

Syracuse University Magazine

Rachel May



Seeding Solutions to Eco-Challenges

If Rachel May ever lacks inspiration to start her workday, she need only turn on the news. With heart-wrenching images from the Gulf Coast oil disaster and renewed questions about energy policy filling the airwaves, May views her work as SU's coordinator for sustainability education as something of a calling. The University created the position last fall as part of an effort to ensure that all students graduate with a knowledge and awareness of climate change and sustainability issues. Such awareness, May believes, is a critical step toward solving the kind of challenges facing a culture that has yet to acknowledge that choices have consequences. "The things we take for granted now are changing life as we know it on Earth," May says. "The Gulf oil spill should lead us to a major rethinking of why we're using oil in the first place. And that's not happening. People have not yet connected their personal behavior to the bigger problems. It's very,

very hard to do that. Helping to make students aware of these issues, and interested in being leaders on them, feels incredibly valuable to me."

May began her academic career as a scholar of Slavic languages and literature, earning a bachelor's degree from Princeton University, a master's degree as a Marshall Scholar at Oxford University, and a Ph.D. degree from Stanford University. In 2001, she left a tenured position as professor of Russian at Macalaster College in St. Paul, Minnesota, to join her husband in Syracuse, where he teaches philosophy at Le Moyne College. Soon after, she decided to pursue her "other love"—a lifelong interest in the environment—by enrolling in graduate study at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF). Upon completing a master's degree in environmental communications in 2003, she became director of the Office of the Environment and Society, a position jointly created by SU and ESF to promote collaboration in environmental initiatives.

In her new post at SU, May works with faculty across the disciplines to find ways to incorporate sustainability issues into coursework. As part of that effort, the vice chancellor's office last year awarded grants to 12 faculty members for course development and engaging their students in a sustainability-related project for SU Showcase in April. During that event, May also oversaw the installation of a rain garden in the Waverly Avenue campus parking lot to mark the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. Designed by ESF graduate student Nick Zubin-Stathopoulos and installed by 55 students along with other volunteers, the garden can absorb 2,000 gallons of water, which in heavy downpours will reduce storm water runoff into sewage drains and reduce the likelihood of sewage overflows into local waterways. Just as important, May says, it serves as a crucial reminder of the University's connectedness to those living "downstream" from campus.

Raising awareness of such connections within the larger ecosystem is essential to changing our ways, May says. And while she admits news of deep-water oil spills and climate change trouble her, she believes the same power of imagination that sparked the Industrial Revolution can be harnessed to put the country on a more environmentally responsible course. The next generation—including her 11-year-old daughter—is counting on it. "A lot of these things I do for her," May says. "They are the generation that will see the fruits of what we do, whether good or bad. Keeping our focus on the people to come is really important, and that's what keeps me grounded." —*Carol Boll*

Photo by John Dowling

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