

Nadkarni weaves 'threads' of nature and social justice in WJW lecture



Nalini Nadkarni is the fourth recipient of WSU's William Julius Wilson Award.

By Pierce Greenberg

Forest ecologist and University of Utah professor Nalini Nadkarni broke nine ribs after falling 50 feet from a tree in a Washington woods last summer. But that did

not stop her from delivering an engaging speech about the connections between social justice and nature just a few months later at WSU Pullman.

Nadkarni was selected by a University committee as the fourth recipient of WSU's William Julius Wilson Award for the Advancement of Social Justice, administered through the Department of Sociology. Her work centers on educating prison inmates about nature to give them a sense of purpose and worth.

"Science can contribute to the tapestry of social justice.... Nature is also part of social justice," Nadkarni said. "It's a tapestry that is complex, strong, youthful, and beautiful."

Nadkarni started the Sustainability in Prisons Project at the Cedar Creek Correctional Center in western Washington in 2002. The project developed from her search for a sustainable solution to illegal harvesting of forest mosses. Nadkarni sought out a group of people with lots of available time, an interest in learning, and some open space. That led her to prison.

There she found people willing and able to help. Not only did the project provide an efficient way to grow replacement moss, rather than scraping it from trees, it also provided inmates with a renewed sense of self and self worth.

"Instead of thinking they are only black holes of people... they are now beginning to see the fact that they can contribute to something that is larger than themselves," Nadkarni said.

The program was a success, and even led some inmates to pursue nature-related careers and graduate education.

However, that program impacted only minimum-security inmates who were close to release. Nadkarni wanted to influence inmates in solitary confinement, too—so she conceived of an idea to bring nature imagery to the most isolated parts of the prison. Providing inmates with access to forest and mountain scenes actually led to a decrease in violent incidents.

Prior to her lecture, Nadkarni talked with graduate students and faculty in the Department of Sociology. She urged students to think about the opportunities for bringing academic knowledge to the masses.

"How can we thread science in with the threads of social justice to reach a community and give access to experiential and educational opportunities that might not otherwise happen?" Nadkarni asked.

For example, instead of publishing work about climate change in only academic journals, students could print up brochures for skiers, religious groups, or other interested parties.

Nadkarni drew on her own experience of garnering attention to science by enlisting the help of rappers, artists, and legislators.

Assistant professor Dr. Jennifer



Dr. Nadkarni addressed graduate students prior to her University-wide lecture.



Graduate students Lauren Scott and Hong Zhang during a conversation with Dr. Nadkarni.

Givens, who earned her PhD from the University of Utah, recommended Nadkarni to the award nominating committee.

Past recipients of the William Julius Wilson award include William Julius Wilson (2009), David Simon (2011), and Robert Sampson (2013).

Photo at top by Dean Hare, University Communications; photos on right and bottom by Don Dillman.

