

2019 SWS Beth Hess Award Winner and Honorable Mention Awardee Announced



Photo of Laura Jean Kerr, 2019 SWS Beth Hess Award Winner

The Beth Hess Award was established in 2005 to support first generation college students who began their academic careers in a community college, have faced significant obstacles, are committed to teaching and mentoring other first-generation students, and exemplify Beth's commitment to professional service and social justice work. Beth Hess was a President of SWS and one of our mentoring award winners; she also was the President of SSSP and Secretary Treasurer of ASA, and these other organizations join SWS in supporting the Beth Hess Scholar each year. Graduate students in sociology at the dissertation writing stage are invited to apply. In 2019, the subcommittee (Sarah Bruch, chair; Myra Marx Ferree, Mairead Eastin Moloney, Nancy Naples and Denise Copelton) faced the challenge of selecting the winner, who receives a \$18,000 scholarship, certificates and transportation subsidies from SWS and SSSP, and free meeting registration that includes complimentary access to the organizations' award receptions from SWS, SSSP, and ASA. When there is more than one exceptionally strong candidate, an Honorable Mention Awardee is also selected. The Honorable Mention Awardee also receives the free meeting registration from SWS, SSSP, and ASA and will be honored at the organizations' award receptions.

This year's Beth Hess Award winner is Laura Jean Kerr. Laura Jean began her academic journey at Meridian Community College in Meridian, Mississippi. Her decision to attend Meridian, and her experience there, drove home for Laura Jean the importance of community college as a source of opportunity in one of the most historically disadvantage regions of the United States. "This educational experience," as Laura Jean noted in her application, "had a profound

effect on my life.” As a testament to this commitment, Laura Jean returned to Meridian after completing her undergraduate education (at the University of Southern Mississippi) to work as a career assessment coordinator, a position which immersed her in helping Meridian students and community residents navigate the local labor market in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Laura Jean’s decision to enter the Sociology graduate program at Mississippi State was a direct extension of this experience; a next step shaped by her determination to understand the personal and economic struggles of students at Meridian and—more importantly—to strive for solutions. Laura Jean is “*committed to community college teaching and learning,*” as her mentors underscore in their letter of support, “and to improving the experiences of community college students, particularly in Mississippi, a high persistent-poverty, low-resourced, state.”

Three elements of Laura Jean’s record illuminate Laura Jean’s passion for educational equity and social justice. As a teacher, Laura Jean is deeply engaged in drawing meaningful connections between the academic study of social stratification and the real-world experiences and circumstances of her students. In the classroom, as her mentors note, “she seamlessly weaves all these elements into a concerted effort to address critical issues facing less-privileged students, and the role that higher education can play in redressing inequality.”

Laura Jean’s dissertation research tackles the problem of food insecurity among community college students in Mississippi. Through an innovative panel of surveys, she is working to measure the prevalence of food insecurity, examine its relationship to academic progress or attainment, and assess the potential and the limits of policy solutions. The promise of this work is highlighted by Laura Jean’s selection for the competitive Problem-Solving Sociology Dissertation Proposal Development Workshop at Northwestern University. And it has already yielded an impressive slate of publications—including “The Good Food Revolution: Building Community Resiliency in the Mississippi Delta.” *Social Sciences: Community and Urban Sociology*(2019) and ““God Always Provides”: Challenges and Barriers in Food Assistance Delivery in Mississippi.” *Community Development* (2018).

And finally, Laura Jean’s research and teaching undergird her commitment to community engagement and public sociology. In this respect, she has been instrumental in building an academic community at Mississippi State through her activity—and leadership--in a wide range to local and national organizations. And she has forged meaningful and reciprocal relationships with groups such as the Mississippi Food Insecurity Project—ensuring that her work will not just document the challenges faced by her peers but will contribute in direct and meaningful ways to addressing those challenges.

Laura Jean’s work is—in the true spirit of Beth Hess—animated by a deep and abiding commitment to teaching, mentoring, and service in the interest of social justice. What is remarkable in this respect is not just that she started this journey at Meridian Community College, but that—in all the ways that matter—she never left it behind. We are delighted to honor her and her work with the 2019 Beth Hess Scholarship.



Photo of Rashon Lane, SWS 2019 Beth Hess Award Honorable Mention

The 2019 Honorable Mention goes to Rashon Lane. Rashon started her academic career at Contra Costa Community College in San Pablo, California—going on to complete a Bachelors of Arts at Tuskegee and a Master of Arts in Applied Social Psychology at the Claremont Graduate School. She is currently a doctoral candidate in medical sociology at the University of California-San Francisco. Across these institutions and experiences, Rashon has dedicated herself “to ensuring that individuals like myself, a woman of color from a low-income community have opportunities to excel in higher education.” Toward this end, she has a broad and impressive record of teaching and peer mentoring, including the establishment of an annual Young Professionals Conference.

Rashon’s extensive and varied research experience—ranging from work on food insecurity among women of color living with HIV/AIDS on San Francisco, to health promotion in response to the 2015 Ebola outbreak in Serra Leone—is bound together by a commitment to social justice, and to the application of social science methods to real-world challenges. With each new experience, Rashon has applied sociological methods and theories to public health practice and focused her interests on the social constructions of health, community trauma, and disease. Her dissertation research will take her back to Sierra Leone, to conduct qualitative research on the social construction of survivorship and survivor health using the 2014-16 Ebola outbreak as a case study.

Rashon hopes to sustain these commitments—to teaching and mentoring and applied research—by returning to community college as a faculty member after earning her PhD.

We hope you will join us in congratulating Laura Jean and Rashon and that you will make plans to join us for the 2019 SWS Awards Reception to be held on Sunday, August 11, 2019 starting at 6:30 pm at the Hilton Midtown, New York, NY. More details will come soon regarding Summer 2019 Meeting Registration.



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