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De Meo carries on tradition of teaching chemistry

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Regional

De Meo carries on tradition of teaching chemistry

Chemistry is one of those areas of science that some people find difficult – some even to the point of fearing it. Yet, there are those chemistry professors who infuse such enthusiasm into the subject that it is made not only easier to understand, but actually exciting. One such professor is Cristina De Meo, an associate professor of chemistry at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

De Meo was born in Catania, Sicily, Italy. She obtained her master's degree in bioorganic chemistry at the University of Catania and her doctorate in organic chemistry at the University of Georgia. She is known by her colleagues and her students for combining American style teaching methods with those she learned in her native Italy. She, in fact, comes from a long line of teachers. Her father and two of her grandparents were teachers.

"I am very proud of my grandmother being a teacher because at that time in Sicily not many women had an education," De Meo said. "She was a high school teacher, but that was not very common at that time particularly in the south of Italy." De Meo said that her own interest in chemistry began early in life.

"I like organic chemistry because it requires a lot of thinking and a lot of puzzling and critical skills," she said. "And then by the time I was deciding to do a Ph.D. the choice of organic was because it can be applied to everything. Organic is very intriguing, and carbohydrates – which is my expertise – is a cool topic of

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

science in this field today."

In her work at SIUE, De Meo can often be found in a noisy lab surrounded by the sounds produced by vacuum pumps. When asked what makes a good teacher she answered without hesitation. "What I think is the main point is to let the students know that you care for them and I think this is what I try to show them from the first lecture," she said. "Like, for example, I ask them to introduce themselves one by one in the first lecture and by the end of the semester I know each name of my students. Probably I won't remember all of them in one year but I really try to show them that they are not numbers but they are human beings and I care for them."

She teaches up to 150 students per semester, mostly on a subject considered to be the "tough one" in her area: organic chemistry. "It is not because it is difficult, it is because students haven't been really exposed to chemistry," De Meo explained.

"They have done their general chemistry, so they have, as we say in Italy 'they have flour,' like when you are cooking and you put some flour on top of your food, but they haven't been fried yet. So with a little bit of hard work and working



Dr. Cristina De Meo in her lab at SIUE.

with instructors, students can earn a good grade. So I think if you read the textbook, if with no problems.

Shan Lu/SIUE Photo

"The activities that I am doing in my organic chemistry class are coming from my educational background," said De

Meo. "In Italy every course since middle school, maybe even elementary school, is oral. So you don't do written, unless you are doing written Italian. The teacher will call you one day, you don't know when, and you stand up next to her desk and they can ask you anything. In college we don't have tests during the semester. When the semester is finished you take your time to learn the material and then after a couple of months you have to stand in front of the board, in front of a committee and some other people that are attending and they can ask you anything from the book. I feel that with written tests some students might not be exposed to talking in science. So sometimes during my classes I have them presenting a poster or a PowerPoint presentation to give them the skill of talking sciences.

"My family told me how great it is to be a mentor and I see being a teacher also from a selfish point of view, that people will remember me in their later years, 'Oh, I remember this teacher and she told me this and now I understand.' And I give this idea to my students that one day they will think about me this way. And this is why I am a teacher."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.