

Gator Bytes

www.gatorbandalumni.org/suwanee.mp3—Hear a barber-shop quartet arrangement of “Suwannee,” a George Gershwin tune originally popularized by Al Jolson.

www.mil.ufl.edu—Wonder at the creations of students in UF’s Machine Intelligence Laboratory, including Koolio, a cross between moviedom’s R2D2 and a vending machine, and the DeLuminator, an autonomous rolling candle extinguisher.

<http://wfrec.ifas.ufl.edu/faculty/unruh/orh3222c/Page.html>—View hurricane damage to some of UF’s facilities in the Florida Panhandle, particularly the Turfgrass Science program.

www.clas.ufl.edu/netcam—Watch the action at Turlington Plaza in nearly real time. This Webcam, which gives a dean’s-eye view of the plaza, refreshes every 15 seconds.

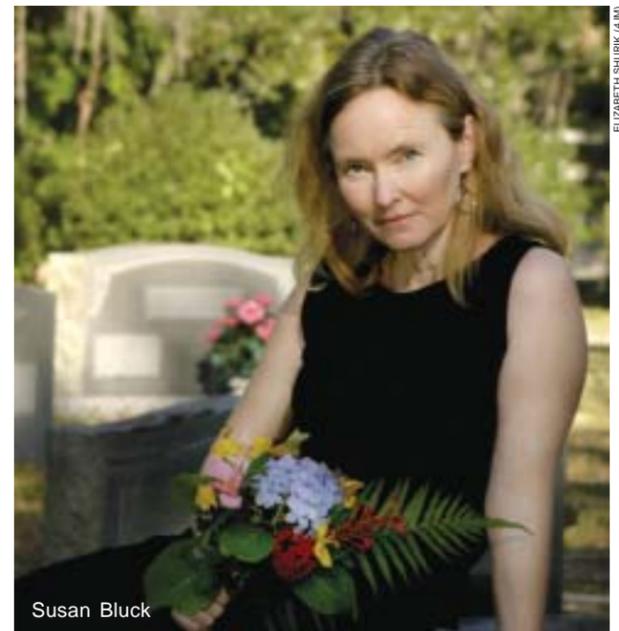
www.astro.ufl.edu—See the first images of Mars through the Gemini South Observatory’s T-ReCS telescope.

www.ufl.edu/HonorRoll—Recognize the alumni and friends who financially supported UF during the last fiscal year.

In the Classroom

Life Experience

UF STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT LIFE BY STUDYING THE CULTURE OF DEATH.



Susan Bluck

ELIZABETH SHURIK (JMI)

Rachel Visschers already knows about death.

The UF senior lost her father, Rudy, to lung cancer in 2002. He was just 52.

Yet Visschers chose to immerse herself in the culture of death last fall when she took Susan Bluck’s Death and Dying course at UF. Now the class has Visschers thinking about life.

“We spoke about how it is to lose a father, and one of the questions was, ‘Do you reflect on your life regularly?’” says Visschers, who discovered several classmates who had lost siblings and friends, including one who was also dealing with the loss of a parent. “Because we both lost people, the answer was, ‘All the time.’”

Bluck, an assistant professor in the Center for Gerontological Studies and the Department of Psychology, says she hopes to educate her 20-plus students about the many facets of death and how death affects each of us every day. This includes dismantling taboos as well as raising awareness of quality of life at the end of life. While the curriculum focuses on death and

life, students often walk away from the course with a better understanding of themselves.

Bluck often engages her students in candid discussions about death at the personal and societal level. Close to September 11, for instance, they talked about war and terrorism. From then on, that tone created a basis for frank discussions about many facets of death, often controversial.

“All of us are going to have this happen to us,” she says. “All of us are touched by death right now in one way or the other.”

Bluck sees death as a time of potential growth. She says there is no way to overcome the emotional, mortal and real side of the last stage of life.

It’s not something you just “get over,” she says.

Bluck, who came to UF four years ago from Berlin, actually revived a Death and Dying course previously taught by UF professor emeritus Hannelore Wass. Bluck has taken his concept and added many of her own topics, including homicide, suicide, care-giving, quality of

life and biomedical research.

Bluck even has the students write their own obituaries. And oddly enough, it’s an exercise the students enjoy.

Choosing how to die was the hardest part for Visschers and her classmate, senior Kristen Viverto. In the end, Viverto decided she’ll be hit by a car.

Mirroring her father’s death, Visschers chose cancer.

“I think it’s a good reflection on life because it makes you realize what’s important in life and what you want to be,” Visschers says of the project.

Going into the course, Bluck says she had certain expectations for undergraduate students — they might not be familiar with death or ready to discuss it so openly. The range of experience in the class, however, surprised her.

“The students are responding really well. I love doing this,” she says. “It’s sort of funny to say that it’s fun teaching a death and dying class, but I enjoy it. I’m doing something that’s meaningful.”

— Staci Zavattaro (4JM)