

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT | SOCIAL SCIENCES

What's on Your Desk?

A look at the desk of Public Health Professor Joe Steensma

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On my desk is everything that really has ever mattered to me. Just students, family, nature. That's it.

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I believe the people who I mentor are really good people and I'm just there to help reflect the best of themselves back onto them.

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A couple years ago, I had a really serious injury and my students got me a care package, including that candle. It was just a beautiful reminder of how kind and nice people are.

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My brothers liked different football teams, but I wanted to be different so I became a Colts fan. I have all these helmets and different autographs, just a bunch of memorabilia from [the] Colts.

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What [these books] really represent is a life well lived and a determination to turn my fiction into a reality.

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Those books filled my life, they filled my dreams, they filled my aspirations. They filled all parts of my existence that were not things I could touch.

“A couple of them I wrote or edited: *Field Guide to Hot Spots and Birds of Illinois*, *A Guide to Finding Birds Along the Illinois River Flyway*, and *A Field Guide to the Birds of North Andros Island*. I actually have a few more books coming out, all on birds. One is *A Guide to Missouri Birds and Their Hotspots*, where I'm the author with my colleague, Colin Dobson; another is about biodiversity in Forest Park that I wrote with a students from WashU.

Before I was anything, I was a naturalist, and it's still a really big part of my life. There's sort of a reflection there with all those places I've been... I'm just a kid from a small town in Northern Indiana, and I hadn't been outside of four states until I was 22 years old.

But I had books, and some of these exact books were the books that I would read. I would see these creatures that were so exotic to me and I thought to myself: one day I'm going to see that bird, one day I want to see that frog, one day I want to see that snake.

Those books filled my life, they filled my dreams, they filled my aspirations, they filled all parts of my existence that were not things I could touch. In other words, as a poor kid from rural Indiana, these books represented places that were just as fictional in my mind as Narnia and Hogwarts.

I imagined the places that these books represented. But I couldn't picture them, there was no internet. So I had to

build these worlds of what Australia or Cuba looked like based upon the mammals and birds that were there.

So then, once I graduated from college, I got my first job and as soon as I was able to, I just got around the world as much as I could.

I just started ticking off those places. All these imaginary places I had built in my mind from these books were real and every single one was more magical and more spiritually deep than what I imagined.

I use them as references now to keep fresh with all my stuff, but what they really represent is, honestly, a life well lived and a determination to turn my fiction into a reality.”

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