

# history

## IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE PAST

*Dr. Don Buerk makes history relevant to today's students and discovers his passions in the present*



*by Debbie Richard '02, '04, Assistant Director of Marketing*

**D**r. Don Buerk, Associate Professor of History, is a quiet, unassuming gentleman with a passion for history and interests that cross over disciplines. A Northwest Ohio native, Buerk began his career in education at a public school teaching social studies.

“The opportunity to teach in the higher education system was a chance for me to explore more than just history, but how history is interconnected with the way we learn, what we are now, and where we might go in the future,” says Buerk. “Specializing in history lets me draw on the past to help explain to students today why things are the way they are. Studying the past helps students in more ways than they initially understand.”

Buerk arrived at Defiance College in 1998 and continues to enjoy the opportunities it has presented. His most recent project has been with Defiance College’s Hench Autism Studies Program. “Autism is widely diagnosed today, and it is inevitable that people will be in contact with people who have this condition,” explains Buerk.

Working with the Hench Autism Studies Program is a great example of crossing disciplines within higher education. It’s not often you find a history professor working with a special education program. “It’s interesting that more has been recorded on what we learn, not how,” says Buerk. “History helps us understand the past practices of education and allows us to explore the methods with which we teach, and the ways we learn from how we have been taught.” Understanding these principles makes working with the Hench Autism Studies Program a great fit.

The Hench Autism Studies Program itself is a cross-disciplinary program allowing students to self-select to be part of the courses. All incoming freshman students learn about the program as part of the college's First Year Seminar course. The program prepares students from all majors to better understand those who are different. "Students will find it useful to learn to communicate and exchange information with different people, no matter what area of study they are pursuing," says Buerk.

The Hench Autism Studies Program is now in its second year as a Defiance College program. Buerk likes to see the sophomores, who were the first freshmen to experience the program, participating again and helping to mentor this year's freshmen who have elected to join the program. It's confirmation of a successful endeavor.

Another area where Buerk is able to use his cross-discipline knowledge is working with the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity as an Associate Fellow to Cambodia for three years now, and to Jerusalem. "International relations is the new phenomenon of the 21st century," says Buerk. "It's important for students to travel and broaden their focus. Many students have never traveled outside of the United States. As a veteran traveler, I help them understand the people and processes they will encounter as they travel. As a professor of history, I help them to understand the culture and the background behind why the situations they are encountering exist."

Each trip involves student research projects. Students conduct research and present their research from the McMaster trip both orally and in writing. Buerk uses his cross-disciplinary knowledge to assist the students throughout the process of completing their projects. As an Associate Fellow, he is also responsible for working with the college's library to ensure there are current periodicals available to students as they begin to build a needs assessment and develop research projects. "Students learn to be inspired by what is needed, not what they want to change."

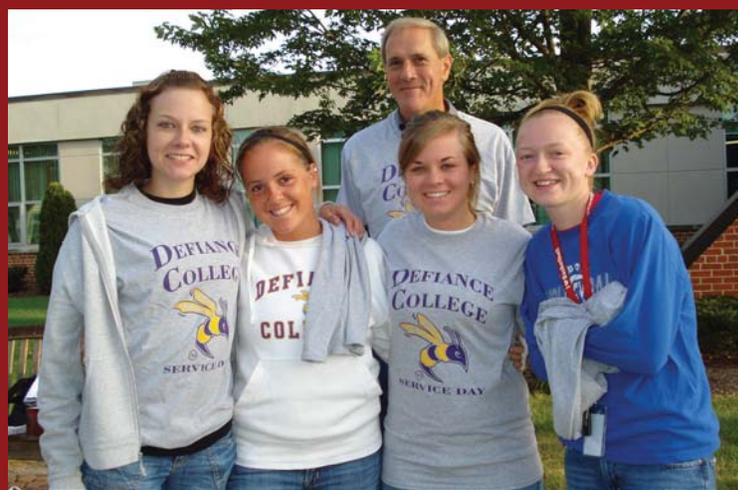
The most recent McMaster trip Buerk participated in was to Cambodia. Becoming acquainted with Defiance College after a speaking engagement, Sophal Leng Stagg from the Southeast Asia Children's Mercy Fund and Cambodian native helped the college identify and meet the needs of Cambodians, including teacher training, medical supplies and training, and business

development. An example of one Cambodian research project taken on by a McMaster student was by Jennifer Creighton. She explored natural birth control methods Cambodian women could use to help control their fertility. She completed her research before the Cambodian trip, and then with the help of Leng Stagg presented her finding to the women of the Cambodia Women's Crisis Center. (*See related story on page 18*)

Buerk also expresses his love of history in other ways. One such example is working with Randy Buchman, emeritus professor and Defiance city historian, to develop a Town and Gown lecture series. The term "Town and Gown" derives itself from 13th - 14th Century Oxford in which a rivalry developed between academia and the townsfolk. No such rivalry exists in the local Defiance community, so our use of the name is ironic in a positive way.

In September, as part of a college course on American Presidencies, the Town and Gown series hosted Gerald Bazer, dean emeritus of Owens Community College, who spoke about the 33rd President, Harry Truman. In October, Buerk presented "Fateful Presidential Elections."

In 2009, there will be a special lecture series to celebrate Lincoln's 200th birthday. Buerk and Buchman have invited to the college national experts Mark Neely, Penn State faculty member and Pulitzer Prize winner, to speak about his book *Lincoln, The Last Best Hope of Earth*, and William Harris, professor emeritus at the University



## PEER MENTORS

One of the components of the Hench Autism Studies Program provides an opportunity for a First-Year Seminar class led by Dr. Don Buerk to study the characteristics of people with autism and then serve as peer mentors to students with autism.

After learning about people with autism, the first-year students serve as peer mentors to students with autism when they are baking for the coffee cart (Bumble Bean Coffee). On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the first-year students work with the students with autism at the coffee cart. The first-year students participate in leisure time activities with the students with autism as well as other activities at the fitness center and during lunch in the College cafeteria.

As part of this year's Freshman Service Day, the DC students participated in a full-day of training at Bittersweet Farms. Bittersweet Farms is located in Whitehouse, Ohio, and is a farm that serves as a residential community for adults with autism. After the training, the first-year students participated in service projects to help Bittersweet Farms prepare for their Fall Festival.

First-year students along with Dr. Buerk and other Defiance College faculty presented their experiences at a national conference entitled "The Challenge of Meeting the Needs of Adolescent Students with Autism: An Opportunity for P-16 Collaborations."

of North Carolina, who will speak on Lincoln as a scholar. Buerk, Buchman and fellow faculty member Michelle Tabit will also give Lincoln-inspired lectures. The lecture series begins in January and will consist of nine lectures examining different facets of Lincoln's life.

"I teach in my spare time," says Buerk, as he laughs. "I enjoy teaching and working with the students at Defiance College. What I learn from my other projects is applicable to the classes I'm teaching. I also enjoy the fact that not only is Defiance College a great place to work, it offers many opportunities to utilize my interests in new and unique ways."

