

Taking a 'Detour:' AU art professor hosts Pittsburgh TV show

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Before she returns to her teaching duties in the School of Art & Design at Alfred University next week, M. Michelle Illuminato is taking a "detour," as host of a Pittsburgh, PA, TV show, "Detour," which she says is "packed with interviews, favorite points of view, mostly true facts, slideshow, games and maybe even dancing." The show will be aired live at 11 p.m. Friday, Aug. 13, at the Waffle Shop, and will also be streamed at waffleshop.org. She and her "band of guides" will talk about "Pittsburgh's famous, nearly famous, and infamous" citizens, and what their homes look like from across the street. They will sift through what Illuminato calls "the largest collection of relics outside the Vatican." "There will be games, too, including "Identify This Spot and "I Know a Secret." While she's ending her summer break from teaching at Alfred University's School of Art & Design in Pittsburgh hosting a TV show, her summer began with a Wild Food Cook-Off she organized in Portland, OR, in May. Raised by a mother who was an excellent cook and with a brother who is a chef, it was natural for Illuminato to incorporate cooking and presenting food into her work, such as the Wild Food Cook-Off she organized as part of the Open Engagement conference in Portland, OR, in May 2010. Contestants were required to include at least one "foraged" food - something that grows naturally or wild - in the dishes they prepared for the event. "I rely on cultural icons - like cook-offs, something fun to bring people in" and begin the engagement, said Illuminato, who gathered ramps (wild leeks) from marshy hollows near Alfred to take with her to Portland for the event. While sampling dishes and comparing recipes was fun for the participants, there was a serious side as well, and Illuminato wanted to evoke conversations about that. For example, she said, there are "different headlines, all the time" about food processed by big corporations that has been found to be contaminated or unsafe. "Food is talked about and thought about so much" in a nation that loves to eat, said Illuminato. But the serious side of food as a resource, as a factor in overall health, is not weighed critically. Through her work, Illuminato wants to whet the public's appetite for art as a medium for social activism and change. "All of my work relates to social practice," explained Illuminato, an assistant professor in the Foundations program in the School of Art & Design at Alfred University. Her current work involves creating events that encourage people to "exchange dialogue, to open up."