

Alumna Turns New Page With Texas Review Press

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SHSU Media Contact: [Romney Thomas](#)



The road less traveled led SHSU alumna Kimberly Davis to the English Department's MFA in Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing program, from which she became the first graduate in May 2015. She now hones the skills she learned in the program as the assistant to the Texas Review Press director. —Photo by Brian Blalock

If Sam Houston State University alumna and Texas Review Press staff member Kimberly A. Davis's life were a book, it would have a variety of chapters centering on a variety of experiences, including the time she spent as a professional sailor and freelance web designer.

Since becoming the first graduate of the Department of English's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing program, she has been able to turn the page once again to embark on a career that highlights her passion for writing and her

alma mater.

Davis, a non-traditional student, made the choice to return to school for her master's degree in 2012.

"My kids were growing up and going to college," Davis said. "I thought it was time to reinvent myself."

Davis's experience working as a web designer led her to consider expanding on her knowledge in communication, but she ultimately chose the road less traveled and decided to focus on her writing, believing that SHSU's MFA program seemed "like an excellent challenge," she said.

"In my studies I was focusing mainly on fiction. Other students within the program might choose to focus on poetry or creative nonfiction," Davis said. "Workshop hours are designed to help with whichever craft you choose to emphasize, but you are required to dabble in different disciplines. For example, even though I was working on writing fiction, I took some poetry workshops."



Before returning to school for her master's degree, Davis was a professional sailor (seen above aboard the ship Augustine), an experience she often draws upon in her writing. — *Submitted photo*

Those workshops created a safe environment in which Davis experimented with various writing techniques and received constructive criticism.

“In the workshops we would share samples of our own writing,” Davis said. “Even though you might only be sharing about 15 pages with your peers and your professors, those pages are very personal, so revealing that material can be intimidating.”

Davis often draws upon her previous experience as a professional sailor on yachts for her writing, choosing to focus on the relationships women have not only with each other, but also as outsiders within the male-dominated profession itself.

“It is not a broad topic, which makes for a niche market that can be challenging to tailor for the average reader,” Davis said. “Difficult subject matter aside, the criticism process within the MFA program was designed to be constructive and encouraging. I think that’s what made those workshops so valuable and such a great place to experiment with new ideas. Various professors would focus on different aspects of writing, too, like plotting and dialogue, or character development, so I experienced a lot of growth through the workshops.”

When looking back on the program, Davis said the best part was the many opportunities she had to meet and learn from visiting authors, such as Tim O’Brien (“The Things They Carried”) and Kyle Minor (“Praying Drunk”), who shared their wealth of knowledge with students.

“The smallest things make the biggest difference, in my opinion, and I would encourage all students interested in any program to step up to the plate whenever any opportunity arises,” she said. “Some of my most memorable moments during this



The ship Augustine, at sail. —
Submitted photo

course of study happened when I was driving a visiting author to or from the airport. For a little more than an hour I had that person's undivided attention, and that's an invaluable experience."

Since graduating, Davis has been able to mix her knowledge of fiction and her love of writing with the business elements of the field as a staff member at the Texas Review Press, housed at SHSU.

As assistant to the director, a role she still fills following the death of TRP founder Paul Ruffin in April, she is able to perform a variety of duties, including layout and design of the press's publications, running the website and overseeing intern training. She also serves as a liaison with authors, cover designers, the Library of Congress, the printer, and The Texas A&M University Press Consortium, of which TRP is a member, among many, many other duties that are required as a national search is underway for Ruffin's replacement.

 Kim Davis at her 2015 graduation

"We are fortunate that Dr. Ruffin left enough projects in the pipeline that we are able to continue operating without interruption through 2018," Davis said.

When she isn't busy applying the skills she learned during the MFA program to the editing and publishing at the press, Davis is teaching freshman composition.

"My one complaint is that I don't have a lot of time to do my own writing," Davis said. "But Dr. Ruffin had such confidence in me, and left me so well prepared, that I feel content in my

Kimberly Davis, at her May 2015 graduation.

current role at Texas Review Press. I am proud of the calm way that Claude Wooley, the interns and I have been able to keep the press functioning in the absence of our

leader, and I am grateful for the invaluable experience I gain here as I am faced with big decisions that affect our authors, who have devoted so much time to crafting their books.

“I do find time to write by forcing tight deadlines on myself. I write flash fiction for contests and it makes me create new stories—even when my schedule at the press takes most of my time. Isn’t that the way most fiction writers work? Late at night and on weekends—squeezing their creative efforts between their work schedules,” she said. “And the truth is that I love my work publishing other people’s books and making them look as good as possible.

“It all feels like it has happened very quickly for me. When you begin the MFA program, three years seems like a long time to study, but it really flies by. I’m happy that I’ve been set up to continue learning about this field for the rest of my life.”

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This page maintained by SHSU's Communications Office:

Associate Director, Communications: [Emily Binetti](#)

Telephone: 936.294.4406; Fax: 936.294.1834

Communications Manager: [Wes Hamilton](#)

Telephone: 936.294.1837; FAX: 936.294.1834

Communications Writer: [Campbell Atkins](#)

Telephone: 936.294.2638; FAX: 936.294.1834

Thomason Building: Suite 102

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