Professor Michael Shea passes away

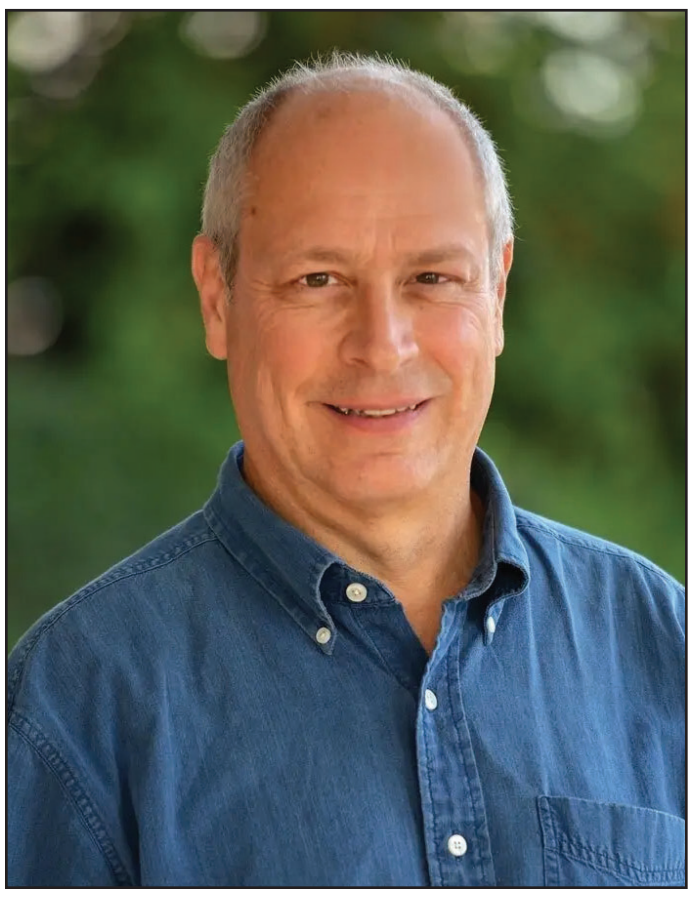

PHOTO | SCSU WEBSITE

Michael Shea, English professor and former department chair at the university.

By Brianna Wallen
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Michael Shea, 74, a longtime English professor and former department chair at the university, died Saturday, Oct. 24, after a hit-and-run collision in New Haven's Westville neighborhood earlier this month.

Shea was crossing Whalley Avenue near West Rock Avenue shortly after 9 p.m. on Oct. 9 when a rider on what police described as an apparent e-bike struck him. He was taken to Yale New Haven Hospital with serious injuries.

"The response to his actual passing is still quite new and raw," chair of the English department, Cynthia Stretch, said. "But the response to the news that he had been in a hit-and-run accident was devastating."

According to police accounts published by the New Haven Independent, Shea and another pedestrian were crossing at a marked crosswalk when the rider passed stopped vehicles, entered the intersection and struck Shea. The rider fled, and the other pedestrian was not injured.

Shea underwent surgery following the collision. Police reviewed surveillance footage from city and private cameras to identify the rider, according to the New Haven Independent.

"It's obviously completely unacceptable what happened to him," New Haven Police Chief David Zannelli told the New Haven Independent after the collision.

Shea and his wife had attended an event at nearby Lyric Hall that evening, according to Stretch.

Strech also emphasized that Shea was following pedestrian signals when he was struck.

"Professor Shea was crossing at a crosswalk. He had the walk signal, and all of the cars had stopped," Stretch said. "So, it wasn't like he jaywalked or stepped out in front of a moving car or anything like that."

The collision renewed concerns about pedestrian safety on Whalley Avenue.

Stretch said English professor Andrew Smyth raised those concerns at a Westville Community Management Team meeting after the crash.

Strech said local representatives discussed organizing a meeting at the university about pedestrian safety.

The department plans to follow up after supporting Shea and his family.

Shea taught at the university for more than three decades, teaching Shakespeare, grammar and film analysis.

Outside of the classrom, Shea previously chaired the English Department and served on university committees focused on academics and student life.

"Mike Shea epitomized service, including a decades-long commitment to service with the faculty union, the SCSU chapter of the American Association of University Professors," Kari Swanson, associate librarian and president of SCSU-AAUP.

Shea also taught generations of students, as he has taught innovative courses in the Honors College for over 25 years.

"His passion was infectious; whether walking by the Honors College Library or his office in the English Department, it was common to see Professor Shea surrounded by students working on their writing or engaging in deep discussion," Terese Gemme, professor in the music department.

Interim President Sandra Bulmer, who worked with Shea for 28 years, described his dedication to teaching and advocacy for public higher education.

"He was one of our most talented and dedicated faculty members," Bulmer said.

Alumni Alyssa Reyes said the lessons she learned from Shea continue to shape the way she teaches her own students.

"Professor Shea influenced my approach to teaching without even realizing it," Reyes said. "His natural ability to impact students' lives stemmed from the passion he had for teaching, and it is one of the many things I hope to carry on in his honor."

Stretch said students have discussed creating a memory wall following Shea's death. She also recalled students describing how he encouraged them to take on challenging work.

Bulmer said her years working alongside Shea showed her the importance he placed on students and colleagues.

"His legacy lives on in the students and faculty colleagues he has taught and mentored during his career at Southern. I will always be grateful that Mike chose to share his life with our Southern community," Bulmer said.

Campus aquariums make waves

By Lily Dalton
Contributor



PHOTO | LILY DALTON

The Werth Center aquarium in the first floor of the Academic Science and Laboratory Building on Oct. 13.

With the Long Island Sound just a short drive from the university, the department of Environment, Geography and Marine Sciences has brought aquaculture even closer to student life through its own aquariums in the Academic Science and Laboratory Building.

Built in 2015, the aquariums serve as educational tools for various students while also offering an interactive experience for the university community, aiming to bring a little joy to those who pass by.

"The aquariums bring people lots of joy. When you're just walking from one classroom to another, it's great to see all of the fish swimming around," Emma Cross, associate professor of coastal and marine science and co-director of the Werth Center for Coastal Marine Studies, said.

The aquariums are managed by the Werth Center, a Connecticut system-wide center housed at the university.

"We have private donors from the Werth family who provide funding for us to really boost our marine science education here at Southern," Cross said.

The funding supports two display tanks on the first floor of the science building, one featuring a pier piling enclosure and the other recreating a seafloor-like environment.

"Additionally, we have two touch tanks inside the aquarium downstairs," Cross said. "One of them has lots of invertebrates, and the other we have a couple of horseshoe crabs in."

The touch tanks are designed to encourage interaction and are primarily used to educate visiting school groups and tours about marine life.

With several tanks on campus, maintaining the aquariums requires daily attention to the health of marine life and the environment they occupy.

"There are four of us, and we are all in charge of feeding, taking care of the fish in case of infection, water quality tests, weekend checks on the smaller tanks used for MAR 210," environmental and marine science major and Werth Center fellow Maryorie Hernandez, a senior, said.

The fellows help maintain the aquariums here on campus while also participating in hands-on fieldwork and data collection at Long Wharf to expand their knowledge and experience.

"The degree that I am in is hands-on," Hernandez said. "The lecture part has its place, but it's definitely completely different when you're out in the field, learning it, then just sitting in a classroom seeing a professor press through slides."

While the aquariums offer hands-on learning opportunities for marine science students, beyond the classroom, they also serve as a point of interest for students passing through the building.

"I think it is an absolutely fascinating thing, and it definitely opens the eyes of a lot of other students to all of the other possibilities that we have in this kind of school," psychology major Gabriel Rubio, a freshman, said.

The aquariums catch the eye of many students just passing by; many make the quick stop part of their routine.

"I stop to look at the fish all the time when passing by," physics major Leah Leffingwell, a junior, said.

Whether it is to educate future marine scientists or simply to bring a smile to the campus community in passing, the Werth Center aquariums are a reminder of the marine life that exists just beyond the university.

"I hope the aquarium breaks up the mundane class schedule in students' days and also inspires them to think about the marine life they have on their doorstep and how their daily lives are also impacting Long Island Sound," Cross said.

Freshmen weigh in on AI use

By Vincent Distasi
Contributor



PHOTO | VINCENT DISTASI

Dyan Robinson, associate director of the First-Year Experience, sitting in her office at the First-Year Experience offices in Engleman Hall on Oct. 1.

The freshmen for this fall semester are the first class of students to have a whole high school experience with Artificial Intelligence at their disposal. Now, they carry this experience with them to college.

Dyan Robinson, associate director of the First-Year Experience, discussed her findings of AI usage in this year's INQ research projects.

"The wording and development of the research question and also looking at past research or what's existing out there," Robinson said. "They're turning to AI for that."

On Nov. 30, 2022, ChatGPT launched OpenAI, a free public preview of ChatGPT. At the same time, the current freshmen were just beginning their first year of high school.

This puts them in a unique situation where they must question their stance on AI and whether they will use it.

Robinson says that the FYE tries to combat this by maintaining the work and research for the projects in the classrooms.

"Most of us do it in the classroom so that we're evaluating it and we're helping them work through what supports a stronger question, without them having to use that assistance of AI," Robinson said.

Some faculty are trying to push students away from using the aid of AI, but many of Microsoft's programs that university runs on are incorporating AI features that anyone can freely use.

"All the office platforms are now incorporating AI features," Trever Brolliar, Information Technology and co-director of the Office of Online Learning, said. "The learning management system is incorporating AI features, like, it's so pervasive."

The Office of Online Learning's page on the SCSU website has an entire section dedicated to their findings of generative AI along with its capabilities and limitations.

The page discusses AI's academic uses as well as the topic of detecting AI as an instructor.

In the case of nursing major Diana Gonzalez-Stevens, a freshman, they seem to fall under the majority that are skeptical of AI.

"Junior year I'd use AI a bit," Gonzalez-Stevens said, "but when I started learning more about AI and people's feelings about it, I stopped there."

Despite Gonzalez-Stevens' former usage of AI, nfluence and observations have led her to turn against AI completely.

"I'm mostly skeptical about it mainly because I feel like people are becoming more and more dependent on it," Gonzalez-Stevens said.

Nursing major Patrick Revita, a freshman, had quite the opposite approach.

"In high school, I tried to avoid using AI," Revita said. "But now that I'm in college, I might use it for other purposes."

Revita referenced a program provided by Google called Gemini Notebook, where it can create quizzes and flashcards to help students study.

Both Revita and Gonzalez-Stevens have had completely different approaches to AI coming into their college careers, showcasing this brand-new divide of opinions that freshman will have to undergo.

"I've used it a few times and I would say they're really helpful," Revita said.