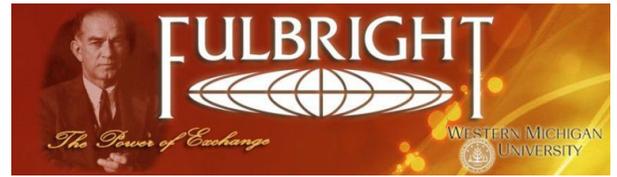


Fulbright scholars promote cultural understanding abroad

Raine Kuch Staff Reporter | Posted: Wednesday, March 15, 2017 10:05 am

Western Michigan University has been recognized as one of the top producers of Fulbright Scholars by the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, revealing that WMU is currently tied for 10th out of all the universities in the nation.



Fulbright Scholars Banner

In the 2016-17 academic year, six professors and members of the faculty have been awarded grants to travel to an international university to promote and be involved in the exchange of knowledge between other cultures. These recipients include: Dr. James Butterfield, professor of political science; Dr. Jon Davis, associate professor of mathematics; Dr. David Huffman, professor of chemistry; Dr. James Hueng, professor of economics; Albert LaVergne, professor emeritus of art; and Lynn Kelly Albertson, director of Career and Student Employment Services. The recipients traveled to Vietnam, South Africa, Denmark, China, Nigeria and Germany respectively.

The official Fulbright Website states that the Fulbright Program has “fostered mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries since 1946” referring to its establishment from legislation introduced by Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas.

One WMU Fulbright recipient, Albert LaVergne, is doing just that as he spends 10 months in Nigeria completing his “Reading is Knowledge” sculpture project. Currently on his seventh month of the program, LaVergne is working at the University of Ibadan to create a steel sculpture that will promote reading in the community,

“I am building a sculpture that promotes reading within the family dynamic,” LaVergne said. “It is going to promote reading skills and it deals with family; the mother, the father and the baby. These are life-sized figures with the father holding the book, the mother turning the page; they are very jubilant.”

LaVergne’s project gets its roots from traditional blacksmithing, but with a modern twist, which is very characteristic of his work. As he goes forward with creating his gift to the university, he also talks to students and allows them to observe his unique application.

LaVergne's design blends pieces of American and Nigerian Culture.

"Many of their sculptures are commemorative of politicians or historical icons that they have. It is refreshing to come in as an American and bring a perspective that is unrelated to that at all; Mine is a happy sculpture, most of the other sculptures here are very serious," LaVergne said.

Though LaVergne is bringing a fresh perspective to this university, he keeps the culture of the people in mind in his design.

"My sculpture is meant to celebrate the power of reading and being able to localize it, the images are taking on a tremendous liking to the people around me, what they are wearing, their expressions are, ect.," LaVergne said.

LaVergne's project was selected from a pool of potential candidates for the grant, but was chosen due to its potential to say something about American education and the American spirit.

The grant gives preference towards fields of a scientific or medical nature. It's rare for an artist to be chosen, though sometimes the art can be compelling enough that they will give it to an artist that can show a need that is just as important, LaVergne said.

LaVergne believes he has already impacted many of the students of which he has shared interactions with.

"They have not spent much time with real Americans. They watch American movies, so they think they have an understanding of what it is like to know an American." LaVergne said.

He discovered that due to these misconceptions, students had it in their head that Americans succeeded due to advantages bequeathed by their homeland.

"I'm here to debunk those myths," LaVergne said. "There's no magic, it is a matter of work and discipline. I want them to see that it comes from the individual, then they start to see Americans as real people and problem solvers."

This will be LaVergne's second Fulbright grant as he had also received one in 2012 to create a sculpture for the 50th anniversary of Obafemi Awolowo University depicting the gift of a mother receiving a child from God.

Anyone who has been around campus is familiar with LaVergne's work as his popular statue "The Committee," depicting four acrobats floating in an unrealistic configuration, is a staple to the student population. The sculpture, due to its unattainable subject matter, was meant to represent the struggle between the spiritual expectations of a person versus the human limitations.

"We always try to do better, but we always fall short, but it is a beautiful thing that you try," LaVergne said of what the sculpture was meant to convey. "The struggle becomes beautiful even if you don't succeed."