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Faculty File

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A Voice in the Wilderness

Priscilla Doel speaks for people who can't speak for themselves

By Kevin Cool

Until he met Priscilla Doel, Hector Ruiz (not his real name) spent his days in a dingy, run-down house deep in the woods near Stratton, Maine, nursing the stub that used to be his left index finger and wondering how he would find his way back to a productive life.

Injured in a forestry accident, Ruiz was not receiving proper medical care when Doel, a professor of Spanish and Portuguese, met his lawyer and learned of Ruiz's situation, in 1997. Shocked that the man was simply being ignored, Doel drove Ruiz and another forestry worker who had suffered a broken neck to the Maine Employers Mutual offices in Portland. There, Doel translated for the two men while they told their stories and eventually won them payment for medical care as well as retroactive benefits they should have been receiving under their company's insurance plan.

What began as a simple gesture of kindness has evolved into a kind of crusade for Doel, who has organized a statewide network to assist migrant, seasonal and guest worker populations in Maine under the aegis of a new non-profit organization, Maine Service Advocates in Foreign Languages and English (S.A.F.E.) It's a safety net for persons, mostly Hispanic, whose fates typically were decided by people who didn't speak their language.

"These guys who come up to work in the woods, they don't have anybody to look out for them if something goes wrong," Doel said. "It's not just the language barrier [that's a problem], it's that they don't know our systems. They need somebody to show them how the system works."

Doel says forestry companies now contract with businesses that recruit workers from central American countries and send the men north with little education on U.S. customs or culture. "They're bringing in crews who speak no English, who have no idea what's going on in this country," Doel said.

Doel's first involvement with migrant workers was two years ago when she learned about a Spanish-speaking prisoner in the Skowhegan jail. The man, a forestry worker from Honduras, had been accused of sexual assault and was assigned a public defender who had difficulty communicating with his client. Doel says her offer to translate for the



Priscilla Doel

prisoner was well received by jail personnel and marked the beginning of what is now a strong relationship with law enforcement officers in the state. It also began a lengthy correspondence with and an advocacy for the prisoner, currently serving a three-year term in a Maine prison following his conviction. Doel, who still is not convinced the man was guilty of anything more

than poor judgment, spent a year seeking a lawyer to represent him and is sorry she didn't become involved sooner.

"There was information left out that was favorable to him, but of course he had no way of communicating any of this. He was sort of at the mercy of the system," she said.

She's been like a mother to Spanish-speaking workers who get in a bind. Injured, in trouble with the law, or just in need of a friend, they find a confidant and an advocate in Doel. The fingers of her statewide support network reach into Honduras, Mexico and Guatemala. She stays in touch with her "clients" even after they've left Maine for other jobs in the South, and occasionally gets cards or letters with updates about their experiences.

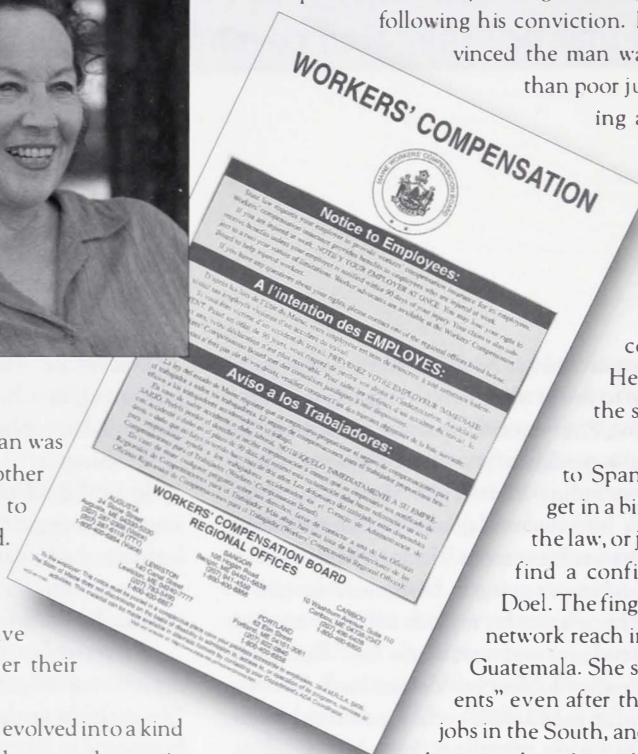
"When I first got involved in this I thought I was living some of the novels and short stories that I've taught in my classes," says Doel. "It has been like an extension of my teaching about language, literature and culture."

She's heartened by the willingness of state officials to ease the transition of migrant workers in Maine. "I'm finding that there are a lot of wonderful people who want to help," she said.

Her language facility and cross-cultural awareness equips her to serve as a resource person for migrant workers, Doel says. "Knowing what I know, I would be doing a disservice if I didn't help," she said.

Her latest effort includes developing official tri-lingual workers compensation posters, used to inform employees of their rights. Maine is the only state in the country to have posters printed in three languages. "Language can be very empowering, but it also can be used to subjugate people. I see this dichotomy constantly, and I think that's what drives me. I have this ability to communicate in more than one language and can serve as an intermediary," she said.

"If you can communicate clearly you can resolve a lot of problems. Language can hurt, but language can also heal. I want to help find solutions." ♦



Colby Welcomes 11 New Faculty

Eleven new tenure-track faculty members joined Colby this fall, the largest incoming group in several years.

Alec Campbell (sociology) spent last year as a Mellon post-doctoral fellow at the Center for Studies of Social Change in New York. He earned his Ph.D. from UCLA, and has lectured at Pomona College and Cal. State-Northridge.

Ariel Armony (government) comes to Colby from the University of Pittsburgh, where he earned his Ph.D. His 1997 book *Argentina, the United States and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984* was praised by *Library Journal* as "important, original work."

Shari Uldrich Dunham (chemistry) earned her Ph.D. from MIT in 1997 and last year taught at Drew University, her undergraduate alma mater. Her research has contributed to five collaborative publications in science journals.

Stephen Uldrich Dunham (chemistry) taught at Seton Hall last year after two years with EPIX Medical Inc. and a three-year NIH post-doctoral fellowship at MIT. He earned his Ph.D. at Montana State University. His work has been published widely in scientific journals.

Gina Herrmann (Spanish) recently earned her Ph.D. in Hispanic literature from Cornell University. Her research has focused on the autobiography of the Spanish Civil War period and the role of women in war.

Howard Lupovitch (Judaic studies) has a Ph.D. in Jewish history from Columbia University and has taught at Cornell. For the past year he was conducting research as a post-doctoral fellow of the Yad Hanadiv/Beracha Foundation. He is writing a book about the Jews of Budapest.

Luis Millones-Figueroa (Spanish) recently earned a Ph.D. from Stanford University. He specializes in Spanish American colonial literature and will participate in the Latin American Studies program.

Katherine Stubbs (English) has taught at Swarthmore and at Duke, where she earned her Ph.D. Among her many academic honors were a four-year Jacob Javits National Fellowship, the Lucretia Mott Award and a dissertation grant from Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College.

John Talbot (sociology) earned his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, where he wrote and conducted research on commodity chains and inequality in the world economy. Former editor of *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, he has published and presented more than a dozen papers on the processes of globalization.

Ted Underwood (English) holds a Ph.D. from Cornell, where, among other academic honors, he received the Spencer Teaching Prize. A visiting assistant professor last year at the University of Rochester, he has written on the history of science and early 19th-century British literature.

Ankeney Weitz (art and East Asian studies) has been assistant professor and director of the art gallery at Denison University since 1996. She also has taught at Washington University in St. Louis, the University of Heidelberg and the University of Kansas, where she earned her Ph.D. in art history. Her specialty is Asian art. ♦

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Unplugged and Loving It

Batya Friedman, a computer science professor and author of a book on the implications of computer technology, nevertheless finds good reasons to occasionally drop out of the cyberspace stream. An article in *The New York Times* described how, each summer for several weeks, Friedman neither sends nor receives e-mail.

It's a way of reclaiming one's private life, she said.

"It's an opportunity for focus, and that's harder to achieve when you are so accessible," said Friedman, who spends her summers with her husband, Peter Kahn Jr. (education), and their daughter, Zoe, at a home without electricity in northern California.

"In the summer, each communication I get I do really read, while the rest of the year I'm overwhelmed by the amount of e-mail messages I get," she said.

In the same article, professor of philosophy and former vice president for academic affairs Robert McArthur told the paper that e-mail's ubiquity may have reached a backlash stage.

Silicon Valley in Maine?

Despite impressive growth in technology jobs in Maine, the computer industry won't provide a panacea for the state's economy, Associate Professor of Economics Michael Donihue '79 cautioned in a *Boston Globe* article.

"To try to say that we are going to develop a Silicon Valley in Bangor or Caribou, that just isn't going to happen," Donihue said.

Even so, Donihue believes, the technology sector does hold some promise for Maine. "A few software manufacturing firms would make a huge difference" in the state's recovery from the loss of high-paying jobs at paper mills in the past decade, he told the *Globe* in an article written by Brian MacQuarrie '74.

Speech Analysis

Robert Weisbrot commented for the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* on a landmark 1948 civil rights speech by Hubert Humphrey, then mayor of Minneapolis and later a U.S. senator and vice president.

Weisbrot, a professor of history and author of *Freedom Bound*, a history of the civil rights movement, said Humphrey's speech "was important in dramatizing the moral struggle and in linking black rights with the highest traditions of the country."

Liberals like Humphrey were making traditional appeasement of southern Democrats, who were resistant to black integration and equality, less palatable to the party's membership, Weisbrot said. Buoyed by Humphrey's speech at the 1948 party convention, liberals succeeded in passing a plank that solidly supported civil rights. From that point, said Weisbrot, "it was clear that a new political era was unfolding, one in which blacks, who had migrated north to take industrial jobs and who were coming into the unions, were becoming a stronger force in the Democratic party."

