

# Putting More HUMANITY into the HUMANITIES

EDURNE PORTELA celebrated the 10th anniversary of Lehigh's Humanities Center (HC) by doing something relatively radical. The HC director paired junior faculty members with senior faculty members outside their departments. Then she instructed everyone to read something written by their partner and present a paper about their new colleague's recent research, brokering collaborations between scholars who often times don't have the opportunity to communicate with each other.

Novel matchmaking is one of many ways that Portela has made the HC a more challenging, yet comfortable forum/laboratory. Over five years she has moderated a wide range of visiting scholars discussing a wide range of intriguing topics. She has empowered new research projects with new research grants and promoted interdisciplinary endeavors with tenacity and courtesy. Simply put, she has made the humanities more relevant by making them more humane.

One of Portela's colleagues is Mary Foltz, assistant professor of English who has written extensively about the literature of waste.

"Edurne inspires deep and profound conversation that bridges disciplinary divides," says Foltz, who shared a 10th-anniversary presentation about decomposition with Gordon Bearn, professor of philosophy. "She brings a sense of play to our work together, a joyous intellectual engagement."

Portela felt at home in the HC's old house on a Packer Avenue hill long before the HC became her administrative home. In 2003, the year the native of Spain began teaching Spanish at Lehigh, she was invited by Bearn, the center's founding director, to participate in a visit by Lourdes Portillo, the Mexican-American

Director Edurne Portela has made the Humanities Center a model forum/laboratory for interdisciplinary projects



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director of a film about hundreds of young women kidnapped and killed after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Five years later Portela took a more active role as a member of the HC advisory board. She sponsored author Nora Strejilevich's talk about her persecution by Argentina's military junta. Strejilevich stars in Portela's 2009 book *Displaced Memories*, a study of how tortured Argentine female writers turned trauma into narrative.

Portela was nervous at first accepting the new role. Not only was it her first job as an academic administrator, she admits she was "scared" by the prospect of reaching the high standards of Bearn and his HC successor, Seth Moglen, associate professor of English who directs Lehigh's South Side Initiative. She was particularly impressed and intimidated by their supervision of yearlong series about substantial themes, such as "Just Globalization" and "Waste."

Portela has extended the HC tradition of provocative programs starring high-profile

authorities. Last year she scheduled a talk by iconic art critic Dore Ashton, a pivotal writer about abstract expressionism. Working with Bearn, Moglen and other advisors, she coordinated a 2012 symposium on the "political visions" of immigration, hunger and other global crises. In 2012-13 she monitored "Movement," a series of nine guest lectures on topics as diverse as the '70s gay-liberation crusade and protecting the Mexico-U.S. border.

## NEW OPPORTUNITIES

As HC director, Portela has pushed academic borders by stretching financial horizons. Lehigh teachers have explored new territories armed with annual research grants she secured. Suzanne Edwards, assistant professor of English, used her HC money to pay visiting scholars who discussed their cross-disciplinary projects. Nicholas Sawicki, assistant professor of modern and contemporary art history, used his funds to visit Prague, where he studied the archived letters and diaries of prominent Czech visual artists. At the HC, he described his unusual portrait of Czech painters depicting World War I not in images, but in words.

The HC "was a natural place for sharing my findings, a great venue for trying out and getting feedback on new ideas," says Sawicki, a member of the center's advisory board. "That has a lot to do with Edurne's leadership and with the remarkable climate of generosity and openness that she has fostered."

The child of a former restaurant owner, Portela knows that conversations about intellectual freedom go down better with free meals. She makes sure that complimentary soup is served during the HC's one-hour forums,

which are open to anyone who wants to discuss scholarly work in progress. She uses power lunches to pick the brains of guest speakers before they speak, to match them with Lehigh teachers, to persuade them to join seminars.

This eclectic menu has especially nourished Nitzan Lebovic, assistant professor of history. An expert on biopolitical films, he's lectured at the HC on Michael Haneke's "The White Ribbon," a fictional account of a German village terrorized by authority figures, including a pastor, just before World War I. Through the center he's met people like Erin Manning, a philosopher, visual artist and dancer who gave a "Movement" talk on choreography as mobile architecture.

Lebovic used an HC grant to fund a seminar by anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler, a scholar outside his field. Stoler led a three-day discussion of her then-unfinished book, a collection of essays on "imperial ruins and ruination"—everything from Cold War images of the United States leveled by nuclear weapons to Indian villages submerged during the building of a dam.

Lebovic regards himself as a foreign foreigner, an Israeli at an American university who believes in critique as an ideology, including the critique of his own identity.

"I know what it's like to take a radical stand, so I appreciate Edurne's courage," says the Apter chair of Holocaust studies and ethical values. "She is one of the most open-minded, curious, innovative people in academia I know. She's made the HC the kind of place one seeks in the interdisciplinary field: challenging, yet comforting."

### A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Portela has also significantly shaped graduate students. Devin Donovan '13, recipient of a doctorate in English, considers the HC director a rare blend of role model and mentor. A former HC board member, he admires her ability to make meetings efficient, enlightening and even enjoyable. Portela, he says, not only helped him view his work from new angles, she helped him value his work. He calls the HC a stimulating sanctuary, "where everyone is encouraged to put their guards down for a second and challenge themselves, intellectually and personally."

Sawicki notes that Portela possesses an ability to help teachers make their projects



more germane to colleagues outside their fields. She helps make the humanities more relevant at Lehigh with a persistent promotion of the work undertaken by her colleagues and by the center. Under her direction the HC has strengthened the services that most humanities departments can't provide—namely, interdisciplinary research and feedback about unfinished projects. Due to her commitment, the center has become a centerpiece of interdisciplinary discussion at Lehigh addressing relevant issues and events, he adds.

"We're at a point right now where every week there seems to be a story in the national press about the 'crisis' of the humanities, calling the continued relevance of a humanistic education into question," says Sawicki. "It feels incredibly important at a time like this for the Humanities Center to have a determined leadership."

Portela says the HC has changed her as much as she's changed the HC. Juggling so many jobs, she insists, has trained her to become a more patient teacher, a more probing scholar, a better listener. She applies these skills to a Spanish literature/film organization

she co-founded and a book she's preparing about writers and filmmakers who address, and redress, indifference to violence in Spain's Basque country. Portela has done everything at the HC except present a portion of her Basque project. For years she's been concerned about "contaminating" the center with her "personal interests." She plans to break her vow in 2013-14. She's scheduled a lecture on Basque nationalism and violence by anthropologist Joseba Zulaika, former director of a renowned American center for Basque studies. She may even excerpt her own Basque study, which is financed by a two-year, \$10,000 New Directions Fellowship from Lehigh's College of Arts and Sciences.

Portela envisions the HC as a true research center. Her goals range from the profound (establishing an endowment) to the mundane (renovating the kitchen). No matter what the outcome, she plans to continue running the center as a challenging, but comfortable home.

"I think I sound too positive for an academic," she says, "but everybody who knows me knows I love the HC." 