Erin Willer studies the ways in which people communicate, particularly during times of stress. Her research has focused on social aggression among girls and women, and more recently on women's reproductive challenges. After five years of teaching at DU, Willer considers this past year to be the most rewarding of her academic career.

“One goal I have in the classroom is to teach students to be more empathic and compassionate relational partners and citizens. One avenue toward reaching this goal has been to engage them in service learning,” said the assistant professor in the department of communication studies.

Earlier this year, undergraduate students in her Visual Narratives of Women’s Health course worked with Colorado Pregnancy and Newborn Loss Services (CPNL), a local non-profit organization that provides support to families suffering the loss of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death. The students created videos with the purpose of persuading people to contribute to a crowdfunding campaign to raise money for scrapbooking supplies for CPNL families to create memory books in honor of their lost babies. The organization has raised $3,000 with the help of the student videos.

“Service-learning projects such as this allows students to develop research skills and work with community partners to address a relational challenge,” said Willer. “However, perhaps more importantly, they allow students to bear witness to suffering, empathize with it and be moved to communicate more compassionately in their everyday lives.”

In addition to raising money for scrapbooking supplies through the service learning project, Willer and her graduate students are working in partnership with CPNL to provide scrapbooking workshops to bereaved parents through the Scraps of the Heart Project, Willer’s own labor of love.

In February 2013, Willer gave birth to twins Matilda and Milo, but Milo died when he was just three hours old. Willer also experienced two miscarriages previously. Although she had never scrapbooked before her first miscarriage, she had a strong desire to capture her memories. The scrapbook not only became what she and her husband Mark had instead of their baby, but also became a way to help others understand their grief and the significance of their baby’s life.

“As you can see from the Scraps of the Heart Project, my research and teaching are very personal to me,” said Willer, who has received a DU Center for Community Engagement and Service
Learning Public Good Fund grant to fund the program and help provide scrapbooking materials for the workshops.

“Although I would give anything to get to raise my son Milo, my research and teaching allow me to do meaningful work in his name,” she said. “My scholarship allows me to help and work with people like my family who face one of life’s ultimate tragedies. I get to mentor students to use not only their personal challenges, but also their research and teaching to do good in, for and with their communities. I simply can’t imagine my work being any more exciting than this.”

Willer has a PhD in Communication Studies from the University of Nebraska. She has received national and regional awards for her work, and has been published in journals including, *Communication Monographs, Communication Studies, Journal of Family Communication* and *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. Willer recently published an article looking at the role that health-care providers’ compassion plays in contributing to infertility patients’ treatment, relational and psychological stressors.
Is your PhD in communication studies?

Yes. I have a PhD in Communication Studies from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

When did you join DU?

Fall 2009

What courses do you teach?

I have taught a number of courses in the areas of interpersonal communication, health communication and research methods.

Professor Willer also investigates types of communicative management strategies, such as story listening and perspective-taking, that relational partners employ when they are experiencing distress. Her work is grounded in narrative theorizing, takes an intergroup approach, and makes use of a dark- and bright-side lens. An ultimate goal of this work is to shed light how people can manage difficulty in a manner that is predictive of individual and relational health, as well as acceptance and understanding of outgroup members. She has received national and regional awards and her work has been published in journals including, Communication Studies, Journal of Family Communication, Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, Personal Relationships and Qualitative Communication Research.

My Dark Side of Relationships course focuses on both negative and positive relational phenomena. Specifically, a dark- and bright-side lens acknowledges that relational communication is functionally ambivalent, meaning that those types of communication that we typically perceive as negative can function to produce positive outcomes and those that usually are viewed as good can in fact be undesirable. For example, we learn about both the dark and bright sides of topics such as compassion, narcissism, forgiveness and social aggression.

My newest course taught at both the undergraduate and graduate level is titled Visual Narratives of Women’s Health. The course is a hybrid between a visual research methods course and a content course. We cover means of collecting and analyzing visual data, such as drawing, photography, and collage-making, as well as issues related to women’s reproductive health such as infertility, pregnancy/birth and perinatal loss.
What do you enjoy most about teaching?

The last year of teaching has brought me the most rewarding experiences of my academic career. One goal I have in the classroom is to teach students to be more empathic and compassionate relational partners and citizens. One avenue toward reaching this goal has been to engage them in service learning. Last Winter in my undergraduate course Visual Narratives of Women’s Health, we worked with community partner Colorado Pregnancy and Newborn Loss Services (CPNL), a local non-profit organization that provides support to families suffering the loss of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth, or neonatal death. The students put together videos with the purpose of persuading people to contribute to a crowdfunding campaign to raise money to purchase scrapbooking supplies so that CPNL families can create memory books in honor of their lost babies. This past summer we raised $3,000 with the help of the student videos. This Fall quarter I am teaching Visual Narratives of Women’s Health at the graduate level. This class too is engaging in a service-learning project working with our community partner Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep (NILMDTS). NILMDTS is an international non-profit organization with a home office in Centennial, CO that provides free remembrance photography to individuals whose babies have died. One of their fundraising efforts includes a program titled, Drawings From the Heart, which involves children who have experienced the death of a baby in drawing a picture in order to remember him or her. At this year’s NILMDTS Remembrance Walk in October, graduate students in my course ran the Drawings From the Heart pavilion where children came to draw their pictures. This experience functioned as a means of practicing the visual ethnographic research skills we were developing in the course. After researching perinatal loss and running the pavilion/performing the ethnography, students developed two products to help NILMDTS in their goal of supporting families experiencing infant loss. One included an infographic detailing scholarly research on children who have experienced the loss of a baby, as well as students’ observations from the remembrance walk and suggestions for NILMDTS as they work to build the Drawings From the Heart program. The other product students produced based on the service-learning experience was a digital storybook that can be shared with children and their families who are looking for ways to help young people cope with child loss.

Service-learning projects such as these allow students to develop research skills and work with community partners to address a relational problematic. However, perhaps more importantly, they allow students to bear witness to suffering, empathize with it, and be moved to communicate more compassionately in their everyday lives. This is what I enjoy most about teaching.

Please tell me about your research

Generally speaking my research focuses on the ways people communicatively manage relational
difficulty. In particular I study two contexts, including social aggression and reproductive challenges. I also investigate communicative management strategies, such as empathy, compassion and storytelling/listening.

Much of my work has focused on social aggression among girls and women (e.g., gossip, social exclusion, friendship manipulation). I have looked specifically at factors that predict well-being for targets’ of social aggression. For example, I tested a narrative drawing intervention with middle school girls in an effort to increase targets’ mental health and forgiveness of perpetrators.

My most recent work in the last couple of years has focused on women’s reproductive challenges, including infertility and perinatal loss. I recently published an article looking at the role that health-care provider compassion plays in contributing to infertility patients’ treatment, relational, and psychological stressors. Participants in the study also identified compassionate memorable messages they received from health-care workers, providing a practical tool for practitioners dedicated to implementing such patient-centered communication.

My biggest current study is The Scraps of the Heart Project. In addition to the students in Visual Narratives of Women’s Health helping to raise $3,000 (as mentioned above), I also received a DU Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning Public Good Fund Grant last spring to fund the program. Jan, I’m going to paste a link to the crowdfunding campaign site because it gives a nice succinct overview of the project, as well as my personal connection to it: https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/the-scrapsof-the-heart-project. Our timeline got moved back a bit from what it says here because I am pregnant and due in January. So we will be starting the scrapbooking workshops this Spring/Summer. As a side note because I imagine you might wonder, I am ok with you using details from my personal story of losing my babies if you’d like 😊.

What excites you about your work?

As you can see from the description of The Scraps of the Heart Project, my research and teaching are very personal to me. Although I would give anything to get to raise my son Milo, my research and teaching allow me to do meaningful work in his name. My scholarship allows me to get to help and work with people like my family who face one of life’s ultimate tragedies. I get to mentor students to use not only their personal challenges, but also their research and teaching to do good in, for, and with their communities. I simply can’t imagine my work being any more exciting than this.