

Seek the answers that resonate within you

Professor David Dillard's life lessons have stayed with me BY KEVIN ELLIKER ('08, '09M)

On my first day of college classes in fall 2004, I walked into a humid classroom in Jackson Hall. I was there for an Honors Program section of GHIST 225, Survey of United States History. There were 16 students. This course stood in stark contrast to another GenEd-level history course I had attended that same morning, held in the Phillips Center (now Top Dog Café) with close to 200 students. I didn't have to participate in that class; there was no interaction.

Clearly, the same would not be true for this class. Dr. David Dillard engaged us in a semester-long dialogue that not only made me excited for class, but it also began a conversation that continued through my entire undergraduate and graduate experiences at JMU.

During my first semester, I came to appreciate the passion and conviction with which Dr. Dillard taught history (any student who has heard him tell the story of the Newburgh conspiracy in the American Revolution can attest to this). He goes out of his way to involve students in class. He asks for their thoughts and solicits comments on the topic of the day. I especially appreciate how Dr. Dillard reaches out to students in the education programs — sometimes meeting separately with them to discuss curriculum and content issues in relation to history courses.

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Dr. Dillard gets to know students as individuals. He remembers our names, where we come from and what we did in his classes. He frequently asked me about my older brother, Mike

('06), who had also taken his classes. In addition to his duties as a history professor and director of the interdisciplinary social science minor, Dr. Dillard has spent significant time working with students in JMU's ROTC program. From 2002 to 2005, he taught ROTC classes. He can relate; the Gulf War vet served 11 years as an Army officer.



Kevin Elliker ('08, '09M), center, receives graduation congratulations from his older brother, Mike Elliker ('06), and history professor and mentor David Dillard.

More than just a professor, Dr. Dillard is a sounding board, an ally and mentor. When I decided to participate in Study Abroad, he quickly wrote a letter of recommendation. As a sophomore resident adviser, I asked him to speak with my residents about his experiences in the Gulf War. He stayed late into the night to share his story.

When I asked if he would be an adviser on my Senior Honors Thesis, he agreed without hesitation. When I sorrowfully trudged into his office a few months later to inform him that I was no longer interested in completing the project, I wasn't sure what to expect — disappointment, hesitation or regret. Instead, Dr. Dillard encouraged me to seek out only those endeavors that excited me. He told me he would support my decisions, including the one to abandon a stale paper. My experiences with Dr. Dillard outside of the classroom brought me back to his office time and again, even while I was a graduate student in the College of Education.

Dr. Dillard taught me some of the greatest lessons a student of history (or life) can learn. Don't oversimplify. Embrace complexity and seek out the answers that resonate with you. There can never be enough perspectives or knowledge or questions about history. Simple answers do not provide fulfillment or meaning. These lessons have stayed with me, especially as a social studies teacher, where, too often, the tendency is to give the simplest answer to complex questions.

I don't regret my decision to abandon my senior thesis. If I do have a regret, it is that I didn't take enough of Dr. Dillard's classes. He provided important opportunities for me to grapple with difficult questions. I will always be grateful.

About the Author Kevin Elliker ('08, '09M) majored in interdisciplinary social science and history and completed a minor in secondary education. He also earned his Master of Arts in Teaching degree from JMU in 2009. As an undergrad, he was actively involved in Student Ambassadors, served as a resident adviser in Logan Hall and spent a semester abroad at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He lives with his wife in Atlanta, where he teaches sixth grade social studies.

About the Professor David Dillard, associate professor of history, is a Gulf War veteran who spent 11 years as an Army officer. He earned a B.A. and M.A. in American History from the University of Georgia and completed his doctorate at Rice University in Houston. Dillard teaches courses on the American Civil War, the History of the Old South and Caribbean History. He works extensively with the Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies Program and is completing a manuscript examining the Confederate debate over arming slaves.