

# UW-Eau Claire: Blugold history class creates digital exhibit about women who changed societal norms after WWII

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After teaching social studies in classrooms across the country for several years, Jonathan Vega knew he wanted to do even more to connect his students and others with history.

Now a first-year public history graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Vega already is finding ways to do just that by sharing interesting pieces of history with people of all ages.

This fall, Vega and a team of Blugolds created a digital [exhibit](#) that tells the story of a group of talented women — including Eleanor Jones, a Chippewa Valley native and longtime Eau Claire resident — who changed societal norms and gender expectations in the years following World War II.

“Being able to bring these rich stories and experiences out for everyone to enjoy and learn from is an amazing feeling,” says Vega, a native of Bronx, New York. “The exhibit is a peek at a piece of both local and national history.”

Vega, history graduate student Kaitlin Augustine and several UW-Eau Claire undergraduate students spent the fall semester reviewing archived materials to create an exhibit, which tells the story of the Marine Corps Women’s Reserve Band during WWII and the Hormel Girls Caravan.

The MCWR toured the country during WWII, entertaining soldiers and raising money

for the war effort. Following the war, the MCWR disbanded, and many of the women joined the Hormel Girls Caravan, a traveling musical troupe that included mostly female veterans who played in military bands during the war.

The popular troupe traveled the country in the 1940s and 1950s, marketing Hormel products to American consumers. They traveled from coast to coast in a caravan of white Chevys, selling products in grocery stores, ringing doorbells and performing in popular national radio and TV specials.

This new approach to sales — young, talented and attractive women selling products — forever changed the world of advertising.

The Hormel women also represented a larger cultural shift in societal norms and gender expectations in the U.S., offering an early glimpse of the feminism movement that came later. By working and earning their own salaries, the women achieved financial independence, allowing them to buy cars, clothing, dinners and gifts for their families, all things not possible for most women during that era.

### **Acquired collection offers learning opportunities**

Last year, UW-Eau Claire's Special Collections and Archives at McIntyre Library acquired a significant collection of letters, photos and recordings from Jones, a trombonist who enlisted in the Marine Corps, joining a group of women who formed the inaugural MCWR. After the war, she was part of Hormel's first caravan troupe.

The acquisition is "one of the most important collections in the United States" documenting the MCWR during WWII and the Hormel Girls Caravan, says [Greg Kocken](#), UW-Eau Claire archivist. The materials include correspondence, scrapbooks, photographs, artifacts and materials associated with other band members. The collection also includes an oral history interview with Jones.

Kocken collaborated with a public history class taught by [Dr. Cheryl Ana Jiménez Frei](#), an assistant professor of history, to use the "fascinating" collection to create a digital exhibit so it can be easily accessible to the public.

The exhibit reflects the extraordinary work Blugolds are doing in the digital humanities, Kocken says. For example, the students included many integrated components, such as a timeline and story map, that enhance the exhibit, he says.

"The students were presented with a great learning experience and challenge,"

Kocken says. “They were asked to develop and curate a significant exhibit within a short time. They definitely rose to the challenge and produced something fantastic.”

Vega says it was exciting to sift through the many archival resources in the collection as they worked to find creative ways to share stories about Jones and the traveling musical groups.

“This was someone who had an amazing story to tell from such an interesting moment in history, and we were able to help bring that story to the world,” Vega says of Jones. “It’s from these kinds of stories that we can paint more complete pictures of many moments in history.”

Jones, who worked for Eau Claire radio and television stations and later for the UW-Extension, has been involved with UW-Eau Claire in various ways, including visiting university classrooms to share her stories. She and her friend Grace Shipley, a member of the Hormel caravan who later taught English at UW-Eau Claire, established the Grace Shipley and Eleanor Jones Scholarship with the UW-Eau Claire Foundation.

Augustine, a second-year graduate student from Ellsworth, says the Hormel project helped her appreciate the significant time and effort it takes to create an exhibit for the public. She better understands the process that must be followed and the standards that must be met before exhibits can be shared.

“In my public history class, we learned the theoretical approach to creating exhibits, but this was the first real-world project I’ve done,” Augustine says. “By creating an actual exhibit, I learned the practical applications. From this experience, I’ll take with me the knowledge of the importance of collaboration and research in creating interpretations of history.”

The knowledge he gained from creating the digital exhibit will help him be more successful in the future, says Vega, who hopes to work in museum education and then someday teach history at a university.

“I learned from this project that this type of work in public history can be difficult but also incredibly rewarding,” Vega says. “Bringing rich stories and experiences out for everyone to enjoy and learn is an amazing feeling. I shared the exhibit with my family, and they absolutely loved learning more about something they had never heard before.”

Augustine, who “can’t remember a time when history did not fascinate me,” says working on the Hormel exhibit gave her the practical experience she needs to be successful in the field of public history. She’s now eager to explore the multiple subfields in public history that interest her, including archival work, curating in museums and becoming a college history professor.

Vega, who will work as an intern with the Chippewa Valley Museum this spring, says opportunities to be part of real-world projects are among the reasons he came to UW-Eau Claire for his graduate studies.

“I chose UWEC because of the opportunities and experiences that this program could provide,” Vega says. “The opportunities for internships and the potential to work with some outstanding professors also drew me to this program. Everything they do sets up students for future success.”