

## Scarce revisits atypical graduate experience at WSU

Rik Scarce's path toward obtaining a PhD in sociology at WSU in 1995 was atypical—to say the least. During his graduate school work, a federal judge jailed Scarce for five months after he refused to reveal information about research subjects whom he had been interviewing for a project on radical environmentalism. That experience had profound impacts on his academic career—for one, he carried the stigma of having been jailed, but he also received widespread notoriety and acclaim for his willingness to go to jail to honor confidentiality agreements with research subjects.



Rik Scarce

“My experiences going to jail are something I’m extremely proud of. I should have done exactly what I did do,” said Scarce, who received his PhD from WSU in 1995. “In the perverse ways that character-building exercises work, it was character building. I didn’t know I had it in me until I went off to jail. I didn’t know I had that strength and confidence. “

Earlier this year, Scarce—now a tenured professor at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY—returned to the WSU–Vancouver campus to talk about his recent research on environmental justice and sustainability. His talk was part of the Collective for Social and Environmental Justice’s spring symposium on “Environmental and Climate

Justice Practices.”

*Sociology News* caught up with Scarce by phone to learn more about his time at

WSU, his career path, and his most recent research.

*Sociology News: Your path to graduate school looks interesting. I noticed that you had already written a book before coming to WSU. Why did you decide to pursue a PhD in Pullman?*

Rik Scarce: I finished up my masters in 1983, and then there was a big honking gap. In that time, I did a variety of things. I was a speechwriter and otherwise represented a couple of different elected officials. I was unemployed. I worked at a bookstore.... I was really kind of struggling to find my way.

But one of these not-super-enticing jobs that I had was to oversee the study hall at a high school. I found myself loving working with the kids. I realized that what I really wanted to do was work with college-aged students. So, I had to swallow really hard and tell myself 'OK, you've got to go get a PhD.'

Why Washington State? At the time, there weren't very many environmental sociology PhD-granting programs, so I really had to look around.... I looked at the professors who were in the departments and decided that Wazzu was the best fit for me. I was fortunate that it worked out the way it did.

*SN: Aside from the events surrounding your jailing, what do you remember most about your time at WSU?*

RS: The first sociology course I ever walked into—I had not even taken Intro as an undergraduate—was taught by David Ward. It was a social psychology class. David was the son of a Southern Baptist preacher, and he just brought this wonderful sort-of preachy feeling to the classroom that I just ate up. And I learned a great deal in that course.

There were so many other takeaways. The last class I ever took was with Greg Hooks. Greg brought a wonderful demeanor to that classroom. I remember the final was an oral final—and I remember going to the union building across the walkway and sitting down in front of a fireplace with Greg. I was all anxious about this big-time grilling, but he just wanted to discuss what I wrote in my final paper and why I took the perspective that I did. Subtle things like that wear off on you as you're about to become a professor, and you think about how you want to interact with your students.

Lisa McIntyre was an absolutely fantastic mentor when it came to teaching. I appreciated her approach a great deal as well. The whole experience — and being given the freedom that I had in the PhD program—is something that I treasured.

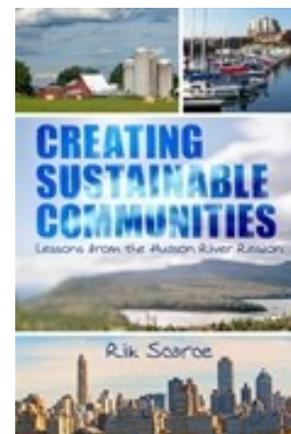
SN: *So, let's talk about your jailing. How has that experience informed and influenced your career overall?*

RS: It affected my career in so many ways. I don't know for sure, but I strongly suspect that I was passed over for some jobs—at least for some interviews. I felt like my experience going to jail might have put people off, and that departments might have thought I was radical or mentally off or something like that. I'll never forget when my department chair at Montana State introduced me to my dean for the first time. He said 'Jim, I'd like to introduce you to my newest jail bird.' It was humorous, but it also indicated the stigma that I was living with.

There were those negatives, but there were tremendous positives. I wrote a book from jail. I got multiple scholarly articles out of that experience. I get asked every other year or so to write a piece or give a talk somewhere about my jailing, as well. It's something that's stayed with me, and it's stayed with me in ways positive and negative.

SN: *You recently published a book titled "Creating Sustainable Communities" – what do you hope the biggest takeaway from that book is?*

RS: There is a subtle theme of the social construction of nature—what I call "landscape"—that runs through the book. The book is intended for a broad range of audiences, everything from undergraduates to graduate courses to lay readers. So that's the big one: communities shape their place, in interaction with the land and water around them. What kind of socio-ecological community do you want?



I'm convinced that the Hudson River region is unique in all of the United States in the concentration of sustainability-oriented practices that are happening here. There are so many diverse, really very exciting examples of sustainability practice and entrepreneurship going on here. I felt that the whole of the country might well be inspired by what's happening here.

There are elected officials who are radically revising land-use plans to really take seriously the sustainability growth ethic. Of course, you've got New York City which has created a massive sustainability plan that was passed seamlessly from a Republican mayor to a Democratic mayor. It's a shining example of how important urban areas are to the future of sustainability.

There's just a wonderful, rich array of sustainability experimentation under way

here. I think a lot of people will learn from, and be inspired by, these experiences.

SN: *I also understand that you made a documentary to accompany the book.*

The book was a bridge project between my old way of conducting research, which was classical ethnography, to the new approach—which is going to be entirely through film. I don't see myself writing another book or maybe even another article in my career. I really do think visual sociology is worth that much attention. Fortunately, I'm in a department where I can do that.

The tie to WSU is that I got there with a strong interest in photography, but I didn't really plan on tying it into the dissertation. I vividly remember having a conversation with one of my grad school peers, Lorie Higgins, who was working on what's known as a "photo elicitation" study. The roots of this new scholarly approach that I'm taking were planted in that moment, right there in the hallway when I was told about this whole area of sociology that I was completely unaware of.

SN: *Was there a learning curve in picking up the methods and technology of filmmaking?*

RS: The learning curve is tremendous. It's not the kind of thing that I would advise for someone who is not tenured. [Laughs] If you don't have some sort of video background, this is not the kind of project you want to take on until you've got some job security. And, at that, do you really want to do something so non-traditional early in your career?

For me, it's just a fascinating way to do sociology. We live in a more visual culture than any that's ever existed. What I have in mind is the plethora of images—we are bombarded by them and there are these intended messages in them. So, it's fascinating to turn that message-making process around and think how I, as a sociological observer, can best convey those concepts and ideas through images.

It's encouraging that our discipline is increasingly welcoming this kind of approach to research. But new folks should not dive in too quickly!

