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Hope and Help: Interview with Janie M. Harden Fritz

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The following offers an interview with Janie M. Harden Fritz, Full Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University, conducted by graduate assistants Michael R. Kearney and Natalia E. Tapsak on September 1, 2023. Dr. Fritz reflects on her professional association with Ronald C. Arnett and the ways that Arnett's scholarship, teaching, and service influenced the department and the discipline.

How would you begin to describe your professional connection to Ronald C. Arnett?

I would start by saying that the Duquesne University Department of Communication hired Ronald C. Arnett to be our chair. He started in the fall semester of 1993. Richard Thames and I, along with several other people, were on the committee. We hired him. I believe he may have come across our radar screen before, but he ended up not joining us at that time. We were convinced he would be a very good chair for us, although we didn't know what a remarkable journey it would be. We had no doctoral program, but we had a master's program. Our department was not held in high esteem, although I will say that the graduates of our program apparently did have good experiences, and they have returned to speak to students in our program as recipients of the Anthony L. Bucci Award for Excellence in Communication Ethics. People learned and grew, but the program was of a very different caliber at the time.

When Arnett came in to lead the department, he looked first at mission. He said, "If I were at Brandeis, for example, I would have a focus on things related to Judaism. But this is a Catholic institution." For context, his first job was at Saint Cloud State University. Then he had gone to Marquette University, a Catholic institution. He was the chair there for three years. He had been a provost at Manchester College, which is where he had gotten his undergraduate degree along with several other figures in our field, like Stanley Deetz. He eventually stepped down as provost there, but stayed as a faculty member, and he came to

Duquesne after that point. He had written the book *Dialogic Education* in 1992 because he was thinking about higher education and some of the challenges associated with that historical moment. After careful thought, he decided he would come to Duquesne. He was forty years old at the time.

He started by helping us to frame our curriculum within the mission of the university. So, communication ethics was huge. Fortunately, this was one of his areas of expertise, as we know. When we had an opportunity to hire another faculty member, we interviewed Calvin Troup, and at the time, Ron had said to him, "We're never going to a have a PhD program here." Well, within the next two to three years, that changed.

The turning point for the department—well, there were two turning points. One was John Murray and the other was Michael P. Weber. When Ron came in to consider serving as chair of the department, he talked to Murray, Duquesne's president at the time, and asked him, "Do you want me to manage, or do you want me to lead?" Murray said, "I want you to lead, and I'll support you." That's what gave him the authority and the power to do what he needed to do with the department. He had the support of upper-level administrators. Weber, the provost at the time, was also there and supported. At some point, Weber had said, "Hey! How would you like a brand new building in the middle of campus?" And Arnett said, "Please don't do that. We're not as healthy as we need to be. If we're in the center of campus, we will draw scrutiny, and we're just not in a position for that."

There came a time when the English department was going through some difficulties. Their numbers were down, and they were trying to find a chair for the English department. They couldn't agree on a candidate, and President Murray asked Ron to lead the search. So, Ron came in, worked with them, and helped find candidates. They found agreement on three candidates to present to the president. As I recall the story, President Murray called him into his office and said, "I think we have a fourth candidate—you. What if you ran English and communication? What if we merged the departments?" Ron said, "Please don't merge them. They are different disciplines. But if you want them to be affiliated, I will be the chair of both." That happened in 1997. And I remember that because I was going up for tenure that year. We were down in Des Places, which is now a living and learning center. Anthony Bucci, who ran an integrated marketing communication firm, had been recruited by Ron as a supporter and friend of the department. Bucci built an office complex for us—the MARC Center for Excellence. We're sitting in it now.

I believe that happened as a response to the affiliation between departments because we needed to move communication up here to house the units in the same space. They built this center, and the departments were affiliated. It was like, "Pack up and go!" And I was like, "I'm trying to put my tenure packet together!" But we left and came here. And Ron had an undergraduate director and a graduate director for each department. That was back in the day when I was trying to wear suits, and I realized I couldn't because I kept tearing the pockets on the doorknobs when I would exit a room. So, I said I was done with that.

We had this really nice complex. It was all one unit before. There wasn't a wall there; it was one big thing. We had two administrative assistants at the time. We had a nice space out here, and we would have weekly meetings with the grad

and undergrad directors. President Murray had said to Ron, "What do you want in exchange for this work?" Ron said, "Give us a doctoral program." We could build one by fitting it within the currently existing English PhD, and he saw the opportunity. At the time we created the Rhetoric PhD program, we offered two core courses from English, with the other core courses grounded in the communication field. Two members of the English department, one of our graduate students, and two members of the communication department formed the committee that created the rhetoric PhD program. I believe our first rhetoric PhD student graduated in 2004.

About five years after the affiliation was created, English got healthy, and, as Ron knew they would, they wanted to separate. They didn't want to be affiliated with communication—oh, the horrors! So, they divided the departments, and as things worked out, we kept the rhetoric doctoral program. We ended up with this complex here, and English was around the corner. And that was the start of everything.

Calvin Troup was the first director of the doctoral program. We eventually hired Pat Arneson, who later became a co-director of the PhD program. We tried to publish and recruit. At one time, journalism folk were a part of us. It became clear they had a different mission in mind, writing for much more popular audiences, which makes sense. So, eventually they separated, too. We ended up with the MA programs in communication and, of course, the doctoral program.

The biggest area of dispute rested with the very popular areas of advertising and public relations. The question was "Who's going to own this very popular major?" We had worked with Bucci, who recommended an integrated marketing communication approach to advertising and PR. One representative from each department met to negotiate this curricular issue. We framed our approach to ad and PR as integrated marketing communication working from a rhetoric and philosophy perspective, and the journalism department did it from a journalism perspective. The representatives eventually agreed that the communication department would offer a series of courses under the umbrella of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Functions and Strategies, which comprised IMC Functions I: PR; IMC Functions II: Advertising; IMC Strategies I: PR; and IMC Strategies II: Advertising. We also offered Professional Communication in IMC as an introductory IMC course

Our IMC perspective and its grounding in rhetoric and philosophy made it distinctive. After the separation of communication and journalism, we changed our name to the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies and ended up with four undergraduate majors: integrated marketing communication, corporate communication, rhetoric, and communication studies.

Having two distinctive but related programs actually worked out very well because students wanted both. They wanted to study everything. So, you'd learn how to do a press release in both, and in our program, you might read Plato as a rhetorical foundation, and in theirs, you might read something else. So, the framing of the practices came from very different theoretical ground. People used to say, "Oh, students are confused!" They were not confused! They were benefiting

from both. So, we just said "hush" to people who would say that, and we moved on.

Over the years it has turned out that IMC is a very strong major that has continued to grow in popularity. IMC came out of Northwestern University with a quantitative focus. We adapted it to fit the mission of Duquesne University by giving it a humanities focus. And it was around that time that we formed our two pillars: walking the humanities into the marketplace and the ethical difference.

It's interesting: One of the reasons we focus so much on historical understanding is that one of the members of the English department—a former poet laureate of Pennsylvania—was very distressed because he didn't think people in communication had a good understanding of history. So, we said, "We'll put history of communication in our curriculum. We'll have courses that look at historical periods, such as the rhetoric of the humanities and the rhetoric of the marketplace—in fact, we'll cover historical periods in all of our PhD classes." That's where we got the historical periods and required every PhD student to learn the historical periods.

And here I am, from the social sciences, and Ron decided I needed a place in the program, even though I had a quantitative orientation. Now that's another important thing: When he came into the program, many of us were quantitative scholars. Actually, most folks were not scholars at all. But the sense was that scholarship has to matter in a PhD program, no matter what type it may be. Although our PhD students were going to work from an interpretive perspective, they needed to know something about other methodologies. He always supported my quantitative work and even published a quantitative article with me. (There's a great story behind that, too. One person who read the article wrote to us about how she really loved the quantitative part and invited us to write a book chapter. But when we finally met her, it turned out that she was impressed with the philosophical orientation. It was pretty fun.) Ron's undergrad degree was in experimental psychology, by the way.

So, we turned to the humanities. When the doctoral program was being designed and formed, we got people from the University of Pittsburgh to sit at the table with us, and we said, "We are not going to compete with you or any other program." We just wanted to have people who could teach and who could learn to do research. And we wanted to focus on communication ethics. We have tried to help our doctoral students become very good teachers who could serve at small, regional campuses or community colleges where the need is greatest. I think at that time that was not exactly what was said, but that was our orientation, and that orientation remains. I think that's always been part of the Spiritan mission. Though I don't remember it being stated as explicitly, that has been the sense: We're people who serve. We have a mission-sensitive spirit. We teach people to love students, to help them learn.

But at the same time, the PhD is a research degree. I believe we continued to understand the "unity of contraries" that Ron often discussed, citing Martin Buber: There's not an opposition between teaching and scholarship, and along with teaching and scholarship, there's service. They all count and matter. The service you do is a matter of course; you don't do it for the recognition, and people don't

get tenure based on service. But over the years, things would emerge that helped us to realize that we needed to maintain the focus on scholarship. If you have people in the program who don't believe in scholarship—graduate students who don't believe it's important—then, you won't have a PhD program. You've got to do research; you've got to write. Even if your intention is to teach—especially if your goal is to teach!—you better be able to do that research and give students the very best that you've got.

When you get your work out there for publication, it doesn't matter where you publish. Just find a place that needs your work. It might not be the top journal in the field, but we don't care about that. Not to say you wouldn't be happy to have it; we'd be happy to publish in whatever journal it may be. We made sure, too, as we developed our tenure requirements, that people had to publish a scholarly book with a university press. That was not always the case, but it became more and more important. (When I was going up for tenure, it was a very different world. By the time I went up for full professor, I did need to write a book, and I had a number of other publications by that point.)

The biggest contribution Ron made was to help us situate ourselves as a program within Duquesne University's Catholic mission through history, the humanities, and, more and more, religious communication. That had been implicit in the program, especially with Calvin Troup, when he led the program. It was always there, there was always a sense, but now it's more explicit because we have courses in religious communication: Rhetoric and Philosophy of Religious Communication; Rhetoric, Race, and Religion; and, at the undergraduate level, Approaches to Rhetoric, Religion, and Society. The program has developed over time to have an emphasis on these areas.

Also, we were, and still are, very careful to think about the notion of a constructive hermeneutic. We don't want to blow things up. A constructive hermeneutic is about having an appreciation for what's there. Certainly, the world is broken, but how do we heal it? And as we think more and more explicitly about the Catholic intellectual tradition, we understand people like Dorothy Day, who had a heart for the poor and who wanted to change the world—the kind of change that we would advocate. But as I would say, and as Dr. Arnett might very well say, you want to think along the lines of Edmund Burke: Be careful. Change, but change slowly. Don't blow things up. Don't chop off the head of the old grandfather. And, of course, Kenneth Burke's permanence and change. Richard Thames could talk about that. (Thames has been here the longest.)

That's another thing Ron always did! Ronald C. Arnett always made sure that faculty members would not be picked on. He protected people's intellectual and academic freedom, but he also would try to find good fits for people. Richard Thames would be the first to say that Arnett taught him to be a learner again, and Richard began to publish.

In your view, what are the most important scholarly theoretical coordinates that Dr. Arnett contributed?

Dialogue, communication ethics, and philosophy of communication from a constructive hermeneutic perspective are, from my perspective, the most important scholarly theoretical coordinates that Dr. Arnett contributed. There are strands of all these areas throughout our curriculum. A heavy emphasis on cultural studies and critique has emerged in the field over the last few decades, whereas in earlier years, rhetoric and the social sciences were what many considered the two major divisions. Dialogue and philosophy of communication came into view as alternative perspectives, along with critical theory, as the field developed and grew. Of course, there are many understandings of philosophy of communication in this moment.

So, I would say philosophy of communication from a constructive hermeneutic perspective is what Ron contributed.

Phenomenology! That's another reason we turned to the humanities here in this department. Phenomenology matters so much. The psychology department at Duquesne University studies phenomenology, as well, as a philosophical understanding of psychology. We focus on phenomenology that is constructive, along with dialogue, communication ethics, and interpersonal communication from a dialogic perspective.

So, that's the nutshell. He was always sensitive to institutions, their missions, and the historical moment. And *Dialogic Education*—read that! It was written before he came here, but that was kind of his agenda. He was always concerned about people. The institution has to be first, but the people who are part of the institution matter very much, too, and you can't forget the people, but work matters. Don't talk about what you've done, talk about what's next.

Was Duquesne already known for phenomenological research by that point? Was the Phenomenological Center already operating?

Yes! My husband got a master's in multimedia arts, and one of the projects was to create a virtual tour of the library, and one of the places was the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center. The center has become more important over time. I know Duquesne has always had a phenomenological impulse.

What do you think about Dr. Arnett's approach to resolving conflict? Was there a significant change from the way the

department had functioned before, and what were some of the most unusual things about it?

He had a gift for helping people keep working. Keep the conversation going. Let people be responsible for their spheres of influence rather than interfering with other people. That was the main point, I think. There was a public nature to the way he would work. Before Arnett, there wasn't really a sense of leadership. It was almost as though there were kids in the playground, and nobody was in charge. But Arnett had the support of the administration, and that support was made public. He worked to focus not on personalities but on what we are doing—functional, functionality—on what we are doing, on what people could do. "All right, you're troubled about this. Well, you're in charge of it. Let's see what you can do." And the work would happen, or the work wouldn't happen.

The authority he had he put to constructive use. In *Communication and Community*, Arnett talks about Rollo May's notion of nutrient power. For people who wanted to get work done, who wanted to be able to have a sense of security and not be stabbed in the back, to work within a mission, this was a very freeing place and a very protective place, a very safe place. If you had your own agenda, and you didn't like what someone else was doing, and you weren't doing much yourself, and you wanted to hide your lack of productivity, it was a very *unhappy* place. He protected and promoted work.

He was put in place by the administration, but there is a difference between the legitimate power of a formal role and the referent power that comes from being accepted and appreciated by the people you are leading. I remember one conversation he reported with a member of the English faculty during the shift to his leadership of the affiliated departments, who said to him, "I don't like this at all." So, he gave the faculty member a slip of paper with a phone number on it and said, "Call my wife. She doesn't like it either." That person became one of his strongest supporters. He led in an almost Japanese style, where he would go to people, talk with them, get their sense of things, and ask for their support. He gave people authority over specific areas and asked them to work creatively to make things better.

The support from the administration was vital. If you don't have that, you don't really have any leverage. He was careful with people. He protected people. He gave them every opportunity to do constructive, productive things.

Thinking about your professional friendship with Dr. Arnett, is there anything you want to share about how he affected your own life?

He helped me to be productive. He would suggest things for me to do. Sometimes I didn't appreciate it, but they always turned out to be good things. For example, I was the kind of kid in high school that if you wanted an organization to die, make me president because I wouldn't do anything. I didn't know what to do. But he

convinced me to run for the presidency of the Pennsylvania Communication Association (PCA). I was not very happy about that. But he found a way to give me the support I needed. He was very good at providing scaffolding for people, teaching people how to do things. And he did this not for me—he did it for the institution. He did want to support me, but it was not about me. It was about "Here's somebody who needs to be a productive part of an organization, and here's an organization that needs help." I wasn't involved in PCA when he first came. He got involved, and he essentially saved it. But I got involved much later. He asked one of our doctoral students at the time to assist me, and she ended up essentially planning the entire conference for me during my time as vice president. But by the time I got to be the Eastern Communication Association (ECA) vice president/convention planner, I was able to fulfill my role without difficulty. I knew how to do it; I could figure it out. I had help, of course—like the second VP, Leeanne Bell (now Leeanne Bell McManus), the interest group planners, and the entire planning team. I was in a very different place by then. He helped me to do things I didn't think I could do and didn't think I wanted to do. He modeled the work. I was very inspired. In fact, he supported my quantitative work. He didn't say, "You have to do something different." He wanted to support what I could do. So, that was very encouraging.

Encouragement! He was responsive to the needs of the department at varied moments in its developmental life. There were times when he would say, "Stay home if you're not teaching. Stay home, and do your scholarship." Then there was a time when we needed to be here with students and recruit. "Come in," he would say, "Come in as much as you can and do your scholarship here. Learn to work through the interruptions, and hide occasionally, if you need to." I remember one year I was on sabbatical, and I did manage to publish something from it, but I ended up coming back to the office. I was like, "What am I going to do at home? Eh, there's nobody there. All right, I'll work in the office."

Opportunity after opportunity—that's what I remember. He would provide opportunities up to the last year he was here, too. I remember receiving an invitation from a scholar to write a chapter in an edited collection. I said to myself, "Okay, I know who suggested that this person invite me. That was Ron. Fine! I'll do it. I'll do it." (I later came and asked Ron, "Did you get this scholar to ask me to write a chapter?" And he said, "Oh, well, I just talked about your work.") So, he was always encouraging, always helpful. He operated through Buber's notion of the unity of contraries: he knew what our limits were, and he honored and respected those limits, but he also helped us go beyond them. He often talked about the difference between Kant's notions of fantasy and imagination, where imagination is pushing off the real.[1] He worked through imagination.

And the modeling, the role modeling! I didn't work nearly as hard as he did, and that was okay. He worked much more than I did. I worked as I could, and I worked probably more than I ever would have worked because of him.

[1] See Arnett (2020).

He helped me to love institutions. I didn't care about institutions; I didn't know what an institution was. I was very individualistic; I never understood, really, the importance of groups and communities and the importance of working with other people. Before working with Ron, and before taking the full-time position here, I had begun to learn this principle implicitly from my fellow graduate students, but through Ron's leadership I learned it more explicitly. He was always there, giving me a sense of how we get things done. In Ronald C. Arnett, there was a spirit of care for the community, not just for yourself but for others, too. He understood how people could flourish.

Are there any notable scholars that you both studied or some that Dr. Arnett introduced to you and vice versa?

Charles Taylor! I still to this day insist that I introduced him to Charles Taylor because I was reading *First Things* and had read a book review of *Sources of the Self*. I knew Ron had a deeply religious soul. He had a seminary degree and his faith was very important to him, but he didn't wear it on his sleeve. When I first met him, I was probably trying to encourage him to make those commitments more explicit. I remember how, when we were interviewing him for the chair position, he said something, and I responded, "That's like in the Book of James!" And he said, "Well, I wouldn't cite that in my scholarship." And I was like, "Well, well." But I understand where he was coming from now. But Charles Taylor.

MacIntyre! All these scholars who have a concern for tradition. Hannah Arendt! I had heard about her back before I met him, and he was very interested in her, too. There were so many scholars and voices—like Christopher Lasch!

From my perspective, Ron had a traditional yet open understanding of the world, a concern for both stability and change. I always saw him embracing different perspectives. The kinds of people he would read resonated with that approach to the world. He manifested a very open, ecumenical, and invitational sense of helping people find their way and not imposing a particular path or position on them.

And Levinas! He liked Levinas, but I had not read Levinas. I learned about Levinas from Ron.

How has Dr. Arnett's work influenced the content of your scholarship?

I recently wrote about Flannery O'Connor and existential leadership.[2] I think Ronald C. Arnett is the quintessential existentialist. And I don't know if he's ever talked about himself as an existentialist, but I think he appreciated Christian existentialists—like Kierkegaard, who said that we have ground to stand on, but

[2] See Fritz (2023).

we're not God. We don't know what the next day is going to bring. So, we have to trust, have faith. It's not groundless faith; it's faith that recognizes we don't know what's going to happen next. We can think of Job! "Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him!" (Job 13:15, KJV). There is a kind of trust even in the face of the unknown of the next day.

In the future, I would probably write about themes representing the unity of contraries, a commitment to a sense of the world as both good and flawed—in need of grace. The world is broken, but not irredeemably so.

And I think that the *Communication Ethics Literacy* book is one of my favorites.[3] I'm so glad I could be a part of that.

I'm reminded of a sense of hope in people. He always had hope in people. He was a hopeful person. And he always wanted to help. Hope and help. Those were his coordinates.

How did Dr. Arnett handle conflict with people who did not appreciate this orientation toward the world?

In the very beginning, there were some people who disagreed with the way that others in the department were teaching particular courses. Dr. Arnett recognized that there are multiple ways to approach a given content area. His approach administratively was to permit all voices to come out. He wasn't going to restrict any voices, as long as they fit within the horizon of the departmental and university mission. When it came to mission, there's got to be a framework that guides. So, the doctoral program wasn't a free-for-all endeavor. It wasn't both quantitative and philosophical. We had to fit our approach to the framework of the university. We honored the humanities, which pushed us toward philosophical and humanities-grounded understandings of communication. As time went on, people interested in joining the department understood our perspective. And so, there was a self-selection process, in some ways. Since I was already there, Dr. Arnett wanted to use my strengths, and he knew that people needed to understand a quantitative perspective, even if that was not going to be the method used for a dissertation. There were limits. Also, someone working primarily with a critical approach wouldn't have functioned very well, and they wouldn't have been hired in the first place. Everything has its place, and we need to know about all approaches, but the framework we have chosen to work from as a department is a constructive hermeneutic. At some point, it's like, "Okay, we need to hear that, too. But this is the approach we're going to take in our projects and in our classes. You can certainly teach this approach; it's your choice, and you have academic freedom. You can certainly appreciate it, if you want, but if you're going to move into positions of leadership, then we need a constructive approach."

[3] The first edition of *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference*, co-authored by Ronald C. Arnett, Janie M. Harden Fritz, and Leeanne M. Bell, appeared in 2009. The book is now in its third edition (Fritz, McManus, and Kearney 2023).

He was also careful with people who it was clear might not publish at the level that might have been needed for tenure. His position was to help people recognize whether they would make it early on so they could choose whether to stay or to find a place more suited for their scholarly abilities. That's difficult. And if there was ever any question, he had a way of working with people to help them see and know that there's nothing wrong with functioning in another place that might be better suited for them. You have to keep the standards of scholarship high, because if you don't, the program won't survive.

I think there was a time when there might have been a group of folks who were thinking that scholarship wasn't good or important and that we really ought to be more attentive to students and just put scholarship to the side. But he corrected that understanding.

He moved people out of positions of influence who were promulgating problematic messages. Administratively, it's a matter of choosing which people will be in charge of areas and units and curriculum and who might be in positions of influence at the university, who's going to be on promotion and tenure committees. You can't control these things, but you can encourage them. He used his influence and authority in an appropriate, mission-sensitive way—always invitational, but firm, as well. He would not put people in charge of something if they couldn't do the work or were going to move in a way that was contrary to the mission of the university. Sometimes you don't know if that's going to happen or not. You can watch and you can see, and you can do a lot structurally, but you have to have the support of the administration. If you don't have administrative support, give it up. He was always closely connected to administration, sometimes more and sometimes less depending on who was in charge and how they thought of the program.

How did Dr. Arnett show his care for students?

He showed his care by working with content. He would talk to students. If students had a problem, he would talk with them like he was at a small liberal arts college. It was always an invitation and always if it seemed appropriate at the time. He would talk to undergraduate students—for example, an alum of the program is now sending us notes that he took when he was in Arnett's class back in the last millennium. Dr. Arnett took this student under his wing. He said, "You're going to be my TA." Ron knew that he couldn't work with everybody; he had to make choices. But the connection with students was always around ideas, and that's what it meant to be a TA for him. He wouldn't go eat French fries with students; he would work with them. But he would counsel people, talk to people.

There are probably so many things I still don't know because he took care about keeping things confidential. Who knows how many lives he has affected over time?

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