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Major donation establishes chair position in history for WKU

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WKU alumnus Richard Frockt speaks Friday, April 14 following his \$500 History to a chair position.

Provided by WKU

A new chair has been added to the table thanks to a generous donation to Western Kentucky University.

Formerly the Frockt Family Professorship in History, the endowed faculty position was elevated to chair status last week after a gift of \$500,000 from WKU alumnus Richard Frockt.

The professorship was established in 2003 following a gift from Richard, Janet and Ryan Frockt. The latest gift brings Richard's commitment to the endowment to \$2 million.

"Everything in my life has been built on the platform of my WKU experience," Richard, from the class of '67, said in a release. "WKU impacted me professionally in every way ... If you are able to help, then that's what you should do when you can. Take the extra step for what's important, and WKU is important to me."

He earned his bachelors in history at WKU before attending the U.S. Navy's Officer Candidate School. Following this, he completed law school at the University of Louisville thanks to the G.I. Bill.

Richard has served on both the WKU Board of Advisors and the WKU Foundation Board of Trustees, including a stint as chair of the latter.

The Frockt Family Chair is the sixth chair at WKU, but is the first to be elevated from a professorship. It is also the first chair in the Potter College of Arts & Letters.

Dr. Katherine Lennard was chosen as the inaugural Frockt Family Chair in History. She earned her PhD from the University of Michigan.

Lennard's work focuses on the legacies of the Civil War and Reconstruction in American popular culture.

She's interested in the "unspoken code" of everyday items. Working as a theatrical costume designer before grad school got her thinking about what messages are broadcast through cultural materials like clothing.

"How do everyday things – furniture, clothing, modes of transportation – how do those things shape our world," Lennard said. "Both visual and material culture have been very important to concepts like race, gender and nationality We experience those things and those categories just through our interactions with everyday things."



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Lennard's debut book, "Manufacturing the Ku Klux Klan," is under contract with University of North Carolina Press. It examines how the Klan's outfits themselves helped lend the movement power and the look of uniformity.

"There's a big change that happens from the 19th century to the 20th century," Lennard said. "In the 19th century, (Klan members) dress in really chaotic garments, they're intentionally disruptive, they look weird and scare people. In the 1920's, Klan robes are mass produced in factories in Atlanta."

Lennard said the standardized garments reinforced the idea that the Klan was a powerful organization.

"They all look the same, the organization can claim the power of uniformity, like 'we are this uniform organization,'" she said. "Even if in practice, the person wearing the garments might have joined for reasons that are very different than the leaders in Atlanta are probably hoping."

Her current project is a book about the artifacts and relics left behind by Lincoln assassination conspirators. The work has a unique family angle for Lennard as Lewis Powell, the man hanged for attacking Secretary of State William Seward, is a distant relative.

"What happens when historians need to think of themselves as descendants? There's a lot of space for students thinking about histories of the civil war and its

legacies and aftermath, thinking about that from angles that they may not have anticipated,” Lennard said.

Lennard will assume her duties this fall and is excited to investigate what new stories can be told about the Civil War and Reconstruction.

“I’m delighted. The folks that I’ve met are ready to think about the issues that are exciting to me,” she said.

She is hoping to shine ample light on the Reconstruction period of U.S. history. She said it may be taught at the beginning or end of history courses but “doesn’t get a lot of careful attention in American classrooms.”

Some of the courses Lennard will teach include a Civil War and Reconstruction class, a survey on the United States up until 1865 and a course that examines the Civil War in popular culture.

Lennard said she hasn’t spent much time south of Louisville, but Bowling Green is “one of those spaces that just feels familiar.”

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