

*Faculty Profile: Christopher Wren*

*by Casey Carpenter*

*“Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.”*

- T.S. Eliot

A conversation with Professor Christopher Wren is a whirlwind of an experience, a not-so-Socratic method of learning that extends further than any classroom lesson ever could. In hindsight, its narrative nature is likely drawn from Aristotle’s *Poetics* rather than Plato’s *Dialogues*.

As interlocutor, you sit back and enjoy the stories of an Army paratrooper, New York Times editor, foreign and war correspondent, professor, cat owner (see his NYT’s bestselling book about it), loving husband and father, mountain climber, and so much more. And he weaves these stories expertly and effortlessly. For those who have not had the pleasure, the experience is like sitting back and watching the blurred wings of a hummingbird carry the near weightless being from flower to flower. The words, like the beak, attempt to pierce the heart of the story, but shift from tangent to tangent, bloom to bloom, causing one to feel lost in the commotion. Lost, that is, until you reach the end, smile and recall the simple life lesson – a lesson Professor Wren knows intimately after he hiked from the New York Times office in Manhattan to his home in Vermont upon retirement – that the long and winding path will often prove the most rewarding.

As Professor Wren prepares to retire from the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) program it only seems fitting to share his words, his wisdom, and, most importantly, his stories. Lucky for us, his story begins here at Dartmouth.

Christopher Wren graduated from Dartmouth in 1957. Had you been lucky enough to know him in those days you would, quite literally, find him hanging around campus since he was an avid rock climber, a passion he carried throughout his life and eventually led to him climbing 20,000 feet of Mount Everest. Professor Wren was also an English major, learned to speak Russian, and was a member of the ROTC program while an undergraduate.

Upon graduation he served on Active Duty before taking roles with both the Army National Guard and Army Reserves. While serving, the eventual Captain Wren joined the elite club of Army Special Forces and became a paratrooper. Asked to recall a story from his time in service, Professor Wren’s literary instinct kicked in as he reminisced on Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia. For those who have not had the pleasure of jumping out of a perfectly good airplane, the school is surprisingly notorious for its boredom. The military adage of “hurry up and wait” is in full effect as troops spend hours waiting to perform a single 45-second-long static line jump, maybe two, for the day. When asked how he chose to pass this time, Professor Wren recalled

his Commanding Officer (CO) walking around and performing spot checks. When the CO came upon the then green Lieutenant Wren, he found pages stuffed inside the lining of his helmet. When asked what was in his helmet, likely posed in much more colorful language, Lt. Wren replied, "T.S. Eliot, sir." Fifty years later, the memory still brings a smile to his face.

Following his time on Active Duty, Professor Wren moved on to the Columbia School of Journalism before embarking on his career as a journalist. When asked to articulate the value of journalism Professor Wren is quick to point out that a journalist is charged with providing the first draft of history. A fitting response for a reporter who covered countless historic moments throughout his career. To name but a few, the byline of Christopher Wren was attached to the end of Communism in the Soviet Union, the Iran Hostage situation, Nelson Mandela's release from prison, the Vietnam War, the Cambodian Conflict, a brief stint covering the United Nations, the Bosnian Conflict, and so many more. His foreign postings include Russia, China, Egypt, South Africa, Belgium and Toronto before he was called back to the Manhattan Bureau to work as an editor. As a result, seventeen of his twenty-eight years with the New York Times were spent overseas.

Following his retirement from the New York Times in 2003, Professor Wren trained young journalists in Central Asia before accepting a guest teaching position at Princeton University and, roughly a decade ago, accepted a final teaching position back at his alma mater—a perfect bookend to a storied career as it is difficult to imagine a professor who better embodies the interdisciplinary nature of MALS. His foreign reporting covered global politics for decades, his work and training was continuously cross-cultural, and his creative writing skills were always on display. One could argue that Professor Wren's professional and academic experience qualifies him to teach in any of the MALS Cultural Studies, Globalization, or Creative Writing concentrations.

When asked to provide advice for future journalist, Professor Wren listed six steadfast rules. As you'll see below, the list would border on the humorous by the end if it were not based on lived experience. The advice is sage, honest, and shaped by the character of a Special Forces veteran turned war correspondent who knows a thing or two about getting out of a sticky situation. The list is as follows:

1. Always eat breakfast.
2. When you come across a bathroom, use it.
3. Never travel with anything that you cannot carry at a dead sprint for ¼ of a mile.
4. For every situation you find yourself in, have a plan to get out of it.
5. Never find yourself stuck between a wall and a bad situation.
6. As often as possible, avoid standing in front of a young man carrying a Rocket Propelled Grenade.

With this advice in tow, we thank Professor Wren for his sagacity and the years of experience it is rooted in, for the sacrifices he and his family made so that he could stand at the starting line

of history, and for the sacrifices he made in honorably serving our country. The MALS program is forever grateful for the time and energy he spent educating and mentoring its students.

Lastly, it only seems fitting to leave the reader with Professor Wren's own words. After hours of telling stories about his career, his adventures, and his lessons learned, Professor Wren was asked what the most rewarding part of it all was, and he humbly replied, "Getting to tell the stories of others."