



Henry  
David  
Thoreau



civil  
disobedience

Model T



Frederick  
Douglass

a man's  
character

self-  
evident



Thomas Jefferson

desire is  
creation



Willa Cather

hope

ErH



*Thomas Jefferson and Krispy Kremes, Pocahontas and  
picture windows, Manifest Destiny and the Mall of America...*

# AMERICAN CONVERSATIONS

*students dig deep into American history, culture and values.*

What  
Makes

America

AMERICA?



donut



**BY PATRICIA GROTT'S KELLY '77**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIC HANSON '77

**I**T WAS THE FIRST DAY of math class, but the students in this urban classroom didn't do much math. They had a conversation instead. Their new Teach for America teacher Maggie Wells '08 had them talk about the number 18. What did it mean to them? They brainstormed. When they turn 18, they can vote or get married. If they add six years to their current age, they will be 18 and have their driver's licenses! Working with numbers, it seemed, might be kind of fun after all.

On this September morning, Wells drew on her experience in the American Conversations program at St. Olaf to open up a new world to her class of Latino and African American sixth-graders.

"Math is very intimidating to many of these students," says Wells. "They're usually grade levels behind, and they come into class assuming they are bad at it. I wanted a way to show them, through all these associations with the number 18, that they actually know a lot about math and that it really does relate to their lives. So I did a 'dense fact' activity like we did in American Conversations."

The part of Kansas City where Wells teaches is, as she calls it, "a complicated area" — extremely poor, 80 percent Latino, the rest African American. Missouri is "a former slave state," she says, "with a lot of hostility among races, with old battles still being fought in some ways, as well as new immigrants trying to carve out a space. It is very American, all of it."

She never imagined being a teacher. She envisioned public policy work or research in a museum or writing or a professorship. American Conversations changed all that.

"Reading Tocqueville and *Walden* and slave narratives and covert newspapers written by women led me to thinking ... education *matters*," says Wells. "All of those people who had given us these ideas, who had built this culture, had had someone teaching them, whether it was formal or not. And I thought, 'there isn't any way to be closer to the heart of America than to be a teacher,'

especially a teacher of kids who have, in large part, been forgotten by the rest of society. I wanted to see whether the American mythology of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps really was possible. I was ready to dive in and be a part of the American story."

## UNPACKING

WHAT MAKES AMERICA AMERICA? American Conversations students spend two years answering that question, using "dense fact" activities that take them on an interdisciplinary adventure that changes forever their notion of what learning is all about.

A dense fact — a concept first introduced by the American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz — can be a person, place, thing or idea, the analysis of which leads to conversations both real and metaphorical, between the past and present, between disciplines, between students and teachers, and between students themselves. Visitors to an American Conversations, or "AmCon," classroom at St. Olaf will undoubtedly find some dense fact activity going on. Professor of Religion L. DeAne Lagerquist says AmCon students use it as a verb: "Can you dense-fact that?" "I can dense-fact anything."

"The dense fact really is the lens through which I see everything now," says Maggie Wells. "Sometimes you just want to be able to turn that part of your brain off and say, 'This really is just a cup of coffee. It doesn't have to be anything more than a cup of coffee.' It kind of gets under your skin."

As an American Conversations lead teacher, Associate Professor of Art History Matt Rohn likes to open his first class with a pack of Marlboro cigarettes, a dense fact that spurs a lively conversation ranging from health to gender issues to colonial Virginia to the tobacco industry to slavery.



"Students get going on the notion that they can take an ordinary package of something and discover an awful lot to think about," says Rohn. "It's an interesting way to look into your world and then well beyond it."

American Conversations assignments call for creativity as well as concrete knowledge. Students have created magazine ads for utopian communities. They have written and performed monologues for unknown persons in Japanese internment-camp photographs. They have analyzed Hudson River School landscape paintings, Jimi Hendrix music and the Model T. They have read Frederick Douglass and Tim O'Brien, Willa Cather, Thomas Jefferson and Henry David Thoreau. They've written papers on Krispy Kreme donuts, given stump speeches for presidential candidates from the mid-1800s, gone on field trips to the Mall of America, presented vaudeville skits and registered people to vote.

American Conversations is contrary to the way in which most students are taught in elementary, middle and high school, where much of what they learn comes directly out of standard textbooks. AmCon professors want their students to "unpack" this way of learning.

"It's actually very Emersonian," explains Rohn. "Ralph Waldo Emerson went out into nature and said 'Look around. You can unpack all you need to know when you go on a walk in the woods.' So we're saying [to our students]: You can do the same. Stroll anywhere, even the Mall of America, and you can have the same experience. All you need is curiosity."

### KEEP YOUR PART GOING RIGHT

THE INSCRIPTION ON THOMAS JEFFERSON'S GRAVE neglects to say that he was president of the United States, but it does note that he founded the University of Virginia.

Thomas Jefferson thought education was critical to democracy. From its beginnings, the American Conversations program has encouraged students to seek to live Jefferson's dream that free and educated citizens should learn to understand what is going on in the world, and to keep their part of it going right, "for nothing can keep it right but their own vigilant and distrustful superintendence."

Professor of History Jim Farrell has two ways of spelling citizen: "with an 's' — for people who just sit around and complain about the way things are going, and with a 'c' — which has a long heritage that we mostly deserted in the late 20th century." People think citizenship means you reside here and you can vote, he says. "We tend to think of voting as sort of the culmination of citizenship. But 19th-century [Americans] would think we're just crazy! Voting can't be the culmination of citizenship; it's just not active enough. We need to be citizens *all the time*."

Assistant Professor of History Eric Fure-Slocum, an expert in labor, urban and political history of the United States, has adopted the theme of citizenship for his two-year tenure as AmCon lead teacher. Each semester, his students will take on a civic engagement project outside the classroom. "The question that I've borrowed from the scholar Michael Schudson and posed for the students is: What kind of citizenship, of the kinds that may be possible, do we want to strive for?"

What kind of Citizenship  
do we want to strive for?

What is our connection  
to the Common Good?

Last October, Elise Vreede and a few of her fellow-AmConnors went to Thursday's Table, a free-meal program in Northfield, to register people to vote. Their success was marginal at best: 150 people came to eat, and the students came away with about five registrations. "Some of the older people said things like, 'I've been voting for 40 years, and I'm proud of it,'" she says. "But most of the people were hostile to us. They'd say they didn't like either of the candidates and they didn't believe in voting. It wasn't horrible being snapped at; it was just not something I was expecting."

The experience wasn't about seeing how many people they could register. "It was to have conversations," says Fure-Slocum, "to hear what people have to say about politics and voting. How does voting define our citizenship? How does it define our place in society? What does citizenship mean, how have we constructed it in the 18th 19th, 20th, 21st centuries, and how it could be better?"

Jim Farrell shares, "In the 18th century, when Jefferson was alive, they talked about being republicans, with a small 'r,' which comes from the Latin *res publica* — the public things. What that meant was that all of your life you were supposed to think about the public implications of what you were doing. We try to instill that spirit in American Conversations students. What is your connection to the common good?"

### GETTING STARTED

IT WAS EIGHT YEARS AGO when a group of St. Olaf faculty from various disciplines designed and launched a conversations program that examined America and American culture with the focus on analysis, history, cultural diversity and the articulation of ideas. Questions about America, American values and America's role in the world are important for the 21st century, but AmCon students dig deeper. They ask, "What exactly are America's values relative to the wealth of perspectives that have shaped the American experience? What do we mean when we talk about freedom, rights and justice for all? What is the American dream, where did it come from and what implications does it have for people the world over?"

The founding faculty — history professors Jim Farrell, Chris Grasso and Judy Kutulas, English professors Mark Allister, Carol Holly, Mary Titus and Colin Wells, art history



# Setting the Trend

St. Olaf College's first Conversations program, The Great Conversation, began in 1981. Since then, two other "Cons" have been added: American Conversations in 2000, and Asian Conversations in 1999, and a third, The Science Conversation, is slated to begin in the fall of 2009.

"St. Olaf is not often recognized as a college that sets trends, but the notion of the 'learning community' emerged here long ago, before it became popular or well-known. Today, many people in educational circles are touting the idea of the learning community as an important and original way of educating students," says Provost Jim May. "We are proud that we introduced such a component into our general education curriculum more than 25 years ago and that we continue to develop the idea in new and creative ways. With our Conversations programs, we've found a great model for a kind of education that works extremely well."

## The Great Conversation

Since its founding by St. Olaf Paracollege faculty with the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, The Great Conversation has challenged hundreds of St. Olaf students (including three Rhodes Scholars and a Marshall Scholar) and inspired the creation of similar St. Olaf programs.

Through an integrated sequence of five courses taken over two years, The Great Conversation introduces students to the major epochs of Western civilization through many of history's most significant works. The program begins with the ancient Greeks and Hebrews and concludes with the modern world, exploring the development of literary expression, philosophic thought, religious beliefs and historical reflections on Western culture. Great Con students discuss and debate the ideas of many of the world's most influential thinkers, including Marx and Nietzsche; Martin Luther King Jr. and Freud; Dante and Darwin; Sophocles and Virginia Woolf; Dostoyevsky and Elie Wiesel.

## Asian Conversations

St. Olaf sophomores who participate in the Asian Conversations program embrace the languages and cultures of East Asia — China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and other nations — and discover through challenging dialogue how the past, present and future of these societies intersect with our own. Students study either the Chinese or Japanese language and take a series of three linked courses that focuses on the experiences of past and present Asian travelers and migrants; Asia's political, economic, cultural, linguistic and environmental communities; and Asian interpretations of the human condition (religious, philosophical and literary). During their January Interim, students travel to Beijing and Tokyo and return to campus for a final course together.

## The Science Conversation

The Science Conversation will bring together second-year students and faculty with a broad range of academic interests for a critical exploration of science within its historical, philosophical, theological and social contexts. A sequence of three courses will cultivate an appreciation for the development of science, the relationship between reason and faith, questions of meaning and purpose, and the complex interplay of science and society. The program illuminates the distinctive character of science and its relevance to challenges facing our world and prepares students for contemporary debates about topics such as global warming, genetic engineering, stem cell research and science education.

professor Matt Rohn and religion professor L. DeAne Lagerquist — modeled American Conversations on the college's Paracollege and its inaugural conversation program "The Great Conversation" (see sidebar, "Setting the Trend").

"We wanted [a program] that said American culture is a great conversation," says Farrell. "At a time when there were no female novelists, women were talking in some other way, like making quilts, so we look at what quilts meant in the 19th century. We read Frederick Douglass every year because he's an essential part of the American conversation. Thomas Jefferson says all men are created equal and [yet he] has slaves. Douglass comes along 40 years later and says: Exactly what do you mean by that?"

Exactly what America means remains an intriguing — and timely — question, which helps to explain why American Conversations is thriving. Each fall, a cohort of approximately 38 first-year students enter the program where they are taught by teams of two teachers — the lead teacher, who stays with the cohort for two full years, and a series of four partners, each of whom devotes one semester to the program.

AmCon is nothing like a traditional history "survey" course, but rather a deeper conversation that moves through history, literature, art and a variety of social sciences. Each semester focuses on four or five dense facts. "There is some sort of chronology, but we don't feel like we have to fill all the gaps," says Fure-Slocum. "We think across time, picking out different themes or dense facts that get at key moments, key ideas in the development of American culture."

Jim Farrell says the Model T Ford is one of his favorite dense facts. "To my mind, it's probably the most important artifact of the 20th century," he says. "All of automobility comes out of the Model T Ford, from industrialization to all kinds of gender relations — dating, getting away from parents, freedom. We can look at it as a technological artifact and as a social artifact."

Farrell points out that one of the main characters in E.L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* drives a Model T and the Charlie Chaplin movie *Modern Times* is based on the Ford River Rouge Complex, the biggest auto plant in the world in the mid-1920s. These facts lead to more questions: What does it mean to work? What does it mean to work on an assembly line instead of in the ways Americans worked earlier?

"We can get at lots and lots of questions that are really interesting to students," he says, "and I think we would argue that the questions are more important than the answers."

What is the American Dream?

## EXPLODING MYTHS

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH Colin Wells's office floor is strewn with poster board. Images of Pocahontas stare up at the ceiling. She looks like a typical Indian maiden in some images, a lot like Queen Victoria in others. Students have been assigned to write a museum description of a Pocahontas image they have selected from a database of images dating back to 1625.

"The idea is to look at the evolving images, what it tells us about Pocahontas in her own time, but also about how the myth of Pocahontas has a history all its own," says Wells, whose expertise is early American literature. Wells explains that in 1791, Pocahontas was used in an effort to show Indians that they really needed to change their lifestyle, to stop hunting, start farming and become 'civilized.' In the 19th and early 20th century, Pocahontas was the symbol of our American-ness. Even though those who created these images were white, they were 'playing Indian' in a sense against civilized Europe. Then in the late 20th century, Pocahontas became the subject of a lot of feminist poetry, when she stood up to her husband and America. And first-year students no doubt remember firsthand the environmental activist who was Disney's 20th century Pocahontas.

This fall, Wells is team-teaching the first-years with lead teacher Eric Fure-Slocum. "We spend a lot of time with Thomas Jefferson," Wells says. "We start with the Declaration of Independence and we look at [Jefferson] as an architect and a Renaissance man. Then we read a section from a book of his called *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where he likens African Americans to orangutans and how their physical differences are related to their inferiority in intellect and moral capability. When students read this, their heads explode!"

Wells believes that students who experience American Conversations recognize that their country is a paradoxical place "of extreme, awesome idealism and great things done by great men from 1776, but also the worst kinds of oppression and cruelty by one group of people to others," he says. "We look at the Indian Removal Act and how the United States Supreme Court could relocate 40,000 Cherokee to Oklahoma, and it was perfectly legal. The students are stunned by that."

What do we mean when we talk about Freedom and Justice for all?



## A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

OTHER COLLEGES HAVE AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAMS similar to American Conversations, but Farrell says there are two key differences: St. Olaf requires that students commit to four consecutive semesters, and most first-year students live together in the same residence hall. The students' study of American culture engages them in developing critical thinking and writing skills, preparing them to converse intelligently about anything they will encounter in their studies and in life.

"I don't know of anybody else who does it quite like we do, but I do know a lot of people who are jealous," Farrell says.

American Conversations attracts a wide range of students with varying interests and majors. Some are fascinated by American culture; others don't like traditional history courses. Some love AmCon from day one; others say it takes some getting used to. Many are intrigued by the team-teaching, the interdisciplinary focus, and the ease with which they can take care of many of their general-education requirements. Still others say they thought it would be a good way to make friends.

American Conversations faculty hope the conversations that begin in the classroom carry over to the sidewalk, the dining hall and the residence hall. Junior Geoff Carlisle, who finished AmCon last year, says, "Just because class ended at 10 o'clock didn't mean our discussion came to a good end at 10 o'clock! A lot of times, we'd go to the Cage for coffee because our minds were still stuck on the topic and we weren't done talking about it."

The American Conversations community creates a bond among students and between students and faculty that English Professor Mary Titus calls one of the joys of AmCon. "There is just a lot of trust and delight that comes from them knowing each other so well, so when they talk about things, they can talk more personally and can respond more easily," she says.

"It's a matter of the risks they are willing to take," says Farrell. "You can do stranger assignments, more challenging assignments when you get to know your students well enough. They know you aren't going to shoot them down if they try



something risky. It takes a while for them to warm up and say stupid things. But once they're willing to say stupid things, they'll say *brilliant* things."

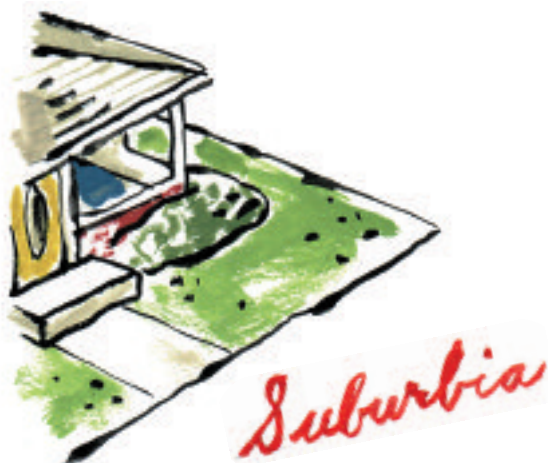
Breanna Peterson Lathrop '06 is a case in point. She and her cohort were assigned to write their own version of a chapter in Thoreau's *Walden* called "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For." Farrell says, "Breanna wrote a paper in which Thoreau actually comes to St. Olaf and hangs around with her. And he's just a pain in the neck! He says: 'You're working too hard. You should be outside enjoying nature.' But Breanna tells him, 'I'm doing these things because they are important to me, and your message is that people ought to do what they want — so BACK OFF, HENRY!' It was just a brilliant thing — that a college freshman had the authority to tell Henry Thoreau to back off. That was really cool."

AmCon gets a lot of attention for its "fun" projects. The vaudeville show, for example, is a popular third-semester project in which students not only study vaudeville, but also create and perform their own live show.

But Steve Hahn, an assistant professor of history, says the program isn't all fun and games. "We set a serious tone because these are important issues," he says. "We are engaging [students] in the great debates, great literature and important ideas."

"We learned very quickly that we had to actively participate," says Geoff Carlisle. "And because a lot of the people in AmCon came from strong leadership backgrounds, the group projects forced us to learn to work well with strong-minded, opinionated people."

AmCon projects and readings vary from year to year, depending on the teachers. This year, Judy Kutulas assigned one of her favorite books: *Cheap Amusements*, by Kathy Peiss, a look at working women in turn-of-the-20th-century New York. DeAne Lagerquist and theater professor Gary Gisselman have assigned Tony Kushner's play, *Angels in America*. Students in Steve Hahn's course are required to read the U.S. Constitution in its entirety.



## What exactly are America's Values?

### GETTING IT RIGHT

IN THE END, IT WAS THE READING LISTS that Maggie Wells loved most. "Adrienne Rich's poetry. Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Franklin ... I really dislike Ben Franklin." She laughs. "He is absolutely insufferable. Part of what was fun about AmCon was that we became so familiar with these authors that they really did become part of the conversation," she says. "We read an incredible book called *Picture Windows*, which focuses on the growth of the suburbs in the 1950s and the new conspicuous consumption. Not only could you see *out*, but others could see *in* and see what you were accumulating. Another powerful book for me was *Class Matters*, a compilation of essays on social class in America. That book absolutely changed my life."

Ed Pompeian '05 says the AmCon readings forced him to view freedom in a whole new way; it wasn't enough to just think about ideas. "We saw the American past as one in which there were constant struggles over the meaning and practice of freedom," he says. "Even after an event would happen, there really wasn't a clear resolution. A couple years later, people were struggling over the same things."

Pompeian, a Ph.D. candidate in American history at the College of William and Mary and a first-year teacher in Williamsburg, Virginia, says his world changed completely after two years in American Conversations. "Reading about what these individuals had done showed us that we cannot just sit idly by; that is not how it has ever worked. AmCon helped us realize that we did have responsibility for, and power over, our future."

For Gretchen Riewe Burch '04, an American art specialist at Sotheby's in New York City, a pivotal "a-ha" moment came during a presentation on a Thomas Cole painting called "The Oxbow" as AmConners were analyzing what was going on in the painting and how it dealt with Manifest Destiny.

"When people ask me, 'Why did you go into American art?' I often cite the fact that I took this four-semester American Conversations course in college," she says. "And I do think that is the reason why I went into American art and why I'm still very much exploring the question: 'What makes this art American?' It's a conversation I'm still having today."

PATRICIA GROTT'S KELLY '77 is a Twin Cities-based writer and a frequent contributor to *St. Olaf Magazine*.