

## History Professor Named Campuswide Outstanding Teacher of the Year

Contributed by Rebecca Lauck Cleary  
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John Neff

OXFORD, Miss. — Bringing history alive in the classroom is John Neff's passion, and he has been rewarded for his efforts by being named the campuswide outstanding teacher this year at the University of Mississippi.

Neff was recognized with the 2009 Elsie M. Hood Outstanding Teacher Award Thursday evening at the university's 66th Honors Day Convocation. The ceremony also included recognition of 43 students who were awarded the Marcus Elvis Taylor Memorial Medal, the university's highest academic award.

Chancellor Robert Khayat presented Neff with a \$5,000 check and an engraved plaque. His name also will be added to a permanent plaque listing all Hood Award recipients, which is displayed in the Chancellor's Office.

"Dr. Neff consistently receives glowing comments from his students regarding the high quality of his teaching," Khayat said. "His commitment to his discipline, knowledge of the subject matter, personal investment of himself in his work as a faculty member and extraordinary encouragement of his students have distinguished his career. Dr. Neff represents the best in higher education."

Watch video of John Neff

Neff, who joined the UM faculty in 1999, said he felt overwhelmed when he learned that he had been chosen to receive the award this year.

"There are so many good teachers on this campus doing such great work that to be selected is a tremendous honor," he

said. "I keep expecting a call back, saying, sorry, miscounted the vote. It just doesn't seem possible."

Neff specializes in American history, particularly the Civil War era. Students flock to his classes, including his popular Era of the Civil War course, which consistently enrolls more than 100 per semester.

Letters nominating him for the Hood Award reflected such popularity, including one that read, "His classes fill quickly because they are informative, engaging and thought provoking."

One former student said that sitting in his class is like "watching a play narrated by a brilliant historian."

Another said, "Dr. Neff is an extremely talented instructor who has a deep knowledge and passion for this subject. Each class feels like a conversation rather than a lecture."

Neff said his goal is to provide students the opportunity to acquire skills and tools that will carry them far beyond his classroom. He said he feels lucky to teach in a place where Civil War history has such resonance with so many students.

"They come to the classroom ready to dive in, and that is a really wonderful thing," he said. "I hope to get students engaged in seeking to understand the world around them, to be in a position to be savvy, curious and discerning."

Aside from his students, Neff said he feels energized by his faculty colleagues.

"I work with such terrific teachers, in a great department that has always supported whatever hair-brained endeavor I want to try," he said. "My friends and peers have taught me a tremendous amount about the work we do together, and I feel lucky to work with them all."

Neff holds a bachelor's degree from California State Polytechnic University-Pomona and master's and doctoral degrees from the University of California-Riverside.

He was named Liberal Arts Teacher of the Year in 2005. That same year, his book "Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation" was published by the University Press of Kansas.

Neff shines outside the classroom as well. For example, his guided tour of Shiloh National Park was a high point of UM's

2006 conference "Remembering America's Civil War."

The Outstanding Teacher Award has been a tradition at Ole Miss since 1966. In 1988, Mr. and Mrs. Warren A. Hood Sr. of Jackson made a gift to endow the award, and it was named the Elsie M. Hood Outstanding Teacher Award in Mrs. Hood's honor. In 2000, the Hoods made another gift to support the award so that it will continue in perpetuity.