

# History professor arranges meeting between greatest minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

By **BRIAN ESTES**  
Staff Reporter

A Vol State history professor has devised a very innovative method of educating his students about some of the most prolific minds of the twentieth century.

Students in Dr. Robert Ruff's world civilizations II and political science classes have been busy the past 12 weeks preparing for "The Meeting of the Minds," a long running tradition in Ruff's classes.

"I try to get my students to do five things – read, write, think, talk, and listen," says Ruff, professor of history and political science. His solution involves having students take part in a conference that can essentially be described as a sit down conversation between the greatest thinkers, artists, musicians, and politicians of the twentieth century.

Each student in Ruff's class plays the role of a particular character in the meeting.

Once the conversation begins, students are expected to interject at points in which their characters would likely have strong feelings. Ruff elaborated that he got the idea from a comedy routine performed by Steve Allen, the host of the original Tonight show.

Allen would have a guest on the show that would portray a particular character and perform a monologue based on the viewpoint of that person.

Many students seem to be very enthusiastic about the upcoming event. "It is fascinating thinking about how these people would have really interacted. It increases your understanding of a person when you see how they would interact with others," says Robin Lawhorn, one of Ruff's political science students.

Lawhorn will be playing the role of Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher who is best known for his statement that "God is dead."

Nietzsche, as Lawhorn explained, came from a long line of Lutheran pastors, but as he began studying the Bible according to the principles of historical criticism, he came to reject revealed religious truths.

He then formed what is known as the will to power, which says that man must overcome his moral and

intellectual dependence on God and become a god himself.

Lawhorn found some of Nietzsche's concepts difficult to understand, but expressed a certain level of respect for Nietzsche, saying, "I like that he had the conviction to live according to his conscience, even when it meant going against prevailing beliefs. I was uplifted by his philosophy that your role in life is to figure out who you are and then live accordingly."

Abraham Pottenger, 19, a business major from Hendersonville, has assumed responsibility of the role of Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Co. He detailed that Ford rose to prominence by combining interchangeable parts with the assembly line to create the moving assembly line.

"I was really impressed with Ford's entrepreneurial spirit," Pottenger said.

Amy Harrison, 23, an elementary education major from Goodlettsville, will serve as the embodiment of Salvador Dali, the famous surrealist painter.

Harrison plans on weaving an intricate and colorful portrait of the artist by going above and beyond and being larger than life, just as Dali would have done.

"Dali was really ahead of his time, he had a creative style that really pushed the limits," said Harrison. An example of this lies in Dali's portrait "The Enigma of William Tell," in which Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin was shown mooning.

As a young child, Dali was taken to visit his brother's grave on a frequent basis. Dali was visibly affected by seeing his own name on a tombstone and had difficulty distinguishing that the grave was his brother's and not his own. This, Harrison mused, likely had a significant impact on Dali's bizarre painting style.

Jim McDonald, 58, a history major from Hickman, is in charge of representing Yasser Arafat.

McDonald explained that Arafat had received billions of dollars of aid from the US government which he was supposed to spend to help the suffering population of Palestine. Instead, Arafat took most of the aid money and put it in a Swiss bank account. However, McDonald also made a startling comparison. "I believe that Arafat, as a

thieving politician, is no different from Democrats and Republicans in this country, the prime minister in Britain, or Kofi Annan in the UN," McDonald said.

He supported his argument by citing several examples, including Coleman Young, former mayor of Detroit.

Young, McDonald said, instituted a Detroit city income tax and kept much of the money for himself. This tax drove many businesses out of Detroit and turned the city into a slum. Harold Wilson, a former British Prime minister, hid losses of the British government so he could fund lavish sex parties, McDonald also said.

Kofi Annan, secretary of the United Nations, had a son who took money from the US Oil for Food program. McDonald suspects that Annan benefited from the money his son took.

Ashley West, 20, a psychology major from Portland, looks to delve into the mind of Albert Einstein.

Einstein, as West recounted, was raised in a rich Jewish heritage but, similar to Nietzsche, set aside his faith when he began studying science.

Despite this, Einstein always considered himself a Jew and therefore it is expected that he will have a few choice words for Hitler at the meeting next week, as West pointed out. "I thought he was an interesting guy to read about, but the science was confusing," she remarked.

Sheri Serra is taking on the role of Mohandas Gandhi. Serra plans to place an emphasis on the peaceful nature of Gandhi's uprising.

"One day people in this world may decide to stop killing each other. Gandhi has set the example that we do have the courage to put down our weapons. It takes much more courage to let someone hit you than it does to take a gun and shoot someone," Serra said.

There are many other characters that will be represented at the Meeting of the Minds, including C.S. Lewis, Sigmund Freud, and Mikhail Gorbachev, among others.

"I hope that students are able to gain an alternative vision of the world that is not their own," Ruff said.

He summarized his feelings with a quote from the Irish poet Robert Burns, which, with apologies to Mr. Burns, appears in a loosely translated version: "Oh that God would give us the very smallest of gifts to be able to see ourselves as others see us."

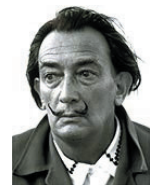
## MEETING OF THE MINDS



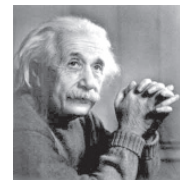
Friedrich Nietzsche  
German philosopher



Henry Ford  
American entrepreneur



Salvadore Dali  
Spanish painter



Albert Einstein  
Jewish scientist



Yasser Arafat  
Palestinian political leader



Dr. Robert M. Ruff