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# RUFUS FEARS: SHARING A PASSION FOR HISTORY

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Photo provided

**Students pack his classrooms and seminars for spellbinding lectures with an overriding message: The past has lessons to teach us; we just refuse to learn.**

**By DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI**

**R**ufus Fears doesn't much care for talking about himself.

But he loves talking about the subject he says defines him: history.

The University of Oklahoma classics professor's spacious, sun-dappled office in Cate Center on OU's Norman campus is filled with shelf upon shelf of books on ancient Rome and Athens, the World Wars, American presidents and other world leaders. His walls are adorned with images of Winston Churchill and Julius Caesar. Drawers overflow with photographic slides documenting his travels to historical sites around the globe. He is immersed in history.

Ask Fears where he is from originally, and he responds with Southern gentility (he is a native of Atlanta) but with little interest. But ask him to name his favorite historical figure (Churchill) or place (Rome) or to describe an important lesson for modern times (the first lesson of history is that we just do not learn from it), and you can almost feel his pulse quicken.

"History is my passion," he declares, "and I want to share that passion with others."

An internationally renowned scholar and author, Fears is the David Ross Boyd Professor of Classics and G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty. He also is one of OU's most popular professors, famous for making history come alive in the classroom, whether in a lecture hall packed with 300 undergraduates or a seminar room of 60 senior citizens.

"Dr. Rufus Fears is one of the most gifted teachers in American higher education," says OU President David L. Boren. "He understands how much our students need historical perspective in order to fully understand current events. He is one of the University's greatest resources and adds immeasurably to the intellectual vitality on our campus."

Before arriving in Norman in 1990, the Harvard-educated professor was a member of the faculty at Indiana University and Boston University. Over his many years in academe, he

has amassed an impressive body of work and accolades: a celebrated series of original books on tape on such topics as *The Wisdom of History*, *A History of Freedom* and *Life Lessons from the Great Books*; 25 awards for excellence in teaching; frequent appearances on television and radio and guest columns in newspapers; hundreds of lectures at national and international conferences and meetings; dozens of study travel tours to famous historical sites stateside and abroad; numerous books and book chapters, including a chapter in *Preparing America's Foreign Policy for the 21st Century*, edited by Boren and former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Edward J. Perkins.

While the subjects of Fears' many endeavors are varied, the overarching theme is singular: how the lessons of history can be applied today. Foremost among them is the concept that freedom is not a universal value.

"Many times, in many places, people have chosen the perceived security of absolute rule over the self-responsibility of freedom. China is a great civilization, but even Confucius never spoke about freedom; he spoke about order and security," Fears explains. "Russians believe their country is the 'Third Rome,' after ancient Rome itself and Constantinople, and that it will never fall. But Russia has always been chauvinistic, xenophobic and expansionist. Life there today is chaotic.

"America has a wonderful democracy, and we think everyone else should have one, too," he continues. "But we must respect the fact that many of them don't want it and allow them to choose their own way."

Nevertheless, he says, a great historical lesson lies in America's success as a democracy.

"Our founders succeeded for two reasons: their own moral fiber and their willingness to learn from history," Fears observes. "There were no really successful democracies in 1776, so they looked back to ancient Athens and the Roman republic. They understood the need to delve beyond historical fact and aspire



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"Historical fact is only good for Trivial Pursuit," Fears says. "We need to engage in historical thinking—using the past to make decisions in the present and a plan for the future."

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That is one of the many lessons of history that Fears shares with students of all ages.

Not surprisingly, his undergraduate courses are among the most in-demand on campus. Each fall his “Freedom in Greece” draws more than 300 students and another 40 participate in his seminar on the U.S. Constitution. In the spring, he follows with “Freedom in Rome” and a seminar titled “Freedom and Morality: The Great Books Tradition.” The courses explore both the history of and modern lessons learned from those great civilizations.

“OU students are the best I’ve ever taught in terms of their openness and willingness to new ideas,” Fears declares. “They make teaching history interesting and fun.”

Ditto for the senior citizens he instructs in his Great Books course offered through OU Outreach’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, which is dedicated to promoting lifelong learning and personal growth in adults age 50-plus.

“Great Books have wonderful themes and beautiful language, but they must speak to you personally,” Fears says. “The insights of people in their 60s and 70s are fascinating and frequently not so different from those of college students.”

The class meets once a month for eight months. In the decade since its creation, the Great Books course has become so popular that Fears now teaches two sections, one in Norman and the other in Oklahoma City. He selects a different theme each year based on his taped lecture series, plus an assortment of Great Books that illustrate the chosen theme. For a course titled “The Unconquerable Human Spirit,” for example, he included the autobiography of Albert Schweitzer, Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and works by Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel.

Some of the students have attended the class for as long as it has been offered. Jim Brown is one of them.

“Several things keep me coming back,” Brown explains. “Primarily, it is the opportunity to delve into subjects that weren’t in my technical professional field. Also, the intellectual stimulation in and of itself is appealing, as are Dr. Fears’ personality, style of presentation and fearless expression of opinions.”

Brown appreciates the broad range of literature and history to



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While undergraduates clamor to get into his classes, Fears also has developed a following of senior citizens, including Jim Brown, center, and Lila Stevens for his Great Books course, through OU’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, with sections in both Norman and Oklahoma City.

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which Fears has exposed him and his classmates. “We’ve read and discussed Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation*, the Gospel of Mark, and the writings of Plato, Homer, Cicero and Machiavelli, and have learned how those works speak to us today,” he says.

In addition to teaching in the classroom, Fears leads annual “In the Footsteps of ...” study trips sponsored by the OU Alumni Association. The groups travel to historical sites stateside and abroad that focus on individuals, events and ideas pertinent

to the history of freedom and the western tradition. He and his students walk in the footsteps of Christianity's saints Peter and Paul, as well as Winston Churchill, George Washington and Robert E. Lee.

"I enjoy the study trips because they give me a chance to teach lessons of history there on the spots they were made," Fears explains. "We've gone to the Roman Forum, where Caesar was assassinated. We've learned Civil War lessons at Antietam

Fears calls history a laboratory of all the experiments humans have made. The laboratory shows us why some of those experiments have succeeded and others have failed, why some have enjoyed lasting good results, and why some have been pure evil.

And, he says, we must continue our exploration in that historical laboratory.

"Today, we have a tendency to believe that science and technology puts us beyond the lessons of history. But we as

a society still need to think historically," Fears says. "The mistakes we've made the last few years that led to this global recession were made because we believed the lessons of the stock market crash of 1929 just didn't apply.

"Our failure to act decisively during the Iranian hostage situation in 1979 and 1980 left us with a bitter harvest from the Middle East that we would one day reap," he continues. "That happened on Sept. 11, 2001—and it came from our failure to learn from history, particularly the rise and fall of the Roman Empire."

Despite society's periodic lapses in heeding history's lessons, Fears tirelessly continues his own search for them. His latest book, *The World Was Never the Same*, chronicles 36 historical events that forever changed the world, from the first written code of law in Babylonia and the discovery of scientific medicine to the 1929 stock market crash and the bombing of Hiroshima at the end of World War II.

"Being good at something requires more than just loving it. I love history, but I also continue to think, change and grow intellectually, morally and spiritually," Fears muses. "I'm always searching for the answers and looking down different paths that might lead me there."

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Long after they have completed their degrees and left the University, Fears continues to follow the career accomplishments of his best students. At Commencement in 1996 he posed for a souvenir photo with letters majors Kimberlee Hefty, left, and Kate Somuongsiri.

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and Gettysburg. We've visited Washington's Mount Vernon, Jefferson's Monticello and the room in the Pennsylvania state house in Philadelphia where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were discussed."

In 2008, he led a group that traveled to Russia to study why the course of Russian history differs from that of American history. "The simple fact is that at every critical turn America has chosen freedom of the individual, while Russia has chosen despotism," he says.