Stephen Clark: Professor with a passion for Spanish literature

By Larry Hendricks
Flare Editor

His passion for the Spanish language started when he was in high school.
And now, Dr. Stephen Clark, assistant professor of Spanish/American literature at Northern Arizona University's Department of Modern Languages, has brought that passion to bear. He has created a new course on Cuban literature and has managed to bring Cuban writer Leonardo Padura to NAU Tuesday for the benefit of his students and literature lovers in Flagstaff.

This realization of a dream for Clark began a long time ago, and far, far away — in the Midwest.

“I lived in a town in Ohio that had a very large Puerto Rican community,” said Clark. “My best friend as a child was Puerto Rican, so I would go over to his house and hear Spanish being spoken. And from what little I was learning in school, I realized, ‘Hey, maybe this language is not just in textbooks; maybe it’s a living thing and can be of some use.’”

Clark then moved to California and immersed himself deeply in the state’s considerable Hispanic environment, which fully awoke him to the reality of the Hispanic culture’s importance in the United States. He went on to study Spanish as an undergraduate, and during his junior year, went to Spain to complete his studies.

As an undergraduate, a friend gave Clark a copy of the book, “Cien Años de Soledad” (One Hundred Years of Solitude) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

“I sort of used that book to teach myself to read in Spanish,” said Clark, who also translates books into English. “The book really opened my eyes to how many great writers there are in the Spanish language, and I guess, when you start reading with a book like that, it really whets your appetite to read more.”

His appetite was whetted to the point that he decided to return to Spain and earn his master’s degree there.

After a stint as the language department chair at Verde Valley School, Clark decided to return to his studies and enrolled in the Ph.D. program at the University of Colorado, where he studied under the direction of one of the most prominent Cuban American poets in the country, Emilio Beigel.

It was then that Clark’s fascination with Cuban literature was born. “I guess I was attracted by the fact that (Beigel) and a lot of other Cubans born toward the middle part of this century, have had their lives really broken in two by the revolution which took place in 1959, many of whom left afterwards and many who stayed,” said Clark. “The revolution was sort of a landmark event which really made them consider their lives through two chapters — what they were before the revolution, and what they were afterwards. I thought it was really interesting to see how much the national history can have an impact on one’s own life in a situation like that.”

So, in Clark’s thesis work, he studied a group of Cuban writers who decided to leave after the revolution and who were originally supportive of it, but who became disillusioned when Cuba turned toward communism.

This past summer, Clark returned to Cuba with the help of a grant from NAU in order to fill out the other side of the equation for the construction of a college course — interview several writers who decided to remain in Cuba (Padura among them), study their literature, and compare and contrast it with writers who left Cuba.

“In my course, I’m trying to give students the views of both those who stayed, and either support or are trying to change things in Cuba to make them a little more respectful of human rights and freedom of artistic expression, and those who left and are very critical of the situation and portray their negative experiences in their work,” said Clark.

“I’m really trying to understand and share a more balanced view of the subject.”

But besides that, Clark has another goal in mind: To give the students and literature lovers in Flagstaff the opportunity to learn about the history of the United States in relation to Cuba and how different a society Cuba has, teaching what life is really like in Cuba.

“With Padura coming, it’s really going to make it come alive for the students (and the public), so I think they’re really going to be inspired to speak with a writer straight from Havana, a product of the revolution and Cuban society,” he said.