

A REAL PEOPLE PERSON

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Marjorie Marcoux Faiia's office is full of the usual faculty props—books, videos, papers waiting to be corrected. But her office is different. Two dark wood carvings hang behind the desk, artifacts brought back from her fieldwork in Haiti in 1986. A colorful quilt made by sexual assault victims and their friends, a project completed during Faiia's six years as director of the Sexual Assault and Harassment Education Office, rests over the back of a chair. People entering the office may notice a photo of Faiia with a cobra wrapped around her neck taken while she was on sabbatical in Nepal. Throughout the office, there are items that suggest stories and connections.

Faiia was not always an academic. She began her professional life as a psychiatric social worker at Boston State Hospital and Westboro State Hospital in Massachusetts. She earned her master's of social work degree from Boston College. While working in mental health, Faiia first developed her interest in social constructionism. Behaviors that were labeled as mentally ill in our society might be understood differently in other cultures. Her work in Haiti was a comparison of voodoo rituals to diagnostic intake interviews in the United States.

In 1974, Faiia got married and gave birth to twin boys. After having her sons, she tried to go back to social work part-time, but found that the job demanded more hours than she had available. She became an adjunct professor at St. Anselm's and at New Hampshire College in 1975; in 1978 she joined Rivier's faculty teaching half-time in the bachelor of social work program.

Faiia says she felt at home at Rivier from the moment she first stepped on campus. She loved that it was a women's college and a Catholic school. "Women's issues have always been important to me," she says. At Rivier, she has had the opportunity to teach sociology courses cross-listed with women's studies. Faiia served as director of the women's studies committee for five years; she has been a member of the committee since she began teaching full-time at Rivier in 1988.

Faiia earned her Ph.D. at Northeastern University in 1991. Her dissertation, "Social Construction of Social Problems," offered her the opportunity to further explore her interest in the social construction of reality. "I'm drawn to how people make sense out of situations," she says. It's clear that interest doesn't apply solely to research—watching students make sense of course material is important to her as well.

“I like students—even the ones that give me a hard time once in a while,” Faiia says. Her teaching style reflects that. She’s not afraid to share personal experiences in the classroom to get material across. And she has plenty of unusual experiences to share.

Faiia has researched the vampire sub-culture, beauty pageants, and shoplifting; computer hackers, scammers, and perverts. She’s done field work in Nepal to examine the role of second daughters in a culture where they are often seen as burdensome. Research on voodoo brought Faiia to Haiti less than six months before the fall of Baby Doc’s regime. While she was there, a voodoo priest saw Faiia videotaping and made her destroy the film in her camera. She says that it was a dangerous time: many Haitians were poor and frightened. “That’s when religion becomes important—voodoo gave people coping strategies,” she says.

Faiia’s ability to connect with people, an asset in social work and teaching, has helped her as a researcher as well. She’s bought coffee for an entire table of teenagers at Denny’s while researching vampirism. Other times, she must promise people anonymity or confidentiality. While Faiia’s focus on deviance offers many topics to choose from, people are often reluctant to talk about their deviant or illegal activities. “I’ve been fortunate with my access to interviews,” she says. “If people sense you’re not judging them, that you’re trying to understand their perspective, they open up.”



In Nepal (Courtesy Photographs).

Faiia’s research is mainly exploratory; she identifies timely topics and areas where there could be more research in the future. “I’ve included students in a lot of research,” she says. One of the senior honors students presented a paper on internet crime at a meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society, a rare opportunity for an undergraduate. Faiia has also had students present at the Undergraduate Sociology Research Conference. This semester a group of students in the Criminology class will research gay marriage and present their findings at the conference.

Students involved in Faiia's research projects get a chance to explore topics they enjoy and can relate to; they also develop a greater understanding of the impact their research may have. "It's easy for a well-intentioned person to make ethical mistakes," says Faiia. She encourages students to think about what the possible outcomes of their research will be and how it could affect people.

"I like doing research, but I love being in the classroom," says Faiia. "It makes me sad when I hear students say that they took sociology at another school and thought it was boring." With her warmth and willingness to explore all kinds of subjects, Faiia's classes are sure to dispel any notions that sociology is boring. But students who want to try her courses for the first time will have to wait until next spring.

This August, Faiia will travel to Oxford to participate in a roundtable on women in leadership positions, then take a sabbatical for the fall to co-author a textbook on substance abuse. No matter where she goes and who she meets, she's sure to come back with more stories and experiences to share with her students. ■

* **JENNIFER LISKOW** earned a master's in writing and literature from Rivier College in 2002; she has worked in Rivier's Development Office for the last seven years. Jennifer spends her free time preparing food in her vintage 1950's-style kitchen, practicing yoga, and listening to live music in Boston.