

Faculty Bios

Leslie Jill Patterson (Ph.D.) teaches in the creative writing program at Texas Tech University. Her prose has appeared recently in *Texas Monthly*, *Gulf Coast*, *Baltimore Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *The Rumpus*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Bring the Noise: the best pop culture essays from Barrelhouse*, among others. Her awards include two Kimmel-Harding Nelson residencies; a Texas Commission on the Arts fellowship; the Embrey Human Rights Fellowship; the Everett Southwest Literary Award (judged by Lee K. Abbott); a Soros Justice Fellowship, funded by the Open Society Foundations in New York; the *Prime Number Magazine* Prize for Fiction (judged by David Jauss); the Richard J. Margolis Award for Social Justice Writing; and a Pushcart Prize. Since 2009, she has worked as the case storyteller for public defenders representing indigent men and women charged with capital murder and facing the death penalty in Texas.

Elizabeth Vartkessian (Ph.D.) has been investigating the life histories of those facing the most severe penalties possible in the United States since 2004. She started working as a mitigation specialist in Houston, Texas at a time when it was the epicenter of capital punishment. There she learned and developed skills aimed at helping decision-makers have a full picture of her clients.

After starting a successful private practice and obtaining her Ph.D. in Law from the University of Oxford, Dr. Vartkessian and several colleagues created Advancing Real Change, Inc. (ARC, Inc.) a national non-profit with offices located in Baltimore, MD and Jacksonville, FL dedicated to conducting high-quality life history investigations in criminal cases. As the founding

Executive Director, Dr. Vartkessian is committed to having the history of an accused at the forefront of their criminal case. She has worked as a mitigation specialist with defense teams in trial and post-conviction cases in state and federal jurisdictions and is an international expert on the collection and effective presentation of mitigating evidence, as well as the standard of care required by the defense in death penalty and juvenile cases.

Dr. Vartkessian's approach to investigating and presenting evidence is informed by research. She is currently a Research Fellow at the University at Albany in the School of Criminal Justice where she is a researcher with the Capital Jury Project (CJP). The CJP is an ongoing research project sponsored by the National Science Foundation that seeks to understand how capital jurors make their sentencing decisions and whether those decisions are made in keeping with the law. The results of her research were widely cited by the American Bar Association's review of the Texas capital sentencing system. Her publications, which include articles in law reviews, peer review journals, and

opinion pieces focus on receptivity to mitigating evidence.

In addition to having received her Ph.D. in Law from the University of Oxford, Dr. Vartkessian also holds a M.S. in Comparative Social Policy from the University of Oxford and B.A. in Philosophy and Political Science from George Washington University where she was a Presidential Scholar. In 2015 she was awarded the J. M. K. Innovation Prize for her efforts to bring mitigation to all areas of the criminal justice process. In 2018, the City Council of Baltimore passed a resolution praising Dr. Vartkessian's efforts to bring human dignity into the justice system.

Training Description

ARC, Inc.'s Mitigation Skill-building Training: Writing Stories for Change is tailored for attorneys and other defense team members and led by Dr. Jill Patterson, a national expert in narrative defense and English Professor at Texas Tech University. The program also features Q&A sessions with Dr. Elizabeth Vartkessian, an experienced mitigation specialist with a Ph.D. in Law, who will guide participants through legal and investigative challenges to improve clarity and persuasiveness in legal writing. Faculty will share excerpts from real criminal defense mitigation submissions to demonstrate key concepts.

Through plenary sessions and interactive, practice-based workshops, criminal defense practitioners will learn to compose compelling mitigation narratives for sentencing and advocacy. The training equips defenders with the skills to utilize evidence (such as life records, interviews, photos, etc.) and present their clients' stories in a way that is both legally relevant and persuasive to judges, juries, parole boards, and other decision-makers. Participants will develop narrative strategies that address key legal principles and case facts, ensuring their advocacy is legally sound and impactful to secure the most equitable outcomes for their clients.