

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Outing History

In 2011, California Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill into law requiring public schools to include instruction about the contributions of LGBT Americans, among other groups. In addition to creating controversy, the policy created a significant need: more resources for teachers who might have limited knowledge of LGBT history or how to teach it.

Leila J. Rupp, a UC Santa Barbara professor of feminist studies, has helped fill the void with her book “Understanding and Teaching U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History” (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), which she co-edited with Susan K. Freeman.

The book has garnered Rupp a 2015 Lambda Literary Award for Best Anthology at the 27th annual “Lammys,” which seek to identify and celebrate the best LGBT books of the year.

“I am so honored to receive this award,” said Rupp. “This was a labor of love and I honestly didn’t think it would get as much attention as it has. The response from teachers has been really rewarding. I hope it will make a difference in the lives of students.”

Other winners in the 24 categories included New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow for the bisexual nonfiction work “Fire Shut Up in My Bones” and Richard Blanco, the inaugural poet for President Obama’s second swearing-in, for the gay memoir “The Prince of Los Cocuyos.”

“I want to congratulate professor Leila Rupp on receiving this extraordinary honor,” said Melvin Oliver, executive dean of UCSB’s College of Letters and Science and the SAGE Sara Miller McCune Dean of Social Sciences. “She is a distinguished social historian of sexuality and social movements whose scholarship has made distinctive contributions to feminist studies, history and sociology. This work represents her continuing focus on bringing the lives of gay, bisexual and transgendered people into the classroom as full participants in the arc of human history. This acknowledgement is also a reflection of the high quality of work done on these issues at UCSB, not only in our feminist studies department but across the social sciences and the humanities.”

With Caitlyn Jenner’s transgender coming-out photo on the cover of Vanity Fair and the Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage expected in the coming weeks, LGBT issues are front and center these days.

“Public opinion on same-sex marriage changed more quickly and more dramatically than on any other issue,” Rupp said. “You can measure it from Proposition 8 in 2008, when a majority of the population in the country was opposed, to now, when over 60 percent support it.”

A recent CNN/ORC poll found that 63 percent of Americans believe gay and lesbian couples have a constitutional right to marry. That’s up from 44 percent in 2008, the year California voters approved Prop. 8, which made same-sex marriage illegal in the state before the amendment was ruled unconstitutional in the courts.

The rapid shift in attitudes about same-sex marriage suggests a lot of things are possible, Rupp noted, although she added that achieving widespread acceptance of transgender people could be more difficult. “The argument about same-sex marriage that won people over focused on love rather than equal rights,” she said. “So it will be harder, but I am an optimist. As more people know someone who is transgender, acceptance will come.”

Rupp’s decision to take on the anthology project was based largely on the 2011 California law known as the FAIR Education Act (Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful), she said. The anthology is designed not only for college instructors but also for high school teachers seeking an age-appropriate approach. The focus is on integrating LGBT history into general U.S. history classes.

The collection features essays by teachers discussing their experiences teaching LGBT history, as well as essays covering historical themes such as sexual diversity in early America and the experiences of gay men and lesbians in World War II.

The essays in the book's final section discuss different sources, such as novels, films, oral histories and websites including outhistory.org, for use in the classroom. Already, the book has been used by UCSB students who prepared lesson plans and led LGBT history sessions at three local high schools: Santa Barbara, San Marcos and Dos Pueblos.

Tyler Renner, former program coordinator at the Pacific Pride Foundation, a local LGBTQ nonprofit, helped organize a UCSB independent study course sponsored by Rupp that placed 10 student instructors in visits to local schools. The students taught lessons on topics including marriage equality, the Stonewall riots, pride celebrations, LGBT art and gender identity.

A particularly helpful essay in Rupp's book for many, Renner commented, is about the language to discuss LGBT topics in educational settings in an appropriate way, particularly for teenage students. "You're not talking about sex," Renner said. "You're talking about history."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.