Facing the strange. Few people are comfortable with change; some cannot tolerate a different menu at a favorite restaurant or a detour on the way to work. But change happens to everyone, like it or not, and at certain times in your life, you have to face the strange and make a new way.

Teresa Stores is a writer and collector of stories as well as an associate professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences. How she came to teach a course on life transitions called Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes (with apologies to David Bowie) makes an interesting story itself.

"I had gone to an event where President Walter Harrison and former President Humphrey Tonkin were announcing a new relationship between Duncaster [a retirement village in Bloomfield, Conn.] and the University of Hartford. As I was listening, I began thinking about a class where first-year students would interview some of the residents about life transitions and create oral histories. I later contacted Humphrey, and he set up a lunch with Janet Lamenzo, Duncaster’s director of resident services.

“During lunch Janet said, ’I have often thought that moving to Duncaster must be a lot like what freshmen go through when they leave home and start a new life at college.’ Suddenly I thought, ‘What an interesting idea.’”

First-year students in Stores’s fall-semester class examined two life stages: going off to college and moving into a retirement facility. The students collected oral histories by interviewing Duncaster residents who had recently moved in. They also compared the residents’ experiences with their own journals, in which they documented their adjustments as newly enrolled college students.

It proved to be a powerful analogy. Both groups were experiencing major life transitions involving similar changes—relocating from a home often lived in for many years; disconnecting from family, friends, pets, and possessions; learning to live in a collective environment with new rules and new routines; and making new friends.

Dana Eckstein ’13, preceptor for the course, added another dimension. Preceptors are advanced and academically gifted upperclass students who serve as mentors and role models, and aid beginning students in making the transition to the expectations of college-level academics. Eckstein, a cinema major, suggested borrowing video cameras from the cinema department to document the interviews.

For the first five weeks, Stores’s students wrote in their journals, read literature and theory about life phases, and learned how to be sensitive interviewers and how to operate the video equipment. In the second half of the course, they also spent one class period per week at Duncaster, where they were matched with six newly arrived Duncaster residents.

“This class wasn’t at all what I expected,” says Amanda Azzopardi ’15. “I had no idea we were going to meet amazing people, hear great stories, and learn so many lessons that a textbook could never teach. It truly helped me with my transition to college and taught me that in life we will go through many more transitions, but it’s all about what you take from [them]. I definitely would recommend this class to any dedicated freshman.”

Stores and Eckstein will present a paper and short film on the project at the 2012 International Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Conference in Barcelona, Spain, in June.
The Silver Bridge disaster is widely known in the area around Point Pleasant, W.V., a small town at the confluence of the Ohio and Kanawha rivers. The bridge, built in 1928, spanned the Ohio river, connecting Point Pleasant with Kanuga, Ohio. It collapsed during rush hour on Dec. 15, 1967, killing 46 people. Today, the Point Pleasant River Museum houses a large cache of photos and artifacts related to the tragedy. Sisters Ruth and Martha Fout run the museum and are coauthors of the book with Bullard and Gromek.

The project began when Gromek took Bullard’s science honors course, Disasters, in spring 2011. During the course students discussed how disasters happen as well as ways to prepare for and survive them. As a final project, Bullard directed students to select a disaster and make a presentation; the format of the project was left open to students’ creative discretion.

Gromek, now a joint major in chemistry and biology in the College of Arts and Sciences, became enamored with the Silver Bridge story after watching a television episode of Unsolved Mysteries. “I didn’t know what I was going to do at first, but I knew I definitely didn’t want to do a PowerPoint [presentation],” says Gromek. “One afternoon, I saw this story about Mothman, a large, winged creature reportedly seen in the area [see Editor’s Note below], which said that Mothman was one of the speculated reasons why this bridge in West Virginia collapsed in 1967.”

With her curiosity piqued, Gromek began researching the bridge collapse. She says she was shocked to see that there were so many theories to explain what happened—this despite findings from the Institute of Science and Technology that a defective eyebar in the suspension chain of the bridge had shattered, causing it to collapse.

Gromek decided she wanted to go to Point Pleasant and create a video about the tragedy. “When I told Professor Bullard I didn’t have the money to go down to West Virginia, he encouraged me to try to get a grant, and I did, from Hillyer College,” says Gromek.

Gromek went to Point Pleasant and began shooting a documentary to show how the community is still very much affected by the tragedy. As soon as she arrived in the small town, she says, she was immediately welcomed.

“Everyone was so nice and willing to talk. It was like the disaster was still very new and real in their minds.”

After Gromek collected all the data and interviewed survivors and townspeople, she reported back to Bullard, who then also visited Point Pleasant and the museum. It was at that point that student and professor decided to collaborate on a book, using the resources of the museum and the townspeople to tell the story of the devastating 1967 event.

“A lot of people don’t know about Silver Bridge, and this book will serve as a tribute to the victims. We also hope to explain what really happened the day the bridge collapsed,” says Bullard.

Bullard and Gromek hope the book, being released by Arcadia Publishing, will be available for the 45th anniversary of the bridge collapse in December 2012.

**Mothman Didn’t Do It**

Professor and student set out to solve a mystery

by Caitlin Terry ’10, M’12

Mention the 1967 Silver Bridge tragedy in West Virginia to anyone on the University of Hartford campus, and the response will probably be a quizzical look. But Stephan Bullard, an associate professor in Hillyer College, and Bridget Gromek ’13, who took a course from Bullard, are very familiar with the story—so familiar that they are writing a book about it.

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**EDITOR’S NOTE:** Witnesses in the Point Pleasant area reported sighting a large, winged creature with red eyes in 1966 and 1967. These accounts became the basis for a 1975 book, Mothman Prophesies, by John Keel, and a 2002 movie of the same title. A West Virginia University wildlife biologist has said that Mothman was probably a sandhill crane—a large, American bird almost as tall as a man with a seven-foot wingspan and reddish coloring around its eyes—that had veered off its usual migration route.