

# a journey

## ACROSS AMERICA TO FIND HISTORY

*Dr. Michelle Tabit's childhood passion sent her east from Spokane to actually live history*

*by Kathy Punches, Director of Public Relations and Marketing*

**D**r. Michelle Tabit has loved history since she was a child. She remembers visiting the library with her father as an eight-year-old and selecting a book on Abraham Lincoln.

But it was years later as a teaching assistant in graduate school that she discovered a love of teaching. Her plan to work in a museum took an abrupt turn when

she went to a study session and found 130 students in the room. "And all of a sudden that night as I was standing in front of those kids, and they were so energized and filled with questions," recalls Tabit, "I realized I could still work with historical artifacts, but there was something really great about teaching and interacting with students."

In her second year at Defiance College as assistant professor of history, Tabit appreciates the small college environment that allows her to get to know her students.

"They each have their own unique personalities, and you get to have a different relationship with each one of them tailored to their specific interests," she says.

"One of the things I joke about is there's a revolving door here. They come in, they sit down, and they talk about not only politics and history but whatever is on their mind at that particular time." It's not just the informal conversations that Tabit enjoys but also being able to help students grow and develop from inexperienced freshmen to seniors with "clear



PHOTO BY JENNY DERRINGER

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– Dr. Michelle Tabit, DC professor

motivation, clear goals, clear statements of purpose.”

She likes the unique opportunities available to faculty and students at Defiance through the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity. She became involved in the New Orleans learning community as a McMaster Fellow this year and will be returning in the 2008-09 academic year. She led several students in an archival project at the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans, processing collections in an archive of African American history at Tulane University.

Tabit views the Amistad project as a great learning opportunity for students interested in history. “They will better understand the importance of preserving documents and how they fit into the history, because without those documents, without those stories, without those interviews, history is just what they think it is – facts and figures. And it’s not. History is that conversation about who we are and where we came from and potentially even where we’re going.”

The New Orleans archival project was a natural extension of Tabit’s focus on public history for her master’s degree at Washington State University. As a doctoral student at WSU, she explored U.S. Latin American history and women’s history. Her dissertation explored the professionalization of women. Examining the home economics program at the University of Idaho through its archives, Tabit gained a newfound respect for women who used home economics as a venue for breaking into the academy.

“The men of the academy, seemed to believe that if they gave women their own little department off in the corner that they would learn to cook and clean and they wouldn’t try to come into the main body of the academy,” describes Tabit.

“Once women were in the door, they immediately began to attack in the sciences. They saw chemistry in nutrition, they saw cleaning and cooking as all part of science.”

She advises her students not to approach their research with any preconceived notions. “Let the evidence take you where it will,” she said.

Tabit grew up in Spokane, Wash., where she began her college days at Gonzaga University. Knowing she wanted to teach history, she realized it would be hard to do “without ever seeing any history or being anywhere historical.” So she packed up and headed east. She

worked as a nanny and began taking classes at Cabrini College in Pennsylvania. The family with whom she stayed gave her many opportunities to travel, including a trip to Washington, D.C. for her 21st birthday.

“When they went on vacation they took me along, so I got to explore all the historical places, which was my dream. So when I talk to my students about writing the Constitution, I’ve been to Independence Hall. I’ve lived in Philadelphia in the summer when it’s 90 degrees and 89 percent humidity ... and you can really talk about the passion of what it’s like to be there.”

Since the age of 21, Tabit has visited 40 states. “One thing I’ve learned as an American is that yes, wherever you are in the United States you’re always an American; however, each of the regions of the U.S. has its own culture, and I think that’s an interesting dynamic to bring into the classroom.

“I think that everyone assumes because we live in one nation, that we’re all the same and that we don’t have any idiosyncrasies or differences.”

Having lived on both sides of the continent, Tabit is now settled in northwest Ohio. An only child, she is close to her parents who still live in Spokane. Her dad has been a barber for 44 years, sought-after by servicemen from a nearby military base for his great flat-tops. “They’re so flat you could bounce a quarter off them.”

She refers to her mother as her “cheering section.” When Tabit was facing the daunting task of writing her dissertation, her mother spurred her on. “She listened to all the stories. She was always there. You know, being a homemaker herself, she had her two cents to throw in.”

And Tabit’s found an extended family since coming to Defiance. “I’ve made good friends with faculty members here, and it makes you feel like you’re in a family, in a real community, which is important in my job.”

She appreciates the many opportunities offered at DC. “Here at Defiance I can give a lot back to the school. I get to participate in learning communities. I get to participate on committees. Since this is my community, it’s important to me to be involved and know what’s going on.” ♦



## AMISTAD FACTS

*Dr. Tabit views the Amistad project as a great learning opportunity. Here is the story.* On the morning of June 28, 1839, La Amistad (Friendship) set sail from Havana. On board the little schooner were 53 Africans who had been abducted from West Africa and sold in violation of international law. Their intended fate was enslavement on plantations down coast from Havana. On the third day out, the Africans revolted and ordered that the ship be guided toward the rising sun back to Africa, but each night the Cubans reversed direction. Zigzagging for two months, the ship eventually was brought by northerly winds and currents to Long Island. The Africans were jailed and charged with piracy and murder. In New York City, a group of Christian abolitionists formed a defense committee and, with help from former President John Quincy Adams, took the case to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled that the Africans were free.

–Amistad Research Center