

## Ten Minute T(ea) with Mr. Tom Heise

*Interview conducted by Bailey Smith  
April 13, 2017*

Q) Your spring history elective is titled, “Freedom Summer to Ferguson.” Could you please give a brief overview of what this course entails, and what inspired or prompted you to create this class?

A) This class is an elective for juniors and seniors that studies the effort to achieve full racial equality and justice in this country, but not through the traditional lens of the civil rights movement. The inspiration for the course is really the emergence of the “Black Lives Matter” movement. The “Freedom Summer to Ferguson” course an attempt to provide a backstory for that movement and how it came to be and why so many people feel it is necessary.

Q) With only one term for such a loaded topic, do you teach this class with a certain goal in mind?

A) I suppose it is the same goal for every class I teach. I want people to understand the world they live in together better and to have some sense of the historical moments that have produced the time we live in right now and some sense too of the right questions to ask and the right sources to consult.

Q) Deerfield is often seen as inside a bubble to the outside world. In what ways do you see this unawareness in your discussions, or do you see this at all?

A) I think Deerfield is a bubble in some ways, but in some ways it isn't. I think that much of what is going on in the outside world is reflected in various ways in every Deerfield classroom. My sense in having taught this course for three years is that many of the students who are in it have experienced racial injustice themselves, and they have actually paid a lot of attention to current events. But of course there are some other students for whom this material is less familiar. I don't know if there is a single answer that would speak for all of the students in the room.

Q) How do you compare or relate the struggles of the African American race during the Freedom Summer movement to the struggles of African Americans today?

A) History is always about the study of continuity and change. For example, there was a belief in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and certainly among many Americans in the 1960s, that passing significant civil rights laws would end racial justice in this country. Even if we're not all the way there, that view isn't all wrong and many continue to believe that thoughtful legislation can bring us closer to full racial justice in this country. One persistent problem, then

and now, has to do with the experience of Black Americans with the criminal justice system, a problem that seems to have persisted despite civil rights legislation. Effective solutions may require not only new laws, but also changes in how we think.

Q) How do you handle the topic of race to allow an open place for discussion and opinion?

A) I don't think I have a different way of doing this for any of the classes I teach. I try to find good things for people to read that speak to a variety of experiences, and I try to ask the kinds of questions that cause people to want to share what they think and what they know. Because the class is taught in a seminar style and there aren't many students at the table, I think there is enough time and space to share their perspectives. Yet because a course like this deals with issues and truths that can make us uncomfortable, students need to be open-minded and willing to speak candidly. And they have been, again and again and again.

Q) Do you think Deerfield is effective in trying to inform its students about the problems of race in our country?

A) I think every institution could do more. Certainly we are mindful of that challenge, both inside and outside the classroom. There's always more work to be done, such as finding ways to revise curricula so that the experiences of everyone are represented. There's also always an admissions office challenge to make sure that the school has a student body that represents the full diversity of the world, and a hiring challenge to ensure that we have a diverse faculty as well. I think sometimes that Deerfield's rural location can sometimes pose an obstacle to attracting students and teachers of color to Deerfield.

Q) How can we, as a faculty and student body, be more aware and active about these current problems? Should the school spend more required time informing its students about race, or should we encourage more access to information by choice?

A) I don't really see this as an either-or thing. For instance, we require US History, and any good US History course is going to include as part of that course, the history of race in this country. It's a central theme and a central problem. Offering electives like the one I teach is helpful too, although it is fair to say that when creating an elective like this, you are suggesting to students at some level that learning about this is a choice, not a necessity. It is a hard yet productive tension to navigate. I think that having days like our Martin Luther King Jr. celebration day is good thing and it is quite okay to require that. In the end, I favor an approach that has both required elements and elective elements.