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Faculty Spotlight: Heidi Kim

By Laurie D. Willis '86

Two years in Chapel Hill and already making a mark

Heidi Kim started working at Carolina in fall 2010, after completing her Ph.D. in English at Northwestern University, and says she couldn't ask for a better first job.

Chances are, the University couldn't ask for a better first-time professor.

Kim, an assistant professor of English and comparative literature, said UNC's reputation as a top research university led her to Chapel Hill.



Heidi Kim, assistant professor of English and comparative literature

Photo by Dan Sears

“The colleagues down here are tremendous,” said Kim, a New Jersey native. “I knew of the work of some of the people in the English department and was looking forward to working with them. I’ve been welcomed with open arms everywhere, which is fantastic.”

In her two years at the University, Kim has quietly made a name for herself among Carolina's faculty while simultaneously embracing her heritage.

“Students need role models in different areas and ... I can certainly say from personal experience that some students feel quite comfortable approaching a professor of the same racial background,” said Kim, who is Asian American.

She can't recall having an Asian American professor during her undergraduate days at Harvard University or while obtaining her advanced degrees at Northwestern; however, Asian American students flocked to her office when she became a Northwestern teaching assistant and the same holds true now.

"It's definitely an honor when students seek you out and want your advice and your help," said Kim. "It's really a great compliment that they trust you that much so I do my best to help them. But sometimes the best I can do is to try to point them to people who are better suited to help them, because I've had students come to me with just about everything."

Kim loves the performing arts and once considered a career in arts administration. But her love for helping people and sharing things she finds interesting led her to the classroom, where she incorporates projects to engage students.

In fall 2011 her students worked on a project about the Bunker twins, the world's most famous Siamese twins. She followed that up in spring 2012 with a project on Japanese American internment during WWII. In fall 2012 she brought master playwright Philip Gotanda to campus to conduct a workshop of his play about the twins.

"Truthfully, I didn't know much about the Bunker twins, but I knew Philip Gotanda," Kim said. "With the Japanese American incarceration I came to it from a civil rights perspective and am very committed to working on it."

Building on work already begun by colleague Jennifer Ho, Kim founded the Asian American Studies Colloquium at UNC in 2011.

"The student groups have been doing a lot of work to organize, and I wanted to kind of pull it altogether and give it a name so they could feel like there's a resource we could hold on to," she explained. "I don't know exactly what's going to happen with it, but we'll see how it progresses."

Kim, who has a Facebook page, routinely works out, plays the piano and guitar and enjoys reading and watching movies, said she's developing her teaching style as she goes. She ultimately hopes to become tenured.

"I use a lot of multimedia, classroom discussion and Sakai," Kim said. "When I was a student I actually did pretty well learning from lectures and seminars and traditional classroom courses, ... but one thing I keep saying to my students is everybody learns differently."

And what's one thing Kim has learned so far? "Not to schedule a class trip to PlayMakers Theatre on the night UNC plays Duke."