There are few teachers with the passion Professor Amara Graf possesses. She has an entirely refreshing way of engaging her classroom and interacting with both her students and the literary works she teaches. The Wisco native has only recently found her new home here in our SUNY Old Westbury Community, though she has seamlessly and rapidly assimilated.

When I asked Professor Graf what she liked best about SUNY Old Westbury, I at first deemed her response: “The students,” as a cheesy cop-out. She went on to explain the students here are “real.” “Many of the students here have much more lived experience than anywhere I’ve ever taught. So people here are parents, they’re working multiple jobs, usually beyond 20 hours a week” she said. “It’s that wealth of living experience that makes discussing a text more interesting.” I had originally attributed Professor Graf’s incredible classroom discussions to her leadership; however it is interesting to gain her perspective from the other side of the classroom—she feels as though it is us, her students, who make these conversations so enriching.

Teaching is at the heart of Professor Graf’s persona. “SUNY Old Westbury is a teaching institution and they value teaching highly [here]” she said. She discusses how early on in the graduate process she knew that her verve was for education. “The people at UT make it very clear that you’re either in graduate school because you…want to write the next book that’s going to come out of Harvard, or you want to go and be a teacher…I knew very early in my graduate career I was in the teaching track.” Being a teacher is clearly important to Professor Graf, as she goes out of her way for her students, remaining accessible, compassionate and understanding. She has a particularly skillful way of musing out our best work.

Professor Graf describes her teaching philosophy as such:

I want it to be something that takes it out of the classroom. I really respect book knowledge, but I feel like you need to have a way to make students feel as though the material is relevant to them. Find your intellectual curiosity—that will take you through your life; you might work long days, you might not make a lot of money, but if you’re passionate about something, that will sustain you, that will give you meaning. That’s my philosophy—be passionate.

Professor Graf emanates these words every day, as she stands before her classroom radiating sheer enthusiasm for Diaz or Plascencia, or even for literary critical articles. Her fervor enchants her students and instills a similar passion within them as well.
Her love for literature began early. “That was the first question my grandmother would always ask” she recalled. “What are you reading?” Professor Graf describes growing up in a house where books were things you kept and cherished. This early bond with literature surely led to her academic path.

As an undergrad, Professor Graf was an English and Humanistic Studies major at St. Mary’s College, in Indiana. In college, Professor Graf describes herself as the annoying student who loved to close read and would constantly be arguing, telling her classmates “No, wait a minute, look at page 5!” Professor Graf immersed herself in reading while away at school. “I would pretty much spend weekends up in my room reading. I loved it” she said. Her life as an undergrad was also refreshing for her, because it was the first time in her life she had to herself. She grew up with three brothers and said “I would do everything for them—cook and clean, I’d still probably be doing it if I lived close to them.”

Although she did not pursue graduate school immediately after her undergrad studies, it was at St. Mary’s that Professor Graf first realized how much she loved the research process, while writing a paper on Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. “I remember being in the library and that was the first time that I had the distinct sensation of liking that research process…it was delicious, it was like eating a fat burger.”

After St. Mary’s, Professor Graf was accepted into the Holy Cross Associates through Notre Dame, where she lived in Chile for two years, working with the poor. “I was the naïve do-gooder” she said. “Poverty is ugly…there’s no beauty, there’s no aesthetic pleasure…I thought by denying myself these physical pleasures I was doing good for the world, but I don’t really buy that now.” She did develop her fluency in Spanish during her time in Chile, something she still uses in her classroom today—her luckier students will at some point get to hear her read Pablo Neruda.

Professor Graf went onto grad school at the University of Texas, in Austin. She completed her Masters in Comparative Literature, where her coursework was almost entirely in Spanish or Portuguese. It was then she realized she would inevitably end up teaching courses in Spanish grammar if she were to complete her PhD in Comparative Literature, so she decided to complete her doctoral work in English.

Now Professor Graf finds herself at SUNY Old Westbury, teaching within her area of expertise—Multi-ethnic literature and she is thoroughly enjoying it. Her article “A Queer Telenovela: Transformative Representations of the Maricón and the Macho in Ugly Betty,” was recently selected to be published in the Journal of Popular Culture. Her favorite class to teach is a toss-up between the Multi-ethnic Lit class and her Graduate Seminar. And she loves the fact that being so close to New York City affords her the opportunity to see first-hand the settings of so many of the works she teaches in Latino/a literature.