

DNA Forum Set for March 22

For the ancient Greeks, “know thyself,” could mean reading the sages and thoughtful introspection. For Anita Foeman, “know thyself” can mean spitting into a test tube, then waiting to learn one’s genetic ancestry from this saliva sample. Foeman, a professor of communication studies, leads the DNA Discussion Project, an initiative that offers DNA testing to students, staff, faculty, and community members.

Yet whether you “know thyself” via the ancient dialogues of Plato or the contemporary DNA Project, you usually gain a much better understanding of others in the process. And that’s the crux of what the DNA Discussion Project is all about.

“The goal of the DNA Project is to provide participants not only with insights into the origins of their ancestors but also to promote dialogue around shared experiences and shared backgrounds,” says Foeman. “So much of talking about race is based on negative things. Our idea is to make it inclusive and positive, and give people an experience that reaches everyone.”

The DNA Project began seven years ago with a small grant from the West Chester University Multicultural Faculty Commission. Since then, public interest has led to testing more than 700 individuals. The project has grown to include a research team which includes Bessie Lawton, Phil Thompsen, and Randall Rieger, among others. The work of the DNA Discussion Project has been presented in multiple peer-reviewed journals, at community events, public and corporate lectures and at the first TEDx talk held in West Chester, in 2014.

As part of the project, President Greg Weisenstein had his DNA tested last fall. “I learned that my ancestry was far more diverse than I had thought,” said Weisenstein. “My results are a reminder that, regardless of our genetic background, we are all a family and need to learn to treat each other that way.”

A community forum will be held on March 22, “DNA Project: Where We Are Now.” Foeman and Lawton will provide a research update and open the floor for discussion. The forum will be held at 11 a.m. in Philips Autograph Library. RSVP to DNAproject@gmail.com; attendance will be capped at 100.