

# WORD!

## PRWR weathers the pandemic

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Delay. Cancellation. Adaptation.

Faced with a pandemic and its protocols, PRWR students and faculty worked through a curriculum forced online. Students met for Zoom get-togethers. Faculty learned new teaching software and applications. The program, once housed in the College of Liberal Arts building on Towson's campus, became scattered throughout dozens of Maryland homes.

At least one student caught COVID-19, and worked through it while in

quarantine. PRWR students who are also parents managed children, themselves learning from home. Jobs changed; some students lost working hours. PRWR interns worked remotely, never meeting co-workers and supervisors face-to-face.

Our lives were much as others. We endured delays and cancellations. We adapted. To read how the pandemic changed work and life in PRWR, please see page 2.

—Michael Downs, program director

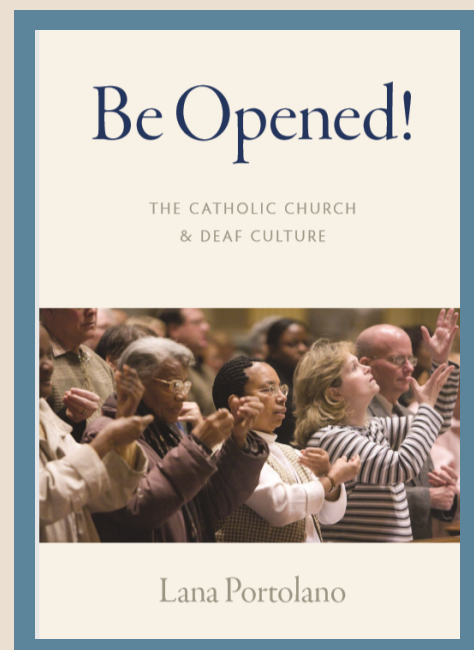
## Portolano's book reveals Deaf Catholic history

By Clara Jeske

When Dr. Marlana Portolano first took her Deaf daughter, Lena, to a Deaf Catholic Mass, how that Mass transformed Lena's religious experience provided the impetus for Portolano's newest book.

Portolano, who has been a professor in PRWR for seventeen years, began learning different forms of sign language when she and her husband adopted Lena from Ukraine. Lena is now twenty-four, and when she was sixteen and preparing for Confirmation, the family switched from a hearing parish to a Deaf one in Landover, Maryland.

"Ease of communication, inclusion she  
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# Pandemic alters work, life for PRWR

## Baltimore Writers' Conference cancelled, hopes to return in 2021

For one Saturday every November, the Liberal Arts building has become a place where more than 100 writers can connect over a shared admiration of words and stories at the Baltimore Writers' Conference (BWC). In 2020, the writers never came.

With PRWR as primary sponsor of the BWC, the PRWR creative writing faculty are the organizers of this annual literary event that hosts writers from around the region. These writers gather at the BWC to discuss their craft, learn from a talented line-up of guest speakers, get quick critiques on their writing, and network with other BWC participants.

"We get to see old friends, in a way," says Professor Michael Downs, "and there's just so much energy in the air about writing, that, I think, is really exciting and fun to be a part of."

The 2020 BWC faced cancellation when Towson restricted on-campus guests in response to the coronavirus pandemic. With the venue already booked, thoughts of a keynote speaker in mind, and excitement for a new system of online registration, PRWR's creative writing faculty were conflicted about how to move forward with

2020's conference. They spoke of possibly finding an off-campus venue or hosting the event virtually.

"And we all decided that we think what everybody loves about the Baltimore Writers' Conference is the face-to-face connections," says Downs. "We just thought a bunch of webinars wouldn't be nearly the same thing. And with all the other pressures the pandemic is putting on all of us, it just seemed it would be best to let it go for a year."

The hope for the BWC is to return in 2021. This means that if Towson's guest restrictions change by spring, PRWR can begin preparing next fall's conference.

—Briana Richert

## Students receive access to Adobe Design Suite for free at home

Thanks to Professor Leslie Harrison, her design students had a shred of normalcy with home access to their usual program software.

With the semester online, Harrison worried how her PRWR 625, Design Layout & Production course would function in a remote setting. She usually teaches this course in a computer lab where students have access to software like Adobe Creative Cloud. Adobe is an essential part of the design course, she says, but the issue was that students were unable to

access the university's licensed software from off-campus computers. Harrison didn't want her students to have to pay the high cost of personal licenses for the software.

"I started asking about this in the spring and summer and got nowhere," says Harrison. "Adobe had provided home access to students for a while early in the pandemic but then stopped. I kept pushing."

Harrison emailed nearly every Towson University department and faculty member who could possibly help with this issue. Eventually, in August, the Office of Technology Services (OTS) offered to pay for the individual student licenses. The students had access to the software by the second week of the semester after OTS pushed through some paperwork.

Students such as Jenna Harry, who is on the Technical Writing and Information Design track, were notably grateful to have access to Adobe for this class.

"Had I not had the opportunity through Towson—and because of Professor Harrison's determination—I wouldn't have gotten the chance to work on Adobe Creative Cloud," says Harry. "I looked forward to new assignments because working with this software became a creative outlet."

—Briana Richert

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# Pandemic alters PRWR life, work (cont.)

## PRWR student married in no-guest wedding

On a rainy Thursday last October, PRWR student Brynn Devereaux and her fiancé Travis Ward went to a Baltimore County courthouse, met a Justice of the Peace inside, and took their wedding vows in front of exactly nobody.

Devereaux, who is on the Writing for the Public and Private Sectors track, had always wanted a small ceremony—she's worked in event planning before, and says that the stress of arranging venues, catering, schedules, and so on made it hard to enjoy the actual events. She didn't want that kind of stress for her wedding day.

She and Travis always planned a no-guest wedding, so the pandemic didn't change that. The biggest change, she says, was that instead of going to a restaurant after the wedding, they ordered takeout from Bread and Circuses, a Towson restaurant, and went home.

"It monsooned that Thursday," Devereaux says, "but we went with the saying that rain is good luck for your wedding. It was a nice, sweet, simple day."

Part of her job, Devereaux says, involves photo restoration. People regularly bring her photos from their grandparents' or great-grandparents' weddings for restoration, and they often mention how simple and plain the

pictures and ceremonies were. All she sees, she says, is how joyful everyone was at their weddings.

"I'll always look back on that day and remember how happy I was," Devereaux says. "I hope people come out of the pandemic realizing you can still have a meaningful day without it having to be a big production."

—Clara Jeske

## Downs anticipates using Fulbright in Fall 2021

Selected for a Fulbright in February 2020, Professor Michael Downs thought he'd be in Poland studying folktales at the start of last September—but then came COVID-19.

Downs, PRWR director, proposed a Fulbright project to write short stories adapted from Polish folktales, such as the story of the evil king who was eaten by mice or the knight turned to stone for his vanity. The Fulbright Program, a U.S. cultural exchange program, awarded him with their grant that allows select students, teachers, and professionals to study, teach, or conduct research abroad. With a five-month residency in

Kraków, he would have researched legends within their geographical and cultural contexts to gain a deeper understanding of the stories.

But when March came with travel restrictions and a global health crisis, it was clear an overseas trip would be impossible.

"At first, we thought January (2021)," Downs says, "but then that window started to close. I wondered if I'd have to give up the Fulbright."

In November, however, governments in Poland and the United States agreed to allow Fulbright selectees to defer their awards. Now, Downs plans to visit Poland in September 2021.

He's excited, he says, to start this world-shifting experience and immersion into another country's literary culture. His host institution is Jagiellonian University, Poland's oldest, founded in 1364.

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Prof. Michael Downs (foreground, in orange) decided to study Polish folktales after hearing several of them in 2017, while on a 109-mile bicycle tour of Polish medieval castles.



# Pandemic alters PRWR life, work (cont.)

"Every time I go somewhere new, it changes how I understand the world to work," says Downs. "To be able to live for five months in a completely different country, I'm really looking forward to seeing how that changes me and my work."

—Briana Richert

## Lawrence joins international, multimedia conference via Zoom

Dr. Halcyon Lawrence spoke about accent bias in technology—and her frustrations with Alexa—at a global, virtual conference on machine listening in October.

In her presentation, Lawrence spoke about how she was born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago where she grew up speaking both English and Creole. When she moved to Chicago to start her graduate study in 2008, she had to begin navigating conversations knowing that her accent marked

her as foreign.

"In a respectful exchange," Lawrence said in her panel, "there's a beautiful kind of linguistic negotiation that goes on between speakers of different languages. It's like a dance...Yet despite many of these tricky exchanges, I never felt the expectation put upon me to change my accent to be heard—that was, until I started interacting with speech devices."

Organized by Liquid Architecture and Unsound 2020, the conference Machine Listening: An Open Curriculum brought together writers, teachers, and artists for a series of Zoom panels about how and why our computers listen to us, and what that means for the future of data control and automation. Lawrence spoke in the "Lessons in How (not) to Be Heard" session, in which she shared a series of her interactions with Alexa.

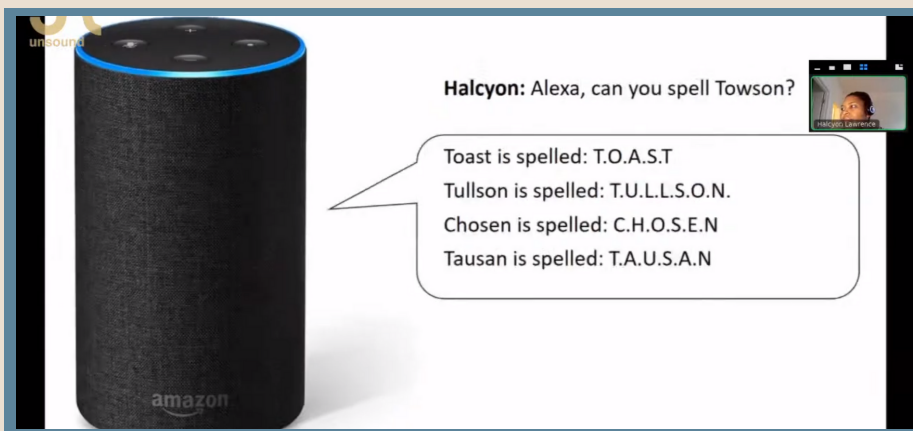
"None of my clear speech strategies worked," she told panelists and participants. "Slower, louder, and hyper-articulated speech was often mistaken by digital listeners as angry or distorted speech. And so it began to dawn on me that in digital spaces, I was not being heard."

In one example, Lawrence asked Alexa to spell "Towson" four separate times, slightly changing her vowels each time. Alexa heard Toast, Tullson, Chosen, and Tausan. This was just one daily way in which machines misunderstand her.

"To impose one's accent upon another is violent," she said. "Yet speech technology demands this of non-standard speakers all the time ... Accent bias is hard coded into these devices."

Though Lawrence says she missed the feeling of an in-person conference, she says the digital one was incredible. "I hadn't participated in a conference that engaged artists, academics, technologists etc., around a single theme, before," she said in a later interview. "It was fascinating to hear how a problem and potential solutions could be represented through different lenses across different media. My own work was validated as people shared (in the chat) similar speech technology experiences."

—Clara Jeske



Dr. Halcyon Lawrence (top right) presenting a recorded interaction with Alexa. See her [full presentation here](#). (her participation begins at ~15:20)

# Portolano reveals Deaf history (cont.)

could take for granted, and a feeling of normalcy replaced the isolation and alienation she had experienced at our mainstream hearing church (and, truly, in the world at large)," Portolano writes in the preface. "It was clear to me and my family that this is the way the church community should receive every individual."

*Be Opened!: The Catholic Church and Deaf Culture* maps the global history and heritage of Deaf Catholic culture, from the first missionaries to teach sign language to modern-day Deaf churches. Published by Catholic University Press in December 2020, the book's title refers to the only Bible passage containing communication with a Deaf person. Jesus puts his fingers in a Deaf man's ears, spits, and touches the man's tongue. He then says in Aramaic, "ephphatha"—which translates to "be opened"—and the Deaf man is miraculously made to hear.

"I wanted to write about the history of Deaf people in an institution that depends on the written word," Portolano says of *Be Opened*, which took her six years to write. The subject also fit with her background as a scholar of rhetoric and oratory. "I felt that I was the person to write this book."

She recounts in the book how Catholic missionaries operated the first schools to teach sign. The first record of education in

sign language was at the San Salvador monastery in 16th-century Spain. This starting point begins a centuries-long history of Catholic educators striving to reach Deaf people across Europe.

Portolano chose to write a history of Deafness through a Catholic lens because of her own faith, but also because, as she writes, "the history of Deaf Catholics bears witness to the need for inclusive communication." Everyone, she argues in the book, should be able to access not only the Word of God but also an education in their own language.

## The history of Deaf Catholics bears witness to the need for inclusive communication.

"Because of a growing understanding of Deaf people," Portolano writes, "the church is becoming more inclusive and (some would argue) truer to its theology of love for the poor, redemption of those who are ostracized, and equality in the eyes of God."

Prayer in sign language, she says, is its own physical poetry. It's an intimate meditation and a form of art.

"Deafness and communication in sign language is literally embodied," she says, "and writing seems to separate the language

from us. Sign language brings it back into your body and really makes it one with your identity, and that can be a very spiritual and moving experience."

In the book, Portolano also tells stories of Deaf Catholic communities that are alive and thriving today across the globe. She hopes these stories will inform readers about the fullness of Deaf life and culture.

*Be Opened* argues that Deafness is a disability in that society is designed for people who hear, but it is also a different way of being fully human. "There's so much that hearing people of all stripes can learn by thinking about Deafness as a culture," Portolano says. "We all depend on each other."

Portolano, who will retire from teaching after the Spring 2021 semester, plans to continue writing. She also hopes to travel internationally to visit Deaf communities where she's made connections.

"Today, in many countries in the West and increasingly in Asia, Deaf Catholic communities are striving to help Deaf people answer their true callings in the church and in the world," she writes in *Be Opened*, "...And what's more, they will reach out to other abandoned, disabled, and excluded populations. May these future pastoral leaders be encouraged to answer their call to "live as good shepherds that know their sheep."

# In memory of Leslie Plajzer, 1955-2020

By Clara Jeske

On the day of my first short-story workshop in PRWR 651, I arrived at school tense and nervous. I'd written a twenty-four page piece and was worried I'd bitten off too much and that the whole thing was no good.

As I approached the classroom, my classmate Leslie Plajzer stood up from the bench in the hallway and astonished me with a tight hug before I could speak. She thanked me for the story I'd written. She was grateful that I'd tried to write with empathy and vulnerability; when she laid a hand on my arm and told me that she hadn't wanted the story to end, that I had nothing to fear, I felt so loved in that moment that I almost cried.

That will always be my favorite memory of Leslie.

Leslie died June 10, 2020 at the age of sixty-four, following health complications that had led her to withdraw from the spring semester. She was a PRWR student for a semester and a half. Even in such a short time, she bonded with teachers and classmates, becoming well known and loved.

"Leslie and I became quick friends on the first night of Writing Short Fiction," says Madeline St. Clair, 23, who is on the Creative Writing track. "It was strange for me to make a friend like her—not because of the age difference, but because of how quickly it happened. We always

sat next to each other and always took the elevator down to the first floor. Never the stairs."

"I still have her voicemails on my phone," she says.

Leslie, knowing Madeline worked an emotionally exhausting full-time job at a car dealership, called her every day to check on her.

"Every time a customer came in, I'd have to put my phone down," St. Clair says. "Sometimes I was only away for a few moments, and sometimes it was much longer. But no matter how long I was gone, I'd pick the phone back up and there was Leslie—still at the other end."

"She loved everyone," says St. Clair. "Cared for everyone as though she had known them for years, remembered their names a week into the semester while professors were still learning. I don't know if I'll ever come across that kind of genuine friendliness ever again, but I am so thankful to have gotten to feel the warmth that is Leslie Plajzer. And because of Leslie, I tell all my friends I love them."

Leslie was generous. If she suspected anyone was hungry during breaks in class, she'd offer spare change for vending machine snacks.

If students were absent, she'd offer to send them her notes. And in writing

workshops, she'd say something positive about every single piece.

I met Leslie in my first class of Fall 2019 during one-on-one classmate introductions. I learned that she lived in Mount Washington with her cat, had a daughter named Sarah, and was nervous because it was her first time in school in forty years; she'd retired and was there to pursue creative writing. She'd worked for twenty-five years as a parole officer in Baltimore County.

Leslie's work experience shaped both her fiction and her nonfiction. She was accustomed  
(continued on p. 7)

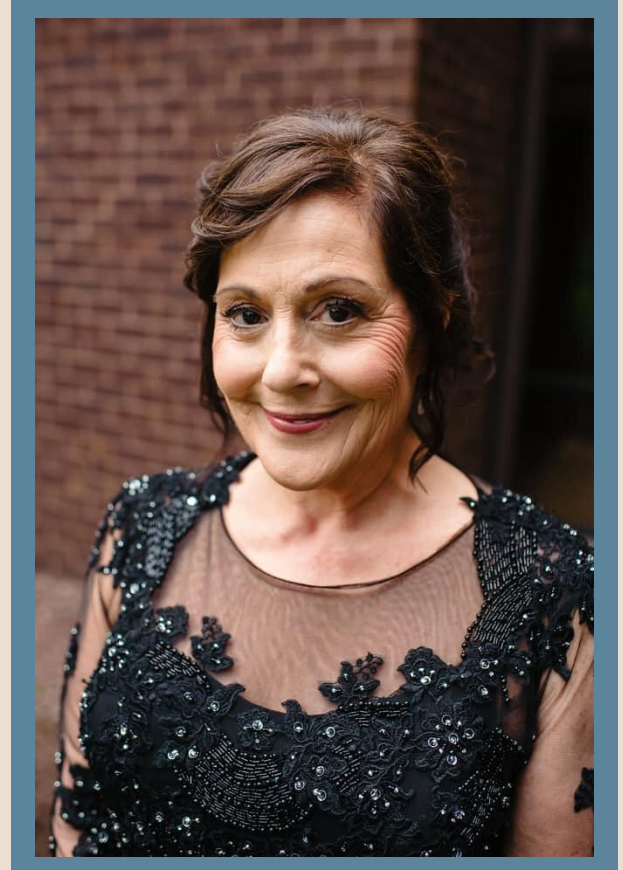


Photo courtesy of Bobby Anderson.

# In memory of Leslie Plajzer (cont.)

to wearing a bulletproof vest to meet clients in potentially dangerous areas of Baltimore, and she approached those days with the same equanimity and kindness she brought to the

classroom. "When I helped it was because I had been helped," she wrote in a paper in her first semester. "When I gave people breaks it was because so many breaks had been given to me.

When I kept a client afloat it was because so many people had kept me afloat. ... and the only reason I could see souls was because along the way, I had found my own."

## Gunning to puzzle over science communications in spring sabbatical

*By Briana Richert*

Dr. Sarah Gunning's sabbatical project will reverse her role in the classroom by placing her in student desks as she learns innovative ways that students and teachers talk about science.

Going into her eighth year at Towson University and with PRWR as a professor of technical communication, Gunning will take sabbatical leave in Spring 2021. She will sit in on TU science courses to watch how professors use language and storytelling to communicate scientific information. She came to the idea in part while teaching her English 318 undergraduate course, Technical and Scientific Writing, where she often finds environmental science and biology students to be among the best writers in class.

"I just love their stories," Gunning says. "So, I figured I could spend my sabbatical seeing what those teachers are doing, how they're getting their students to practice working with language."

Her plan, she says, is to work with Towson professors who teach chemistry, biological sciences, environmental science, and physics. Gunning also wants to observe courses taught in workshops, laboratories, lectures, and seminars at both upper and lower levels of undergraduate study. In these classrooms, she will document professors' teaching strategies.

Gunning doesn't know what she'll find. She imagines she might discover teaching techniques like those she noticed at a summer workshop run by the Faculty Academic Center of Excellence at Towson (FACET). These included teaching scientific processes through hand-drawn diagram and explaining the functions of a cell through poetry and haikus.

"So, I'm just kind of connecting how these little pieces fit together and overlap in ways that we might not have sat down and thought about," she says. "And it just really shows how everything's connected,

especially at the liberal arts level."

She is uncertain and excited after more than a year of planning her project. Gunning has never before studied social interactions between people in a specific setting. In the research world, this kind of open-ended work is called "ethnography." Gunning's past work includes many start-and-end projects like a five-year study on the communication practices of non-profit organizations and another project considering the functionality of scientific posters.

But even though she is most comfortable in non-ethnographic research, she says she looks forward to the challenge of puzzling together her undergraduate experience as a microbiology major with her work in technical communication. As an undergrad, she didn't have much of an opportunity to communicate with her professors.

"I remember feeling very much like a number, where it was 'get in, get out as soon as you can,'" she says. "The biology professors here

*(continued on p. 8)*



Presenter Name

### Intro

### Methods

### Results

**Main finding** goes here,  
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Take a picture to  
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**Full title**  
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**Extra Tables  
& Figures**

Table 1: Summary of data

Category	Value 1	Value 2	Value 3	Value 4
1	10	20	30	40
2	15	25	35	45
3	20	30	40	50
4	25	35	45	55

Table 2: Summary of data

Category	Value 1	Value 2	Value 3	Value 4
1	10	20	30	40
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4	25	35	45	55

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"I thought, 'how do you help someone see this story in their head and get what's in their head to match what's in my head?' That's really difficult," Gunning says. "So, I think that's my big puzzle piece that I'm interested in obsessing about for the next year or so."



WORD! is the newsletter  
of Towson University's  
Professional Writing graduate  
program.

Masthead logo  
Brianna R. Rostkowski,  
PRWR alum (2018)

For additional information  
about the program, write  
to [prwr@towson.edu](mailto:prwr@towson.edu)  
or contact Michael Downs,  
program director,  
at [mdowns@towson.edu](mailto:mdowns@towson.edu)



# Harrison's design class offers new layouts for *Baltimore Review*

By Briana Richert

PRWR students in Fall 2020 spent the semester creating design options for the *Baltimore Review*, a nationally distributed literary journal.

When Professor Leslie Harrison teaches Design Layout & Production, she regularly looks for new ways to incorporate real-world experience into the projects that she assigns to her PRWR 625 students. With the course's focus on print design and production, Harrison thought of the *Baltimore Review*, an online journal that collects its editions into a single annual print book, as a possible resource for her fall

semester students. She reached out to the founder and senior editor, Barbara Westwood Diehl, to see if she had any interest in collaborating with the class to create a new design for the *Baltimore Review* print book.

"I was delighted to know of the students' interest in working with us," says Diehl, who has a strong relationship with PRWR, regularly participating in the Baltimore Writers' Conference and offering *Baltimore Review* internships to PRWR students.

With this project, the students took skills they learned in Harrison's class and applied them. Harrison assigned the students

solve for them."

Working in their small teams, the class created three individual designs. For PRWR student Katie Iser, who is in the Technical Writing track, it was her first experience with this type of design work.

"It has been challenging, but also a realistic reflection of what it is like to work on an actual design team," says Iser. "This class has definitely improved my relationship to design. I feel we are encouraged to play and try and actually do design rather than think and study it. It has definitely made me feel more capable."

After the class determined their sample designs, they presented their work to Diehl, to share with the *Baltimore Review*'s editorial staff. Based on the feedback, the *Baltimore Review* and the students may decide on a new design template for the journal and continue working together on coming issues.

"This is how graphic design works in the world," says Harrison. "You are always working for a client, and there is always a lot of give-and-take as a design concept evolves."

The PRWR design class planned to have a finished version of their work by the end of the semester.



into three teams, each acting as a contract design team and treating the *Baltimore Review* as their client. Harrison says that she gave her students free rein over the project.

"The students and I decided on an approach, and it is entirely in their hands," says Harrison. "My job is to liaise with the editor, oversee the work, and problem-