree.

By raising the minimum for an ENDOWED fund (a one-time effort, though we hope to continue to grow the fund and help more after achieving the minimum), every year interest accrued will help at least one student who otherwise would have had to stop-out.

YOUR RESPONSE, so far, has been very strong, and we hope you'll continue to follow the lead of those who've established our matching fund of over \$4000.

This is a wacky illustration, but what it shows is—so far, we *have all but achieved* our match for 2021—and it's still June! To endow the fund, we will need a total of \$25,000. We hope to achieve that in three years, but the faster we can raise the money, the sooner we can help students in need in a permanent, ongoing way.

Finally, we are well aware of the technical difficulties you once faced when visiting the university's "giving" page ([neu.edu/giving](http://neu.edu/giving)). If you wanted to give to the English Department, you needed to first press "Other," then type in English Department, etc. *You were never sure if the money was getting to us.*

Well, no more.

**We now have our own giving page, [neu.edu/EnglishFunds](http://neu.edu/EnglishFunds)**

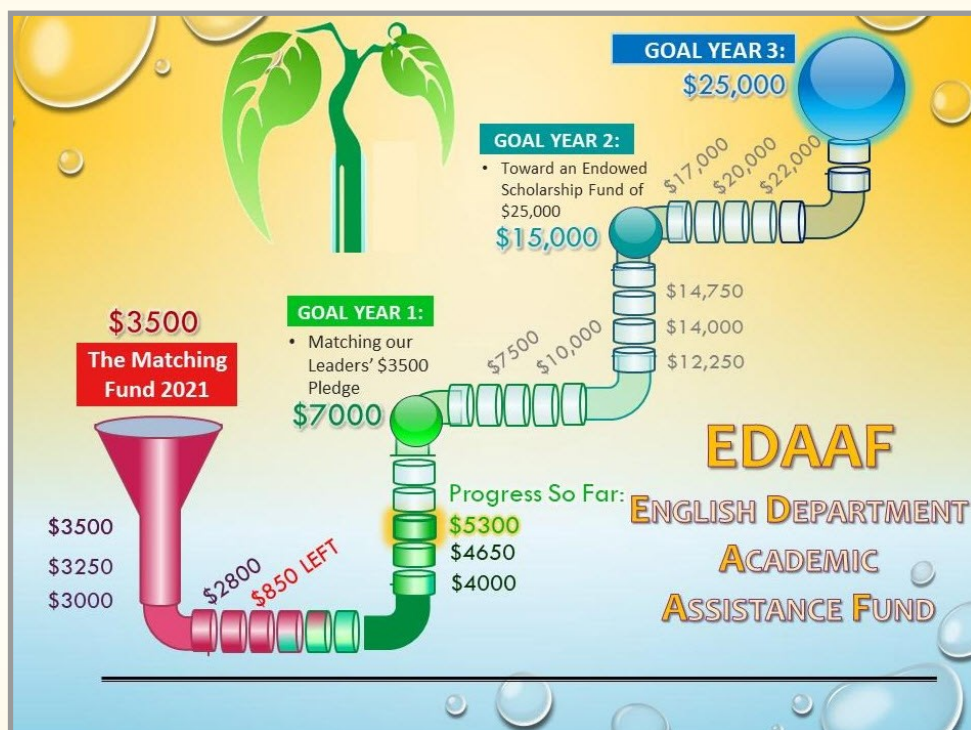
There, with the drop down menu, you can designate your gift specifically for

—The English Student Assistance Fund (our growing fund, toward a full endowment)

—The Writer's Series (this is the fund specifically dedicated to bringing writers to campus through the 82 Series)

OR

—the General English Fund (funding research and travel for students and other sponsored or co-sponsored events)



# A CALL FOR ALUMNI MENTORS!

## COME BACK—TALK BACK—

One of our biggest challenges in English is answering our majors who say, “I love everything about the department, but right now I have no idea what I should I do with my degree.”

Of course the answer “anything you want,” however true, does not suffice.

BUT YOU, as successful alumni, DO KNOW what one can do with an English degree—what you have done, or what others have in your profession.

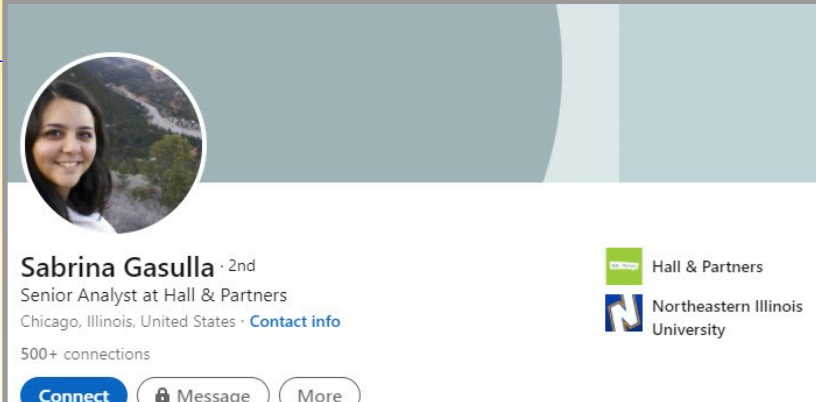
THIS FALL, we begin a new Friday program, our Alumni “Come Back Talk Back” series.

One Friday each month we will feature one of YOU, we hope, answering the questions of both undergraduate and graduate students about

- —your experience on the job market (how long did it take you to get work?)
- —how you’ve used the skills you learned as an English major
- —how to handle interviews in your particular field—what to emphasize?
- —where you plan to go from where you are now?

YOU are one of our students’ most valuable resources, so let’s organize a way for you to help you, help them!

**INTERESTED? Email the Chair at [t-Scherman@neiu.edu](mailto:t-Scherman@neiu.edu)—or expect a call soon!**



**Sabrina Gasulla** · 2nd  
Senior Analyst at Hall & Partners  
Chicago, Illinois, United States · [Contact info](#)  
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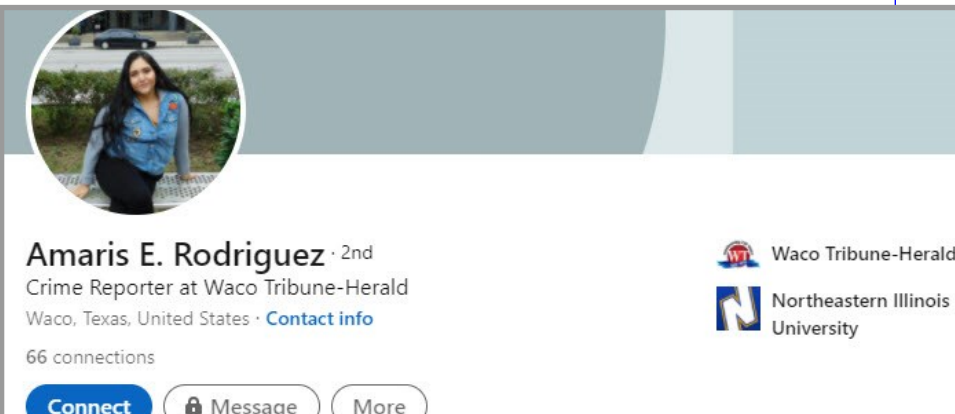
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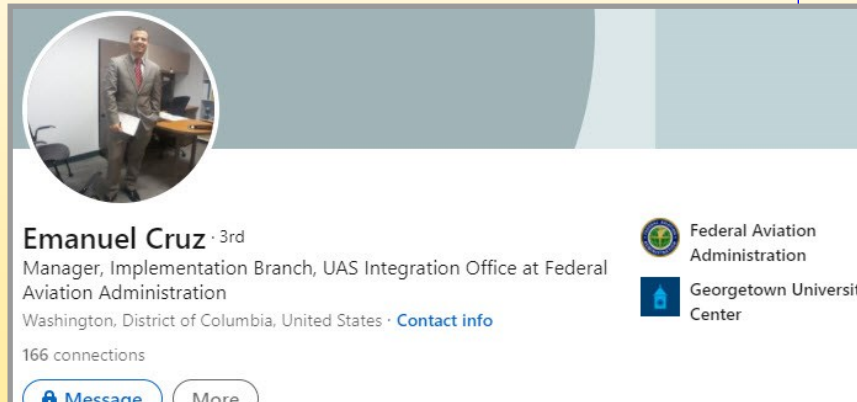
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Federal Aviation Administration  
Georgetown University Center

# For Teaching MA Alum AARON LEIVA, COVID Not the Only Health Challenge Providing New Perspective



"Shortly after graduating with my fancy master's degree a few years ago (MA, 2017), I was able to get a decent enough raise from **Science & Arts Academy** to get myself a nice little apartment in downtown Des Plaines....After years of failed attempts of regularly attending a gym, I bought a bicycle to see if I still enjoyed riding as much as I did when I was a kid, and it turns out I still did! I started riding it everywhere and thought about ditching my car but decided it was important to have options. Around this time I even started attending a jiu-jitsu gym because it seemed like a good idea to be a string bean grappling with people outweighing me by 100 pounds.

I learned I enjoyed the physical challenge (I was never an athlete) and the metaphorical aspects one could pull from the martial arts. It is like poetry in motion, but with oceans of sweat, stinky gas, and cauliflower ears. I was probably in the best health of my life at that point, which made the heart attack completely unexpected.

The cardiologist said that my blood-  
reason why I had a massive blood  
at least there didn't seem to be any  
cessitate a change in lifestyle. He  
tions to keep my new stent good

*"I was probably in the  
best health of my life  
at that point, which  
made the heart  
attack completely  
unexpected."*

work and such didn't point to any specific  
clot lodged in my widowmaker, but hey,  
underlying health issues that would ne-  
gave me a handful of different medica-  
and to scramble my brains.

Cardiac rehab was interesting. That  
ever be the most capable person in  
there was twice my age. At this  
the physical activities I used to do,  
stairs, because I was no longer able to do that without losing my breath....[But] I was more concerned with  
how bad the medications fogged up my thinking. This was the worst part because so much of my identity  
and way of being in the world depends on my ability to think. Dark times.

It took awhile but I had clearance to start riding my bike again and even return to the jiu-jitsu gym. They let  
me grapple at the speed I needed, and my favorite training partners understood the situation so that  
worked out. I was even taken off the worst of the heart medications that was ruining my ability to think so  
everything was looking up. This was last March. And then COVID hit and I've pretty much been alone in my  
apartment for the past year because I'm in the high risk category now. There are days when I really want to  
get excessively negative about the pandemic, the isolation, the political climate, and the 8,000 other unfor-  
tunate situations and injustices in the world, but then I have to think that I'm so lucky to just be alive and  
employed and relatively healthy during this time."

**Needless to say, we're all really glad Aaron can now look back at this experience with a new perspective. While he's been frustrated by the experience teaching in a private school, his goal may to shift to public high school teaching (his plan all along) or work with prison populations. Good Luck, Aaron--and I bet Tim Barnett could give you some great leads on roles in the latter effort.**

# THE MATCHING CAMPAIGN!!

What alums already do for students in the English Department at NEIU is very significant—sponsoring events, speakers, supporting their research, travel, and professional development. Many of you have even provided internships or job opportunities for our graduates. And even with COVID shutting down travel, we've found creative ways with your support to help our students complete their degrees and improve their lives!

But as we announced last summer, at this point our goal is to establish more support, specifically, for our students in need. COVID19 has hit NEIU's demographic the very hardest, and when a student is faced with the question of whether to pay the rent or pay tuition, the answer is obvious.

And our matching campaign is still going. From \$3500 earlier in the year, the matching fund received another boost of \$1000—so let's try to take FULL ADVANTAGE of this fund and raise \$9,000 toward our goal in 2021 (matching that \$4500)!

So even if you've never given before, please JOIN US as we move to the next level! Perhaps you want to help us with our Student Assistance endowment, or perhaps you want to make sure we have funds to continue supporting our Creative Writing program's reading series, the 82.

But do it before you forget. Donate today, at [neiu.edu/EnglishFunds](http://neiu.edu/EnglishFunds), and use the easy drop-down menu to tell us where your money should go!

## AND KEEP IN TOUCH!

*New JOB?*

*News in Your LIFE?*

*Change your email?*

**Let us know! Send an email to the Chair, Tim Scherman at: [T-Scherman@neiu.edu](mailto:T-Scherman@neiu.edu)**

**OR**

**Office Admin Hilary Jirka at: [h-jirka2@neiu.edu](mailto:h-jirka2@neiu.edu)  
773/442-5829**

Visit us on the web at [www.neiu.edu/English](http://www.neiu.edu/English) (your stories are up under "Alumni")

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