



# Living Narrative

By Greg Chandler

**D**r. Fred Johnson was in the third grade, attending school in the Philippines where his father was stationed in the United States Air Force, when he discovered his passion for history.



Students have rewarded Dr. Fred Johnson's engaging approach to teaching with honors including the Faculty Appreciation Award, selection as the Commencement speaker and the Hope Outstanding Professor Educator (H.O.P.E.) Award.

He asked his parents for books dealing with the history of the Air Force, the rise and fall of Adolf Hitler, the Battle of Britain and *30 Seconds Over Tokyo* – the story of the 1942 raid on Japan led by Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle.

"It just got worse as I got older," quipped Dr. Johnson, an associate professor of history at Hope whose scholarly interests range from U.S. foreign policy in Africa, to the role of railroads in the Confederacy during the Civil War, to the late rapper Tupac Shakur.

As a teacher at Hope, Dr. Johnson has taught courses ranging from the Civil War to Modern European History. Acclaimed for his work in the classroom, he hopes to connect his students with the human dimension of the past, to see the events about which they're learning as a living process, and to envision their own place in the stories to come.

In his Modern European class, for example, he has his students visit nearby Pilgrim Home Cemetery, to study the monuments and gravestones of those who lived in Holland many years ago. He has them note the birth and death dates on the monuments.

"I tell (the students) that every last one of those folks used to be just like them, walking around on the earth. They had dreams, passions, desires and ideas about the future.

"The great story is what you do between birth and death. That's when history is written," Dr. Johnson said.

In a U.S. history class, he has his students simulate the February 1861 Peace Conference held in Washington, D.C., where northern and southern delegates argued about slavery and other issues in a last attempt to prevent the outbreak of civil war.

"The students usually come away (from the simulation) with a lot more respect for the elected officials and leaders of that time,



A moment during "U.S. History to 1877." Dr. Fred Johnson of the history faculty hopes to connect his students with the human dimension of the past, to see the events about which they're learning as a living process, and to envision their own place in the stories to come.

that they didn't slide willy-nilly into war," Dr. Johnson said.

Students value his engaging approach. During Homecoming in 2002, they presented him with the Faculty Appreciation Award. In 2003, the graduating class chose him to deliver the Commencement address. Two years later, he was voted the recipient of the prestigious H.O.P.E. (Hope Outstanding Professor Educator) Award by that year's senior class.

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– Dr. Fred Johnson, Associate Professor of History

This past February, he was the featured speaker in Hope's "Last Lecture Series," organized by the college's Mortar Board honorary society. His talk, titled "Let It Not Be In Vain," focused on the implications of the life and death of Jesus Christ for the choices people make.

"Christ did His part for me on the cross. Now, my obligation for His sacrifice is to not let it be in vain. By that, I mean I owe Him service to others. The work He did for me, I am now charged to do for others," Dr. Johnson said.

Dr. Johnson's path to becoming one of Hope's most popular professors was not without challenges.

At 15, he was severely beaten by police officers in Prince George's County, Md., who had raided a block party he was attending.

"It was definitely a sign of the times, the kind of thing that often happened in a southern black community," Dr. Johnson said.

While such an incident might provoke many to anger, he used it to further fuel his interest in history. He began reading about Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave who

became a major figure in the abolitionist movement.

"What I learned, as a student of history, was to ask 'Why are we doing this?'" Dr. Johnson said.

A few years later, Dr. Johnson's dreams of going to the U.S. Naval Academy and becoming a fighter pilot were crushed when he discovered he had a sickle-cell blood trait that disqualified him from flight school. He instead completed his undergraduate degree at Bowie State College, after which he became a communications and electronics officer in the Marines, serving on active duty for four years and another eight years as a reservist.

After his discharge from the military, Dr. Johnson worked for several companies, including Packard Electric of GM in Warren, Ohio (near Cleveland), Contel – Page Communications in Fairfax, Virginia, and Aircraft Braking Systems (formerly Goodyear Aerospace) in Akron, Ohio.

While in Ohio, Dr. Johnson completed his master's degree, and later his doctorate, in

history at Kent State University. It was there that he crossed paths with Dr. Robert Swierenga, at the time a history professor at KSU, who served on his dissertation committee and recommended that he look at Hope, and Hope at him.

"He was a Christian, he was a very good teacher and he seemed to have an interest in teaching more than research and writing," said Dr. Swierenga, now a research professor at the A.C. Van Raalte Institute on the Hope campus. "He simply is a very fine gentleman, he had high moral standards, and I knew he would fit in at Hope."

Dr. Johnson is active in the community and as a scholar and author in addition to his deep commitment to his students.

He serves on the boards of a variety of community organizations, including the Holland Area Arts Council, Holland Historical Trust, Latin – Americans United for Progress, and Disabilities Action Network Lakeshore. He is a facilitator for the Institute of Healing Racism sponsored by the Holland Area Chamber of Commerce, and is a past member of the Holland City Human Relations Commission. He was a faculty representative to the college's Board of Trustees from 2006 through earlier this year.

He has been recognized repeatedly for his ability as a public speaker. In 2006, he was Division champion and second place winner in District 62 for the Toastmasters International Speech Contest. In 2007, 2008 and earlier this year he won the District 62 championship and advanced to the semifinal rounds of the International Speech Competition.

In 2008, Dr. Johnson entered the political arena, running as a Democrat in Michigan's Second Congressional District against incumbent Rep. Peter Hoekstra '75. He received nearly 120,000 votes, the most ever by a Democratic candidate in the heavily-Republican district. He ran again this fall in the Second District, receiving 32 percent of the vote.

He has written three novels: *Bittersweet* (2002), *A Man Finds His Way* (2003) and *Other Men's Wives* (2005). He contributed a chapter to the book *The United States and West Africa: Interactions and Relations* (2008), and is currently writing *America's Blind Spot: U.S. Foreign Policy in Africa, 1945 - present*. In January, he and New York-based author Tayannah Lee McQuillar published *Tupac Shakur: The Life and Times of an American Icon*, a book that examined the controversial rapper who was shot to death in 1996.

Dr. Johnson takes seriously the challenge of making the most of his time, of living his story in the same way in which he encourages his students to live theirs.

"All you get to leave behind is your story," he said. "You need to carefully manage how you write it." 📖

