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The Teaching and Learning Center is pleased to present the *Ten Questions For Faculty Series*. The series is dedicated to helping faculty to stay connected with one another while working remotely. Every week, a faculty member will have the opportunity to answer ten questions about themselves and about navigating the changes brought about by COVID-19. Our first interview features Dr. Scott Ortolano, Professor of English.



Dr. Scott Ortolano
Professor of English

Where are you from?

I was born in Buffalo, New York, but my family moved to Port Charlotte, Florida when I was four-years old. As a result, most of my life has been spent in Southwest Florida. I even attended Charlotte High School, which is just a stone's throw away from FSW's Punta Gorda campus.

Which college or university did you attend?

I received my BA in history (with a minor in English) from Florida Gulf Coast University in 2006. I stayed at FGCU for an MA in English, which I received in 2008, before going on to Florida State University for my PhD in literature, which I completed in 2013.

When did you begin teaching at FSW?

I started teaching at FSW in January of 2013. I was overjoyed to have the opportunity to return to a region that I care about so much and work at an institution that plays such a fundamental role in its growth.

What is your favorite food?

Seafood in general, but shellfish and blue crab in particular. There is nothing like fresh blue crab!

If you could have dinner with any historical figure, who would it be and what would you ask them?

This is a tough question, and I probably change my mind every time I'm asked it. I'd love to sit down with Edna Ferber, a writer and journalist from the first half of the twentieth century. She isn't as popular now, but at one time, she was one of the most famous writers in America and a member of the famed Algonquin Roundtable. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1925, and many of her books have been transformed into well-known films and plays in their own right (*Giant* and *Show Boat* spring immediately to mind). She was remarkably ahead of her time—in terms of how she thought about an America that was rapidly transforming under the weight of new technological, material, and social realities. In particular, she envisioned a society in which women and those on the cultural margins would be afforded far more opportunity than they were at that time, and she tried to carve out a place for art, morality, and higher ideals in a world that sometimes seemed like it had no use for them.

I'd be interested in hearing Ferber's opinion about where we are now and, perhaps more importantly, where we might be going. When we find ourselves at a crossroads that too often can feel devoid of heart and empathy, it would be nice to speak with someone who was able to uncover so much hidden beauty in her own age. On a simpler level, given her life and experiences, I bet she'd have some incredible stories to tell.

What is your favorite local restaurant?

Peace River Seafood in Punta Gorda. It has the best seafood anywhere, and their blue crab is so good that it defies description.

What new things have you learned or done as a result of COVID-19 & working remotely?

I've become an expert at multi-tasking. My wife teaches first grade, so we've both been working from home and juggling parenting duties—with a five-year-old and an almost two-year-old. They are great kids, and we love having the opportunity to spend more time with them, but with work and parenting schedules that have both suddenly become more demanding, we've needed to respond by becoming far more flexible and adaptive than before. At this point, we're more coffee-powered Swiss Army knives than anything—simultaneously parents, co-workers, and teachers at the same moments and in the same spaces. There is no longer a way to isolate those aspects of our identities.

My teaching has called for a similar sort of multifaceted skill set. I've always used technology in my courses, though this largely comes with the territory when you teach composition in the twenty-first century—a time when new technologies are rapidly transforming and expanding the ways in which we communicate with one another and the world as a whole. In terms of my own teaching, I've begun using new programs to try and reach my students, and my conversations with colleagues have pushed me to experiment with using new tools for the types of work that I've done before. The journey hasn't always been smooth, but in many ways, I've learned a few years' worth of new pedagogical and technological skills over the past couple of months. I don't think that my courses will ever be the same, and while this isn't the path I would have preferred for such change, I think that I've become a better teacher as a result.

How do you think COVID-19 has changed the way we do things or has changed your outlook on life?

I'm a planner—partly because that has always been my way of navigating the chaos of life and partly because I'm rather absentminded and need to plan as a way of balancing the scales. The pandemic has

helped (forced?) me to realize that some things are beyond our control, but so long as your heart is in the right place, you can find a way. My classes have been far from perfect since our transition online, and I think that's probably true for everyone. We normally plan online classes well in advance, and there's only so much that can be done when you unexpectedly encounter the prospect of shifting multiple face-to-face classes online in a short period of time. However, the students have been incredible, and everyone has found a way to persevere. This hasn't happened because we're technological wizards but because we are all invested in a common cause and care about the communities that we are part of. Perhaps most importantly, I've come to understand how amazing our little community is here at FSW on an entirely new level—our faculty and staff are so knowledgeable and generous, and our students are unbelievably talented and hardworking. When you see everyone around you all pulling in one direction with such passion and fervor, it's impossible not to do as much as you can yourself. I count myself very lucky.

On a non-professional note, I've also grown to appreciate being a parent in a new way. My wife and I have both gotten to spend more time with our children than would have been possible otherwise. In some ways, that has been stressful and chaotic, and in other ways, it has been sort of incredible and beautiful. You try to hold onto that second part, and it's what I'll remember most about this time in my life.

What are you doing (exercise, cooking, reading, etc.) to take care of your mental and physical health during social isolation?

This is a tough question to answer because work and parenting responsibilities have had me burning the candle at both ends. I try to go outside as much as I can. I've been taking long walks with my kids—pulling them in a wagon, following along with the older one on her bike, or just adventuring around our neighborhood (which is sparsely populated, marked by patches of woods, and full of mystery for two inquisitive children). Whether I pull the kids around for a few miles, find new gopher tortoise holes, or discover new places to look at fish and birds in the surrounding waterways, we always come back to the house a little recharged. That is just as important for them as it is for me.

What advice do you have for your colleagues on how to navigate social isolation and changes from COVID-19?

In terms of advice, I suppose it's just to combat the isolation as much as you can. As I mentioned above, we have such a wonderful community here that I feel like I always find myself chatting with a colleague via text message or interacting with someone on social media. Academics, by our nature, tend to be curious about life and interested in talking with others about our insights, and technology provides us with ample opportunities for doing so. Just reading through threads on academic Twitter has been an unbelievably helpful way of making me feel like I'm part of a broader community of people all struggling to find their way in a brave new world—and I'd like to hope that we're succeeding at doing so as well.

If you would like to be featured in the *Ten Questions for Faculty Series*, please contact Kelly Westfield, Coordinator for the Teaching and Learning Center: kwestfield@fsw.edu