

The magazine of the Columbia Spectator
31 March 2011 / vol. 10 issue 8

the eye

IS TEACHERS COLLEGE DOING ITS JOB?

a new push to prove its worth in harlem

by Sam Levin



Editor in Chief
Amanda Cormier

Managing Editor
Ashton Cooper

Art Director
Cindy Pan

Deputy Editor, Features
Tala Akhavan

Deputy Editor, Lead Story
Jennifer Fearon

Deputy Editor, Online Content
Frances Corry

Senior Design Editor
Cathi Choi

Visuals Editor
Anthony Clay

Eyesites Editor
Margaret Boykin

View From Here Editor
Julia Miller

Interview Editor
Liana Gergely

Features Associates
Nicollette Barsamian
Jon Edelman
Meredith Foster
Molly Speacht
Emma Stein

Multimedia Associate
Paul Hsiao

Business Deputy
Steven Cook

Visuals Staff
Thuto Somo
Kay Lodge
Tristan Gondek-Brown
Matteo Malinverno

Production Staff
Megan Baker
Nathaniel Braffman

Copy Editors
Jess Geiger
Emily Handsman

Spectator Editor in Chief
Samuel Roth

Spectator Managing Editor
Michele Cleary

Spectator Publisher
Aditya Mukerjee

Find Us Online:
eye.columbiaspectator.com

follow us on Twitter:
[@TheEyeMag](https://twitter.com/TheEyeMag)

Contact Us:
eye@columbiaspectator.com
Editorial: (212) 854-9547
Advertising: (212) 854-9558

© 2011 The Eye,
Spectator Publishing Company, Inc.



IS TEACHERS COLLEGE DOING ITS JOB?

A new push to prove its worth in Harlem, pg. 07

by Sam Levin
photos by Zara Castany & Daphne Chen

CONTENTS

03 EYESITES

MUSIC

04 **It's Barbie, Bitch** Angela Ruggiero-Corliss

CULTURE

06 **Musical Genius** Meredith Foster

ART

12 **Inside the Ashram** Joseph Cassara

EYE TO EYE

14 **Institutional Critique** Julia Miller

VIEW FROM HERE

15 **Living Alone, Sort Of** Jon Edelman

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Everyone remembers That One Teacher.

For me it was Mr. Wenger—but we just called him Wenger. He was one of those teachers who, on the first day of class my freshman year of high school, said the word “shit” in the middle of a crazed, spitfire sentence about how important journalism really is. I loved him right away.

I stayed with Wenger for four more years. I don't exactly remember any particular lesson learned in his classes, or during the thousands of hours I spent in the newsroom. What I do know, though, is that he taught me how to be everything that I now value about myself.

You've heard the story before: I walked into his Journalism I class on that first day of school a sweaty, chubby kid who used to read elementary school but had since, like countless others, stopped when I started hanging with a group of Mean Girls. I walked out of his classroom four years later a competent and intelligent adult—with confidence and drive to spare.

Despite the number of

inspirational teacher movies I've seen, I'm still surprised when I think about how only one teacher changed my entire life's trajectory. Wenger didn't attend Teachers College—I'm not even completely sure he has a masters. Not that it matters: he had, and still has, the only thing any great teacher needs: the ability to see something in a student that she can't see in herself.

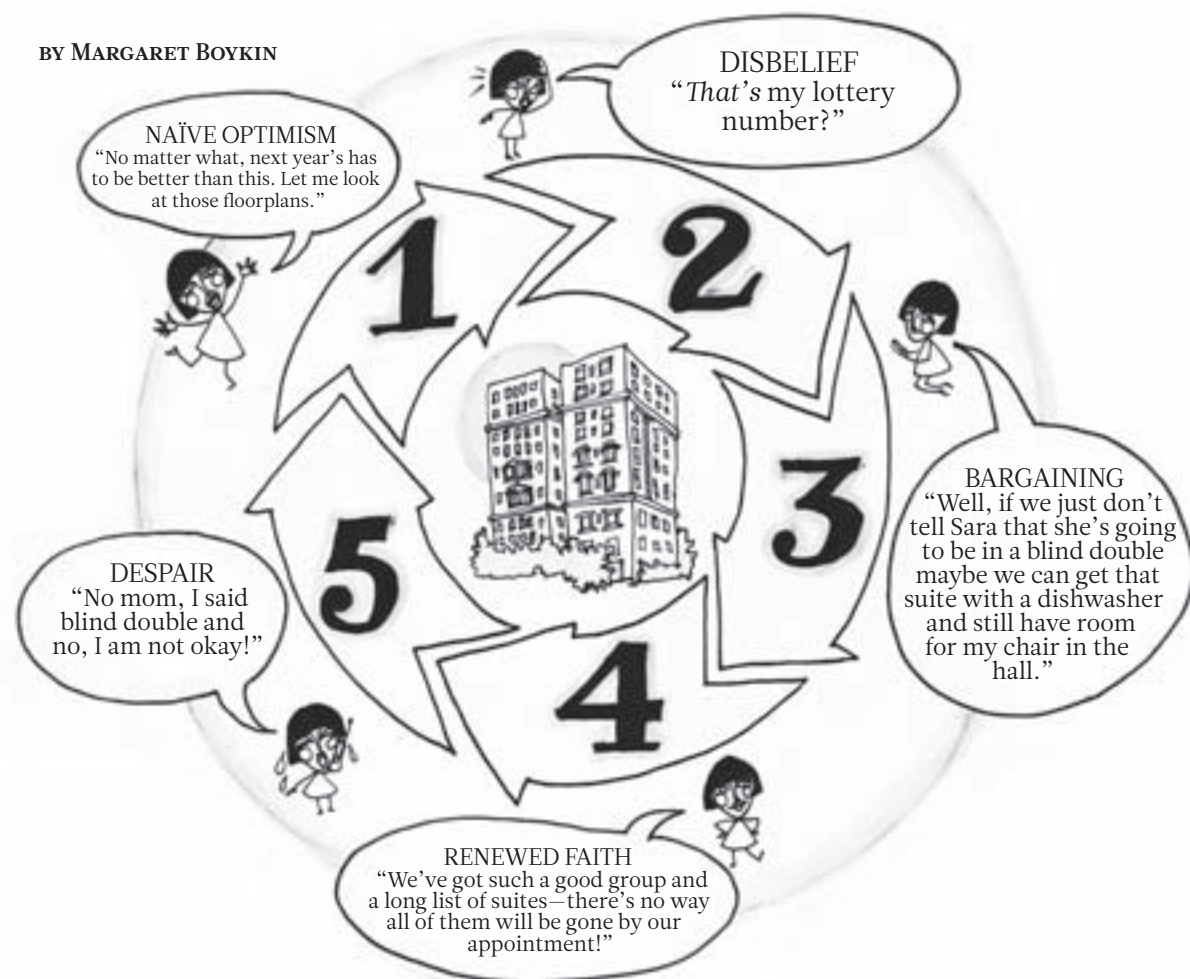
Teachers College, in its efforts to produce an army of *those* teachers, is at somewhat of a crossroads. Columbia's unique location and expansion into West Harlem present TC with challenges—separate from the already difficult task of producing passionate teachers—that fundamentally question its purpose at the University and in the community at large. We'll have to wait and see whether That One Teacher will be present in Harlem this fall, when TC's proposed demonstration elementary school is set to open.

Amanda Cormier
eye@columbiaspectator.com

CIRCLE OF LIFE

THE 5 STAGES OF HOUSING GRIEF

BY MARGARET BOYKIN



OUTSIDE THE GATES

FIVE INTERNATIONAL NEWS ITEMS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

BY RACHEL ROSEN

1 LIBYA
Much of the attention of the international community has been focused on Libya following military action led by British, French, and American forces. The strikes are a response to Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi's repeated attacks on his own people, and allied forces will seek to remove him from power. In his speech on Monday night, President Obama said the role of U.S. troops is "to protect the Libyan people from immediate danger, and to establish a no-fly zone."

2 JAPAN
The recent major earthquake and tsunami in Japan have caused a crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Experts are warning that the crisis is far from over, with 9,737 people confirmed dead, 16,423 reported missing, and a radiation leak in reactor No. 2 causing concerns of serious environmental contamination.

3 WAR CRIMES IN AFGHANISTAN
Graphic photos of American soldiers potentially committing war crimes against Afghan civilians were leaked on Sunday by a German organization, despite U.S. attempts to prevent their release. The U.S. army has issued a statement apologizing for the photos, saying that the actions they depict are "repugnant to us as human beings and contrary to the standards and values of the United States."

4 YEMEN
Consistent with the recent trend of anti-government action in the Arab world, Yemeni protestors are calling for the departure of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Despite the president's assertions that he would step down if he could be assured that power would be transferred to "safe hands", he has also stated that his departure is not necessarily imminent.

5 SYRIA
Violent political unrest is also occurring in Syria, with Amnesty International fearing that 55 have been killed in the city of Deraa alone. The Syrian government is promising limited reforms, but government spokespeople continue to blame outside forces for the majority of the unrest and violence.

MEMETASTIC

GOOGLE THESE

BY JOE GIRTON

What's in a meme? Think of a little graphic piece of cultural portraiture framed by a satirical chuckle-inducing quote, or a music video, or even a phrase. Here are some examples you might want to check out:

HIPSTER HARRIET TUBMAN

Representing the "hipster" category, this hero of the anti-slavery movement gets all Williamsburg with some thick-rimmed specs and modern sass. Google "Hipster Kitty" or "Hipster Ariel" for more lolz.

REBECCA BLACK

We've all heard of the 13-year-old... I don't even know what other labels to apply. Icon? Laughingstock? Regardless, she and her single, "Friday," are ridiculously entertaining—there's an endless supply of memes poking fun at her "music video."

ROSA PARKS – FRIDAY

There are those that put current cultural references in the mouths of historical figures. Like, what if Rebecca Black met Rosa Parks? They'd have a lot to talk about, clearly. Which seat should she take?

EDGAR ALLAN POE – THAT'S SO RAVEN

This one comes from a corner of the meme-sphere that exploits the double-entendres we never think to laugh about normally. Disney Channel meets gothic poetry? Too good.

FUCK YEAH ART STUDENT OWL

A tongue-in-cheek meme blog by art students for art students featuring funny little thoughts on the trials of being a starving artist, all on the backdrop of a pretentious owl smoking a cigarette. This series is part of a larger category of self-satisfied, academically inclined animals—there's also an English Major Armadillo.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CINDY PAN

It's Barbie, Bitch.

is nicki minaj hip hop's new riot grrrl?

BY ANGELA RUGGIERO-CORLISS
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JIIN CHOI

"About a year and a half ago I heard this Usher track featuring a female hip hop artist that I had never heard before," sociocultural anthropology major, Lizzie Americo, a senior in CC, says. "I immediately was attracted to both the tone of her voice and the content of her lyrics. She was just so bold and vulgar, but in an empowering way."

At this point, everyone with some pop-cultural literacy knows who Americo is talking about—the pink-wigged outspoken rap sensation, Nicki Minaj. It's hard not to have heard of the 26-year-old Queens native—or more likely, to have come face-to-face with her brightly-wigged, wild-eyed maniacally grinning image. Minaj exploded into mainstream cultural consciousness in 2009 after she had been scouted by Lil Wayne and had already appeared on several mixtapes. She received six awards at the 2010 BET awards before her first album, *Pink Friday*, debuted in November of last year. Among other achievements, Minaj is currently the only artist to have seven songs on the Billboard Top 100 at the same time.

Of course, in an age where Justin Bieber and *High School Musical* top the charts, sales figures beg a grain of salt. Still, Minaj seems to resonate on the ground level as well. She's fetishized, emulated, tweeted at and "liked" by her fans, impersonated for Halloween, and even discussed in the classroom. It seems that Minaj is doing something new—or at least attempting to. Minaj's self-consciously calculated public identity raises issues about femininity and sexuality with a kind of manic playfulness that transgresses social norms and raises questions that few other mainstream figures address.

Minaj's relentless self-promotion, already par for the course in the hip-hop world, is substantiated by the fact that she is something of a phenomenon. As the first female rapper to top charts since Lil Kim in 2002, Minaj is the latest member in a long but sparse line of hip-hop's reigning queens. With only Missy Elliott, Lil Kim, and Eve as recent contemporaries, Minaj has inherited a rapt audience and the opportunity for innovation—provided she can defend her spot at the top.

Though dynamics between male hip-hop artists are frequently ego-fueled and competitive, there exists a certain degree of camaraderie, and certainly enough room for a multiplicity of personae and styles. Not so for female rappers. One of the most significant roadblocks for any progressive feminist politics in the rap world is that it seems that there can only be one queen. Minaj has started beef with Lil Kim, even naming her album, *Pink Friday*, as a play on Kim's, *Black Friday*, and devotes a good deal of her lyrics to defending her precarious position of prestige by putting down competitors.



SOME HAVE POINTED OUT THAT BY BEING UPFRONT ABOUT SEX, PLEASURE, AND POWER, MINAJ IS A ROLE MODEL FOR THE SEXUALLY EMPOWERED 21ST CENTURY WOMAN.

Compare this to feminist rapper YoYo's 1992 song "Black Pearl," where the feminist rapper talks about sisterhood, singing "Black Pearl, Precious little girl, let me lift you up where you belong." Minaj is famous, of course, while YoYo is relatively obscure. While lesser-known female hip-hop artists such as Psalm One and Jean Grae have achieved acclaim and success in the underground with girl-positive lyrics, sisterhood doesn't sell like machismo does.

Since before Simone de Beauvoir, feminists have promoted raising female consciousness, claiming that competition between girls for male approval reasserts patriarchal norms and divides women amongst themselves unnecessarily. In her interviews, Minaj encourages other girls, but her lyrics complicate this message of girl-power. In "Itty Bittyitty," one of the tracks on her 2009 Young

Money mixtape, *Beam Me Up Scotty*, Minaj raps, "I think I'll have a rap bitch for my entrée," and finishes with an exclamation of victory: "It's like I just single-handedly annihilated every rap bitch in the building." From a feminist perspective, Minaj is acceptable for mainstream consumption because her aspirations and successes correspond to male-defined standards. She appropriates culturally constructed standards of masculinity in order to prove her position as "one of the boys," while maintaining her desirability for a male audience.

Still, Minaj's stylistic and lyrical choices deserve analysis in of themselves. Some have pointed out that by being upfront about sex, pleasure, and power, Minaj is a role model for the sexually empowered 21st century woman. Americo even decided to write a final anthropology paper last semester on Minaj and sexuality. "[Minaj is] owning her sexuality as a female and voicing female sexual desire in a really honest way that in the past in hip hop was usually only reserved for men," Americo says.

And then there are her personalities. Eminem, Jay-Z, and many other hip-hop stars have "alter ego" personalities that allow them to transgress boundaries or express alternative characteristics, styles, and opinions. Whereas in these cases, the alter ego acts as a foil, ultimately reinforcing the primacy of the rapper's "true" personality, Minaj's alter egos take center stage.

"She has all these different personalities...that are different genders and sexual orientations,"

Americo says, referring to these as “different characters that she is playing.” The performativity is evident here, but Minaj’s individual selves, which include “Nicki the Harajuku Barbie,” “Nicki Lewinsky,” “Nicki the Ninja,” and even “Roman Zolanski,” are harder to parse, and don’t really point to a consistent ideology. To compare oneself to Monica Lewinsky is to make a strong comment on sexuality, power, and agency, but is Minaj appropriating and empowering the idea of “intern-who-fucks-the-president,” or just playing into the patriarchal dynamic it refers to? And what about Roman Zolanski, Nicki’s “twin sister,” whom she describes as a viciously catty gay man? Hearing “Roman” rap about “kicking that ho” alongside Eminem’s “Slim Shady” is an expression of self that is wrought with contradiction. What Nicki’s myriad of selves mean is less important, though, than what they do.

“NICKI MINAJ EMBODIES THIS IDEA OF GENDER AS DRAG BECAUSE SHE IS ARGUABLY A DRAG QUEEN.”

In her paper, Americo analyzes Minaj’s image through the theoretical work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, and indeed, Minaj seems to be a poster-child for their post-structuralist theories of gender. “The sexed body is not what determines gender,” Americo says. “Rather, how you behave, how society expects you behave, and how your actions create gender.” Americo likens gender performance to drag, explaining, “Drag is one of the easiest ways to illustrate the performativity of gender, because one is able to express a specific gender, regardless of their sex.” Further, she claims, “Nicki Minaj embodies this idea of gender as drag because she is arguably a drag queen ... her hair, ass, boobs, eyelashes, nails are all fake, so she is, in a sense, rejecting her sexed body. She’s exaggerating her body to make it more “feminine,” or this idealized version of femininity that in reality doesn’t even really exist in natural form.”

Minaj’s work recalls an earlier feminist music movement. In the early 1990s, a movement formed out of the Olympia, Wash., hardcore scene that called itself “riot grrrl”—the most self-consciously feminist music movement thus far. Led by Bikini Kill, it sang about feminism, girl-solidarity, spoke out against corporate oppression, denounced rape, and embraced sex. In “Sugar,” a song off their self-titled album, Bikini Kill’s lead singer, Kathleen Hanna, sings about sex in a high-pitched, girly-girly voice, switching to a full, much more “empowered” shout for the chorus, and then back again. In doing so, Hanna calls attention to the gender performance inherent in everyday expression, and claims her individual freedom to move between registers. Similarly, Minaj’s schizoid shifting from bubbly valley girl accents to deranged raving, all in one verse, is an acknowledgement of the inherent performativity of social roles and a “fuck you” to anyone who believes they should stay rigid. Perhaps more transgression occurs in

Minaj’s tone of voice than in the over-calculated statements made by her appearances and public statements. Minaj is but one of many famous females who have called attention to the artifice of culturally constructed femininity. Lady Gaga jumps out as a recent representation. Katy Perry and others mimic the trend, which pop culture blog, Hipster Runoff, has coined “slutwave,” sporting colored wigs, unitards, but rarely pants, treading the thin line between embodying standards to an extreme and subverting the system from which they derive.

Elizabeth Bernstein, a Barnard sociology professor who teaches courses including, “The Sociology of Gender” and “Feminist Texts,” likens this phenomenon to the work of Orlan, a French performance artist who, in the early to mid-nineties, received several plastic surgery procedures on her face to make herself look like an amalgamation of women, as depicted by male artists. Her “self-improvement” included assuming the Mona Lisa’s forehead and the chin of Botticelli’s Venus—in front of a live audience. “It was a great intervention,” Bernstein says, “but maybe it would be even more radical if instead of making herself look like an icon of beauty she did something like really wild like put eyebrows on her cheeks or just did something that also disturbed codes of beauty as well... that was actually physically jarring and physically arresting. What would the politics of that be?”

In other words, are Minaj, Gaga, and their cohorts putting proverbial eyebrows on their chins? And should they too be considered feminist? Though some, particularly Gaga, turn to the grotesque and disturbing for inspiration, they still perform their gender largely in accordance with norms and with an eye for what is “desirable.” But if they cannot be considered a feminist intervention, what are they? And what effect is it having?

Bernstein identifies domestic work, care work, wage inequality, militarism, and war as key feminist issues of today. “Probably all pertinent political issues are feminist issues in my mind,” she says. Fittingly, she sees little potential for feminist intervention in the mainstream media. “Mass culture is produced by global capitalists,” she says, “and it’s going to be hard to have a critique of global capitalism from the inside. I suppose you could, but it’s unlikely.”

Minaj herself admits her own fakeness, and its function in the contemporary global capitalist mainstream media. Rapping in Kanye West’s “Monster,” Minaj impersonates valley-girl haters who call attention to her plasticity: “Forget Barbie, fuck Nicki, she’s fake” and retorts angrily with: “and if I’m fake I don’t notice cause my money ain’t.” Gaga called attention to the magic and perversity of mass culture and celebrity in *The Fame* and *The Fame Monster*, and Minaj seems to be doing something similar, maybe with a stronger emphasis on the commodification of femininity and sex appeal.

Perhaps the term “feminism” is archaic for this subject matter. There are some who question the relevance of the term “feminism” to today’s society and its problems, and much of recent women’s and gender theory does not align so neatly with the term’s implications—or at least with what it has implied in the past. Still, artists such as Minaj can use their edginess to push boundaries. “Who

amongst us can ever fully escape the circuits and loops [of global capitalist media systems]?” Bernstein says. “At least something can be said for using the circuits and loops creatively.”

Still, if the scores of YouTube videos of young girls impersonating Minaj’s raps are any indicator, her brand of “feminism” has done some “consciousness raising,” and maybe even spread some empowerment. And although Minaj’s gender politics are convoluted at best, the popularity of her campy, drag-like performance of gender opens up possibilities for more transgression in the future—even within the mainstream. ●



Musical Genius

a look at the columbia–juilliard exchange

BY MEREDITH FOSTER

ILLUSTRATION BY CINDY PAN

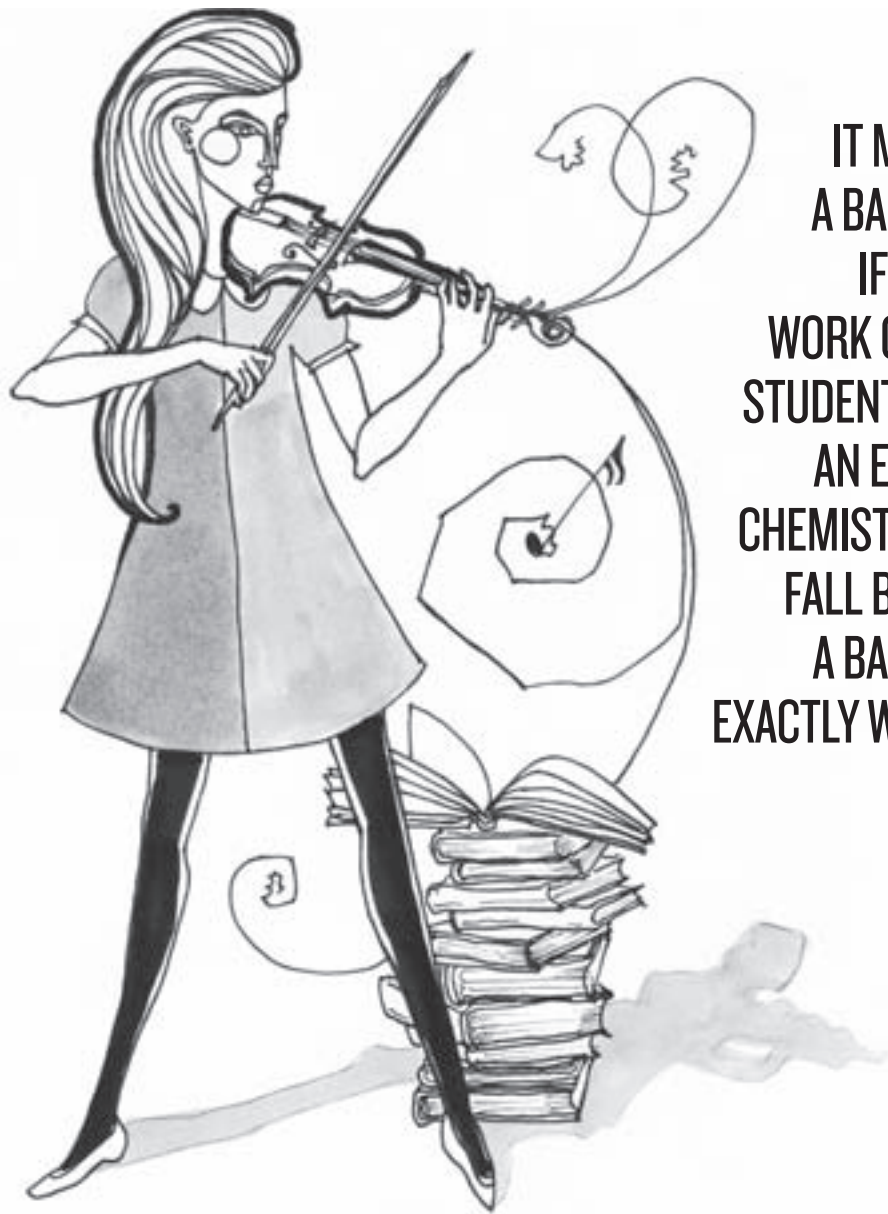
Getting into a top college is difficult, but getting into a top music school is almost impossible. In 2010, The Juilliard School boasted an acceptance rate of 8 percent, while the Curtis Institute of Music accepted only 5 percent of applicants, making it the most competitive school in the country. The merciless acceptance rates of top music schools are indicative of the competition present in the music world at large: Musicians can practice their entire lives without ever having a chance at playing with a top tier orchestra such as the New York Philharmonic.

With this in mind, it makes sense that Columbia and Juilliard have teamed up to design the Columbia–Juilliard Exchange, where students can take music classes at Juilliard while simultaneously getting a degree from Columbia. It may seem like a back-up plan—if music didn’t work out, then the student would have an economics or chemistry degree to fall back on—but a back-up plan is exactly what it is not.

Tavi Ungerleider, a junior in CC, said that his reason for applying to the Columbia–Juilliard Exchange rather than just Juilliard was to be able to take more than one class at Columbia each semester. “I didn’t just want to do music, that is for sure,” he says. “I wanted to do what I did in high school; I could take classes and do the cello stuff primarily on my own.” Ungerleider’s list of accomplishments range from performing in Carnegie Hall, Symphony Hall, and international venues, to playing alongside Grammy Award-winner Béla Fleck, while also appearing multiple times on NPR. Ungerleider is also a full time student in CC majoring in statistics.

Michelle Ross, CC ’10, was in the exchange and is now pursuing a master’s at Juilliard. “For me, it was amazing because I could really get the best of both worlds,” she says. “I am a very serious musician and I have always wanted music to be my career, but I really believe on a deep level always challenge yourself at every level as an artist.” Ross graduated with a degree in English and comparative literature. At Juilliard, Ross plays violin and is an active composer. Recently, the New York Arts Ensemble named her Emerging Composer.

Such a list of accomplishments is not uncommon in the program. Eric Silberger, a senior in CC, will compete in the Michael Hill International Violin Competition in New Zealand only a week before he flies to Russia to perform as one of 27 violinists who have been chosen to compete in the International Tchaikovsky Competition. At the same time, Silberger is pursuing a



**IT MAY SEEM LIKE
A BACK-UP PLAN—
IF MUSIC DIDN'T
WORK OUT, THEN THE
STUDENT WOULD HAVE
AN ECONOMICS OR
CHEMISTRY DEGREE TO
FALL BACK ON—BUT
A BACK-UP PLAN IS
EXACTLY WHAT IT IS NOT.**

major in political science from the College.

Ross said that having a degree in English has helped her tremendously in her musicianship and compositions. “It completely enriched my musicianship,” she says. “Everything that I write, I am drawing from different genres. Right now I am collaborating with my English background. It’s just the way I like to look at things.”

While these students are doing it all and doing it successfully, it does come with a price. “I practice three or four hours,” Ungerleider says. “Freshman year, I practiced five hours a day. I didn’t feel like I was good enough so I tried to practice as much as possible. I went to Juilliard to practice and I was there five hours every day.”

He says that entering the program requires a sacrifice not usually made by undergrads. “I don’t like to make sacrifices, but you have to,” he says. “If you have midterms one week and

you keep practicing five hours a day, you aren’t going to know your stuff. Right before midterm week, all the students will stop practicing, but you just have to do it. Otherwise, you won’t get your school work done.”

Ross feels similarly about the program. “It was the hardest thing in the world,” she says. “Every aspect of it was challenging and overwhelming, but you sort of have to love that rhythm and if you do and you let it inspire, you get so much from it. I think it’s a gift that I was able to do that.”

Ross doesn’t see her degree from Columbia as a backup plan. “I got a degree in English,” she laughs. “Some of my musician friends say, ‘Oh, you have a degree from Columbia,’ but it’s just a degree. It’s not going to change your life; it’s not a career. If I quit music, I would still have to start from scratch. It was purely because I was searching for knowledge like everyone else in undergrad.” ●



IS TEACHERS COLLEGE DOING ITS JOB?

Students in a 7th grade class at Columbia Secondary School participate in a TC-produced curriculum focused on argumentation.

a new push to prove its worth in harlem

by Sam Levin

photos by Zara Castany and Daphne Chen

On a recent Thursday in a noisy hallway of P.S. 36 on Morningside Drive, Arian, 8 years old, sits reading a newsletter about himself. He looks at different articles that tell stories of his life: “A fun-filled weekend,” “The first PlayStation,” and “Sometimes we get sick.” The newsletter, “Arian Speaks,” is filled with colorful cartoons and stories—all about Arian.

Ada Ukonu, a master’s student from Teachers College sitting with Arian outside his classroom, asks him to talk about his day, and they begin the interview for the next installment of his newsletter.

“We went to Safety City,” the third grader says, speaking quickly and energetically about a recent class field trip, focused on traffic safety. Ukonu diligently transcribes. “Before you cross the street, you look three times to the left and three times to the right,” he says.

For half an hour every day of the week, for the entire school year, Arian meets with Ukonu to improve his reading and writing. Their sessions are part of the Teachers College Reading & Math Buddies Program, which brings TC students into several Harlem schools to work one-on-one with the lowest performing students. The Buddies tailor each meeting to the individual needs of their students.

“Arian’s my most talkative,” Ukonu says on the short walk back from the public school on 123rd Street to the Teachers College campus two blocks south. “He tells really elaborate stories. But he can’t always read and write what

he says.” So Ukonu, a clinical psychology student at TC, frequently has Arian tell her stories, which she writes out in newspaper form and presents to him in their sessions.

The Reading Buddies program—which this year serves 100 students in three neighborhood schools—is one of several TC efforts to directly improve the educational outcomes of neighborhood children. But it’s different than many TC efforts in Harlem in one key way: It’s not about research or academic coursework. It is really an intensive tutoring program solely for the participating students in neighborhood schools, who are at risk of falling far behind their peers.

The program fits into a large and complex mosaic of activities that brings this Ivy League institution into struggling neighborhood schools. Teachers College at Columbia is one of the most highly regarded institutions of education in the world—in the *U.S. News & World Report*, it has topped the “Best Education School” rankings—yet it is surrounded by some of the toughest public schools in the nation. In the current education climate, with the rise of programs like Teach For America and intensifying criticisms of educational schools, TC is facing increasing pressures to prove its relevance and its worth, professors say. In this context, many education experts, inside and outside TC, are questioning whether the school’s leadership is doing enough to improve public education in Harlem.

Several large efforts signal a renewed prioritization of community outreach, under the leadership of Susan

Fuhrman, TC president since 2005. She established a new Office of School and Community Partnerships in 2007. The administration is also in the process of opening a TC-affiliated public school in the neighborhood this coming fall. Though Teachers College was originally founded with the direct mission of improving educational outcomes in its neighborhood, many within TC recognize that local engagement has not been a central goal for a long time, and argue that a lot more can and should be done.

To many, it is clear that there is now a concerted institutional effort to deepen TC’s local impact, as schools of education across the country face deep scrutiny. Perhaps the boldest component of this effort is the new TC-affiliated public school. But the project has already received criticisms from some education advocates in Harlem and even TC funders who say they are skeptical of the way the school will select students and are generally frustrated by a lack of information months before the school’s supposed opening.

The question of TC’s local responsibility is not isolated from larger questions about its mission and effectiveness, as critics question whether education schools are actually improving education and have the evidence to prove it. The bottom line, for some, is this: If TC can’t make a difference in its own backyard, then why does it even exist?

Perhaps this explains the new push to forge ties locally. “One could not point to Teachers College as an exemplar of an urban institution living up to its local commitment,” Edmund Gordon, founder and director emeritus of TC’s

Institute for Urban and Minority Education, says. IUME is aimed at addressing challenges of urban education through research and direct service. “But you could point to TC as a place that at least understands the issue and has made a verbal commitment,” he says. Gordon established IUME right in Harlem, near 125th Street, in hopes of creating energy around community engagement, but it has not picked up a lot of speed yet, he says.

Programs like the Reading & Math Buddies are also designed to help bridge this gap. Alexander “Sandy” Pope—who works with third graders typically at kindergarten reading levels—says the program offers an important intervention: “The chances of the teachers in a normal classroom environment being able to get you caught up three years—it’s almost impossible.” He adds, “We’re not only helping that one student improve academically, we’re demonstrating ... that these aren’t students who are incapable of learning—these are just students who haven’t had the proper opportunities.”

Still, some are questioning the sincerity of TC’s institutional commitment, recognizing that it must be essential to TC’s operations. Says education professor James Borland, “We would be blind in every sense, including morally blind, to think that we exist in an ivory tower. ... This is our home. We have an obligation to the place where we live.”

At best, TC’s relationship with Harlem is a positive work in progress. “Well, I think we’re off to a good start,” P.S. 36 principal Cynthia Mullins-Simmons says when asked about the relationship between her school and Teachers College. “I would just like for it to continue—Columbia has so much to offer. And let’s be realistic here: We are two and a half blocks away.”

Boiling Point: A Crisis in Teacher Education

If it were up to Teachers College professor of sociology Peter Cookson, the institution would undergo a massive transformation. Cookson teaches part-time at TC and also runs his own educational consulting firm—Ideas without Borders. On his desk sits a pile of photocopied excerpts from his book *Sacred Trust: A Children’s Educational Bill of Rights*.

“Universities have a great deal to learn ... [about] what it takes to make a really successful 21st-century classroom,” he says. Though he says he’s somewhat removed from TC now, he thinks that a substantial rethinking of the institution might be productive.

“The problem with the university is professors get rewarded for the books they write and the grants they get,” he says. “Practical work is not recognized in the academy.” This is a structural limitation that makes it very difficult for TC to be a genuine community-based organization, he argues. Cookson says he likes the idea of Teachers College functioning similarly to a medical school, where students preparing to work in schools would get really intensive, well-structured training, in the toughest schools that matter most.

In practice, TC tries to be both a professional and graduate school. For some, that’s the magic of TC, while others see it as a sign of the school’s irrelevance in a field that needs major reform and stronger evidence of its actual impact.

Gordon, founder of TC’s IUME, says that the problem of the ivory tower can be real: “One of the roles of the institution is the conservation of knowledge, and I think a lot of us take that too seriously. ... We have to then move out and apply it.” Lucy Calkins, founder of the Teachers College Reading & Writing Project, which is widely-used throughout city schools, says TC’s obligations are broader than just improving local public

schools, which can create ongoing challenges. “Their job is to educate people for the whole world—for the schools that are and the schools that some day may be.”

Outside of TC, critics are catching on, and a movement deeply critical of institutions of education is beginning to threaten and challenge TC to prove its worth. In 2009, in a speech at Teachers College, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said that the country’s education schools are doing a mediocre job actually preparing teachers, calling for revolutionary change. The *U.S. News & World Report* announced in January that it is planning to grade education colleges on an A through F scale, sparking protest from education colleges, including TC.

This national movement, coupled with the rise of programs like Teach For America—which value immediate hands-on experience in the toughest classrooms—has affiliates in the institution reassessing its mission and priorities.

“The whole profession of teacher training is in crisis today,” says TC professor of psychology and education, Deanna Kuhn. “All these questions are being raised about how we ought to be training teachers. I see TC and believe it should be, not a teacher training mill of any kind, but rather, a level above that. It should play a more reflective role in examining the questions and getting evidence on them.”

Others say the criticisms are somewhat misguided. Associate dean of teacher education A. Lin Goodwin says that there are inherent challenges in proving TC’s success. “The one thing that’s very difficult in education is to draw a direct relationship between an action, an input, like a degree program, and an outcome, like student learning, because there’s so many variables involved in that equation.”

Regardless, it is clear to some that the climate is right for TC, as an institution, to reflect on its mission and launch new efforts. And one major goal—the renewed focus on local engagement—could carry great opportunities for TC to prove its legitimacy. But with these new efforts—especially the new TC public school—comes great risk, some say. If efforts to improve educational outcomes fail to make a difference locally, then the school will have a glaring example of its irrelevance. Simply put, the stakes are high.

The Showdown

It’s Wednesday morning at 8:50 a.m., and there’s a lot of chatter in a seventh grade classroom of Columbia Secondary School—a selective math, science, and engineering public school on 123rd Street.

Today is a big day for these middle school students. They’ve been preparing for weeks for an in-class debate—part of an innovative TC-produced curriculum centered on argumentation, with hopes of encouraging students to take a more active role in their learning process.

The topic of debate? Abortion.

First up: Christabel versus Noa. The class oohs as the names are announced and the two students make their way to the front of the classroom.

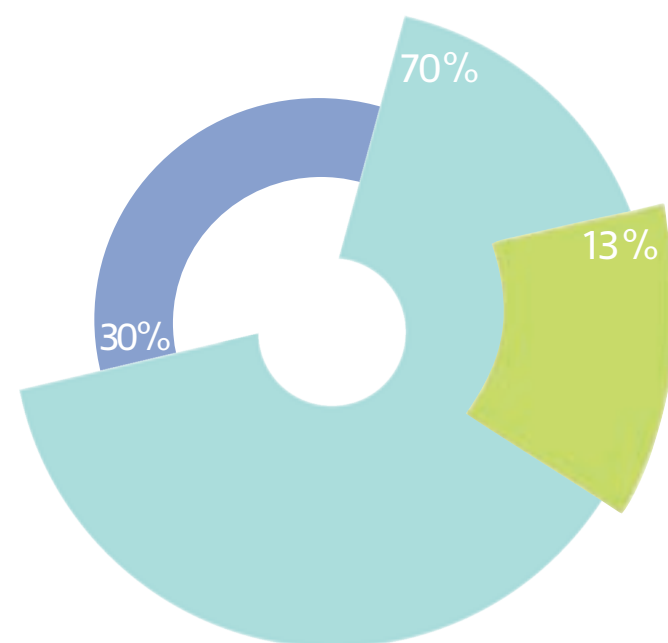
“We think we should stop abortion, because abortion creates a lot of pain to the person who’s getting it and to the child inside,” Christabel Barbosa, 12, begins.

“But how would stopping abortion help?” classmate Noa Hankin responds. “It would just create more pain, because more people would do it illegally.”

“But also, lots of teenagers use it as a birth control,” Christabel counters.

For the next 40 or so minutes, the loaded topic

BY THE NUMBERS TEACHERS COLLEGE:

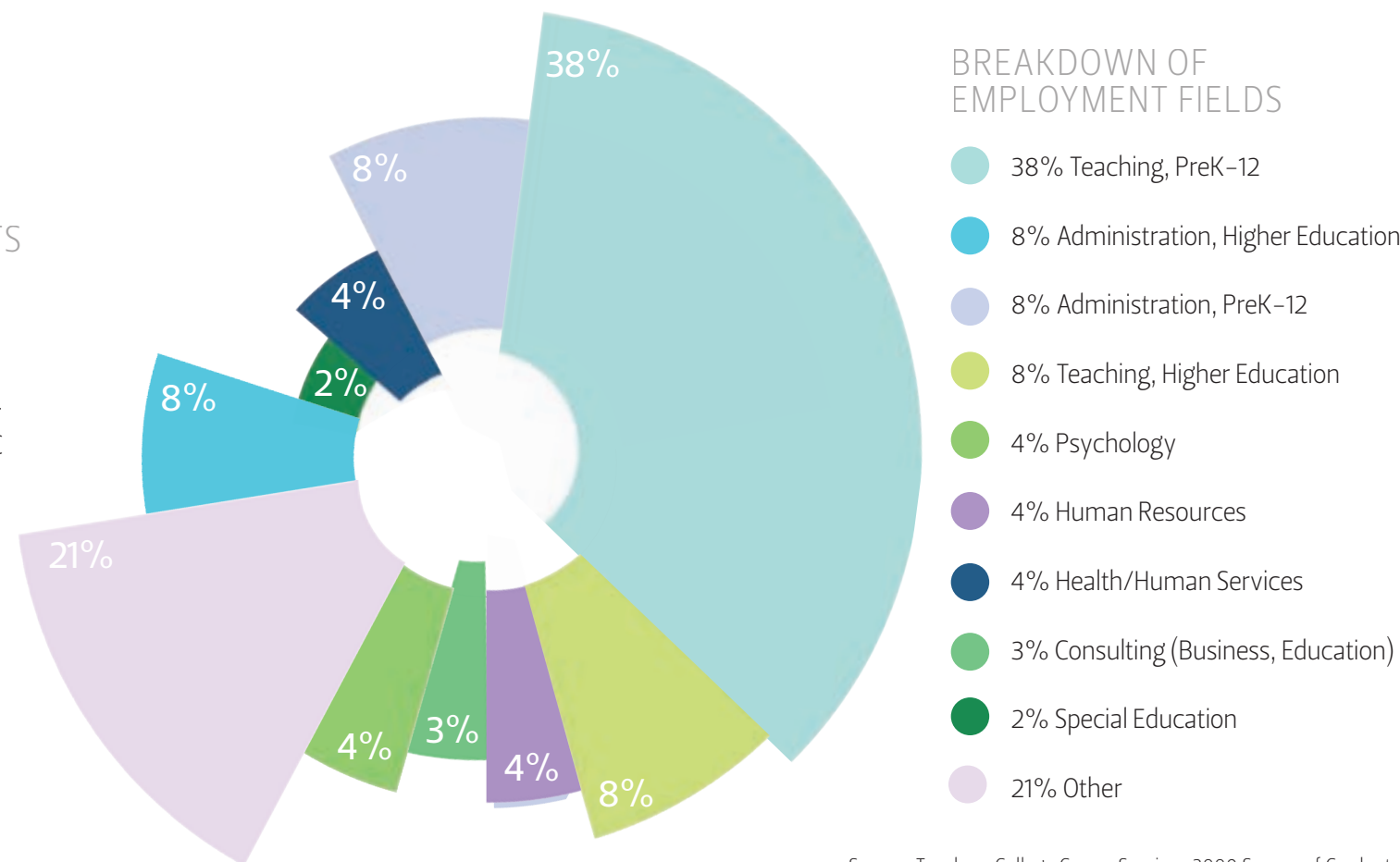


WHERE TC STUDENTS ARE TEACHING as of Fall 2010

70% of 471 TC student teachers are doing their student teaching in NYC public schools.

13% of 471 TC student teachers are doing student teaching in public schools in Harlem or Morningside Heights.

30% other



Source: Teachers College Career Services 2009 Survey of Graduates. The survey included responses from 60 percent of 2009 graduates.

foreign country being attacked by a neighbor—say the debate gives them relevant life skills.

“I used to argue with my brother, and I never used to see his side. I would always just be stuck on my side,” says Rosie Guzman, 11, a sixth grader from Washington Heights. “But now I’m starting to realize why he would get upset.”

Her classmate, Scarlet Herrera, 11, also says it helps her get rid of her nerves: “Everyone’s looking at you, and sometimes you can’t concentrate,” she says. “But it gets easier.” Guzman adds, “After arguing for about 20 seconds, you realize, ‘I know this well—I’ve studied it for so long.’”

Though successful, the curriculum may not be helping the neediest of Harlem students. Columbia Secondary School, a public school with a strong University partnership, is certainly diverse—recent enrollment figures show that 17 percent of students are black or African-American and 52 percent are Hispanic or Latino. Still, it’s a selective math, science, and engineering school to which students must apply. And many experts in the field recognize that the best education programs must help the toughest urban students in the toughest schools.

New Leadership, New Directions

Enter Nancy Streim.

Brought on by TC President Susan Fuhrman in 2007, Streim, heading the Office of School and Community Partnerships, is in many ways embodies Fuhrman’s stated commitment to enhancing the institution’s relationship with Harlem. The two worked together at the University of Pennsylvania, where Streim forged relationships with the Philadelphia school system.

The fact that the partnerships office at TC is so young seems to some alarming at first.

“When I met Nancy, I thought, ‘It’s crazy this is just



Columbia Secondary School students discuss the evidence and arguments they will use for their in-class debates.

happening at one of the oldest schools of education in the country,” Samantha Freeman, a project director with OSCP, says. “I can’t believe we didn’t have this office forever.” But, she says, she realized the office was formed to centralize programs and pre-existing commitments, and to create a broader platform to leverage partnerships.

Explains Dean Goodwin: “She’s [Fuhrman] made things more visible and concrete, and she’s made them more institutional. What Susan said is, ‘This institution is going to have structures in it that signal our priorities as a larger community.’” (President Fuhrman was traveling and unavailable for comment, according to a TC spokesperson).

Streim, talking to a group of funders at a recent dinner event on campus, says TC’s local commitment sets the institution apart from most others. “Universities are not only obliged, but are uniquely positioned to provide services ... that foster educational develop-

ment and human development, especially for children whose educational success can be compromised by conditions of poverty. We should be willing to hold ourselves accountable for the results of our efforts.”

She has a clear vision and, in a way, could be producing an answer to the naysayers who are now questioning the validity of education schools. In his introductory speech, TC Provost Thomas James praises Streim as the perfect link between research and application: “She has a mindset that has the depth and complexity of a faculty member, but she’s got the street smarts of a school reformer who can get out there and really work with people.”

For her part, Streim, in an interview the following day, says she doesn’t really see her work as a way to address any crisis in the field or for TC. The college’s academic and intellectual work is critical, whether or not TC is producing practitioners, she says. “Even if we were not preparing teachers, there would be a place for

Teachers College to contribute the big ideas.”

Still, she says her office and work is critically important to TC—which has not traditionally embraced community engagement as a core component. “What’s changed under this administration ... is a vision that says that new knowledge is valuable and important and it changes the field. If you can’t put it into practice in your own community, then we’re missing an important obligation.”

“WHAT’S CHANGED UNDER THIS ADMINISTRATION ... IS A VISION THAT SAYS THAT NEW KNOWLEDGE IS VALUABLE.”

Since her arrival to Harlem, Streim has set up a network of partnership schools as a resource for faculty and the foundation for a more sustained relationship. Several other programs bring TC students to Harlem schools directly, and vice versa.

One OSCP effort, the Harlem Ivy Program, partners TC with the After-School Corporation and the New York City Mission Society to bring creative science and engineering programs to local after-school sessions.

At P.S. 92 on 134th Street, TC graduate students run an after-school program that’s far more intensive than babysitting. On a recent Wednesday afternoon in the middle of an empty cafeteria, a group of four fifth grade students sift through Ziploc bags with hundreds of Lego-like pieces in them, searching for ones that match those on the screens of their personal MacBooks.

They are trying to build robots.

They quickly get flustered as they struggle to locate the matching parts and connect them. “It’s really hard to find the pieces,” says Ari Thompson, 10, fifth grader. “I get to build robots for the first time in my life,” she adds, when asked about her favorite part of the program.

Sitting next to her, Brian Bravo, 10, lets out a small shout of joy: “I did it!” Then, after scrolling down the instructions on his computer, he adds, “Oh. There’s another step.” Several TC grad students aid them in their project, which takes about an hour.

At the end of the after-school session, the students test out each robot—which carries sensors that detect objects and knock them away—on the floor of the cafeteria. Parent Sabrina Coppedge-Smith watches her daughter play with the robot, along with her 4-year old son, whom she lets join in the fun. “Even my little one is playing and enjoying it,” she says, adding, “It’s good for the brain. It makes them build critical thinking, it really does.” The concept of robot building as an effective teaching tool is simple. “Picture yourself as a 12-year-old with the ability to make these pieces move,” explains Dorothy Whyte from the Mission Society, one of the program partners.

The program is funded by a five-year grant to support 400 students, says Freeman, the TC project director of the Harlem Ivy 21st Century Community Learning Center. Despite challenges, Freeman says it has been a successful OSCP effort so far. “Columbia is not always seen as the friendliest neighbor in Harlem. We’ve spent a lot of time and effort in getting the partner schools to trust us and to understand we’re coming to help give them services.”

In another, more direct in-class program, TC graduate research assistant Darcy Ronan, through

OSCP’s GE grant, works with P.S. 36’s science teacher two blocks north of TC, assisting in curriculum development and classroom management. “It’s a ton of curriculum,” Ronan says on break on a recent Thursday, after assisting science teacher Chris Faulkner with his class on force and magnets. Ronan helps Faulkner parse through and administer the curriculum, and in the classroom, they work as a team.

“She told me we had to do measurements first,” Faulkner says of Ronan. “That was so valuable.”

For Ronan, being in the school is a treat. “This is a natural fit, being so close to Teachers College. Coming to grad school, ... the idea of not having kids in my life seemed very sad.” She adds, “Sometimes, you can get the ivory tower mentality and you forget the reality of the schools.”

Faulkner chimes in: “You get that in here.”

Taking Risks: Entering the Lottery

As students and professors continue to expand their neighborhood collaborations inside and outside of the Office of School and Community Partnerships, administrators behind the scenes are pushing forward with a new public school that is shaping up to be one of TC’s most important local efforts.

It is also the riskiest. Streim worked on a similar project at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia with the establishment of a university-assisted demonstration public K-8 school. According to TC officials, they are on track to open the neighborhood public school in the fall, finalizing details with the city’s Department of Education.

Still, until very recently, there was no public information available on the location, the principal, how to apply, and, even within the institution, some professors and students are surprised to hear that it is opening this fall. Outside of TC, in the local neighborhood, some say it seems nearly impossible for the school to actually open its doors in time.

“This is going to be our opportunity to bring together the incredible knowledge, talent, and resources all across the college,” Streim says to funders.

So what is actually known about the school? The goal is to establish a preK-8 school somewhere roughly between 122nd Street and 135th Street, from the Hudson River to around Saint Nicholas Avenue. To move forward with the approval process, TC recently signed a “Memorandum of Understanding” with the DOE, an important step in opening a new school. Earlier this month, Streim had no comment on the location, though this week, she said that the DOE has in fact proposed a co-location in P.S. 133—a public school in East Harlem, by 130th Street—to incubate the school in its first year. The school will start small and build up. Once at full capacity, the hope is that it will enroll around 500-600 students, Streim says, adding that discussions are continuing for a permanent space for the 2012-13 school year.

According to DOE spokesperson Jack Zarin-Rosenfeld, the approval to co-locate the new TC school for one year is scheduled for a vote by the Panel for Educational Policy at its April 28th meeting. If approved, the school will enroll two sections of kindergarten next year for 40-50 students, he said.

This week, Streim also revealed that Jeanene Worrell-Breeden, currently a principal in the South Bronx, will be heading the school. “This is every principal’s dream, to have the kind of resources and partnerships placed right at your building,” says Worrell-Breeden, who has been a principal in the city for over six years.

“I jumped at the opportunity.”

The new school is very deliberately not a charter school. It will be a regular district-managed public school with a strong affiliation with Teachers College. Though the details are not yet final, it will likely utilize a lottery system to select its students, by which families in the neighborhood can enter their children into a pool, from which students will be randomly selected.

Representatives from local Community Education Councils—groups that represent neighborhood parents and stakeholders and meet regularly to discuss school policy and instruction—say they have no information about the school and would be shocked to see it successfully open in the fall.

“It’s concerning, especially because the way they are going about this. Have they talked to the CECs?” says Noah Gotbaum, president of the CEC for District 3, which covers parts of the Upper West Side and Harlem. “Why wouldn’t they be in discussion with the community?”

Diane Johnson, Harlem’s District 5 CEC president, says earlier this month that it can’t possibly be opening in the fall. “Right now it’s not realistic, due to the fact that we haven’t received any kind of information on it.”

Pat Jones, former chair of Community Board 9—where TC held a few informational sessions last year about the school, says, “I’m not the least bit skeptical,” she says. “[TC is] committed to making this happen and making it happen well.”

Regardless of differing opinions, there’s a lot more at stake than the approval of local CECs. Though President Fuhrman brought the idea with her to TC, the concept of a school was crystallized, and possibly expedited, by Columbia University’s 17-acre campus expansion in West Harlem. The University, now pushing forward with construction, negotiated a Community Benefits Agreement with a local development corporation earlier in the process that promises numerous givebacks to the local Manhattanville neighborhood, including affordable housing commitments, new jobs, access to University facilities—and a public school.

Streim says the timing was just right: Fuhrman joined TC right as Columbia was moving forward with the CBA for its expansion. “It was just connecting the dots.”

THE NEW SCHOOL WILL THUS CARRY AT LEAST SOME OF THE BURDEN OF IMPROVING THE EVER-STRAINED COLUMBIA-HARLEM RELATIONSHIP.

The new school will thus carry at least some of the burden of improving the ever-strained Columbia-Harlem relationship. And TC professor of sociology and education Aaron Pallas says TC’s reputation also hangs in the balance. “Ed schools are struggling to maintain a sense of legitimacy. ... Having a school that would fail would be another thing that would be really bad for [the] College. In that sense, it’s a high-wire move to say we’re going to open a school, because the stakes are high if in fact it doesn’t work out well.” Worrell-Breeden, the school’s principal, says it’s only logical that TC—and other education programs—take this risk. “I think every teacher preparation program should be put on the mark. ... If you believe in this practice, where’s the school that shows you are doing this?”

The school is also getting off the ground at a time of great tension in Harlem, centered on the DOE's strong support for local charter schools, which are publicly operated, privately-run operations. Charters have private boards, often selected by lotteries, and, though they are still accountable to the DOE as public schools, they effectively operate outside of the system.

Charter school skepticism seems widespread within TC, and vocal critics in Harlem argue that these new schools take needed resources away from struggling schools and, through their lottery systems, don't end up supporting a representative local population. Those pushing charter schools argue that the traditional system has failed, and they are providing alternative, innovative choices to parents.

"The TC community school is very deliberately a regular district-managed, so to speak, public school, as opposed to a charter school," Streim says at the funders' event. "We had to fight pretty hard to get that agreement, because the Department of Education is so interested in innovations in the charter realm." Establishing a public school, she adds, gives TC the "ability to demonstrate that you can innovate in mainstream public schools, that you don't have to go around the system."

On a personal level, Worrell-Breeden, a Harlem resident since 1997, says she has seen firsthand the lack of innovative non-charter school options in the neighborhood. "I was very intrigued about having a public school option. ... I think there need to be options other than charters."

Zarin-Rosenfeld from the DOE says in response: "We're committed to offering a wide range of options for our families, and this administration has opened three traditional district schools for every one charter. This will be a community partnership school that will offer families of all backgrounds in District 5 a new option."

Still, to some, TC's effort seems to share a lot of the negative qualities of charter schools. Will it take resources away from struggling neighborhood schools? Will it get special treatment from the DOE because of its tie to Columbia?

"If you want to put a school in District 5, you need to come with your own building," Johnson from the D5 CEC says matter-of-factly.

Jimmie Brown, a grandmother of two students in Harlem's P.S. 76 and a member of the D3 CEC, says she's heard nothing about TC's school and is skeptical: "This is the thing that bothers me. I have no problem with them opening schools. But you are not helping the community you want to come into when you share space." (Officials from P.S. 133, the temporary site this fall, could not be reached for comment).

Streim, declining to offer specific details on any possible final location, says only, "It would be a preference not to impose on any school."

And it's not only local community members voicing concerns. A group of funders at the recent provost dinner expressed disappointment that TC and the DOE would likely be using a lottery for the school. Only children with parents actively searching for schools will enter, and the neediest kids will likely not have a shot, they charge, echoing a common criticism of charters.

"Are you going to randomly pick people eligible for this?" Tom Crowl, a TC graduate and guest at the dinner, asks Streim during a Q-and-A. "If you have people self-selecting, I'm concerned right there that this may not be representative, because more knowledgeable people will know about it."

Responding, Streim says, "It is incumbent on us to recruit, recruit, recruit, so that we can reach out across



TC researcher Ama Awotwi guides P.S. 76 kindergartner Mercedes Willis, 5, through a series of math exercises as part of a new software her research group is developing.

the entire community." Several funders subsequently speak up, voicing similar concerns over the lottery.

Streim, in a later interview, says she sympathizes with these arguments. "It's all expected," she says of backlash at the event, chuckling. "I really value and welcome the passion that lies behind people's questions. ... We're very, very sensitive to issues of reaching out broadly."

The problem, she explains, is that there isn't really any other option. Public schools can be zoned in a specific boundary so that every student in that boundary attends—but that, Streim says, could disrupt pre-existing schools and could also limit the school to just a few blocks, given the density of the city. William Stroud, TC's director of the partnership schools network, adds, "It's the responsibility on our part to make sure the pool of students in the lottery is reflective of the community at large—in a broader way than the charters."

And in response to concerns about a lack of information, Streim adds in an interview earlier this month that it's just too soon—despite the fact that they are slated to open in less than six months. "I wish we had more to tell them at this point. ... At this particular moment, there is no school, there is no lottery."

Diana Henry, who lives in Hamilton Heights and is looking for a school for her son, says it sometimes feels like she's trying to get her 4-year-old into college.

She goes to fairs and open houses, and has been all over the neighborhood looking for options. She hadn't heard of TC's community school. But she's interested.

"Having it in the community where there's a need for it, it's going to draw people. In the city of New York, when you hear something is associated with Teachers College and Columbia University, it's something you need to look into," she says. "The question is: How do I get in?"

Dual Identity

In a large school cafeteria at P.S. 76, Jordan Williams, a five-year-old kindergartner student, is taking a break from class with two TC researchers. On this recent Monday, he's practicing simple math with a work-in-progress computer program being developed by a TC research group.

"I want to count from zero to 100," he says out of nowhere.

"That would take awhile," responds Kara Carpenter, a TC research fellow with MathemAntics, a program of computer activities for teaching mathematics currently being designed as a curricular supplement.

Ligmie Preval, a grad student working on the project, reads from a script and guides Jordan through the interactive counting exercises on her laptop, taking careful notes of his actions and choices. With cartoon animals on screen, the software is supposed to help students develop different counting tactics. Ideally, it should respond to each student's individual performance, making it a useful tool for a classroom with a wide range of skill levels.

"Can we try a harder one?" Carpenter asks. After saying yes, Jordan goes off on a tangent about Transformers character Optimus Prime, happy to chat with the two TC researchers.

"Optimus Prime knows how to count numbers," Carpenter says to him.

"No! He fights crime," Jordan responds.

This work is part of a large project for a diverse group of Teachers College researchers and students. For Jordan, MathemAntics offers sporadic math help, playtime on a computer, individualized attention, and a break from the classroom.

"There are little teaching moments," Carpenter says. "How could a computer pick up that he's frustrated? You see some really amazing gains."

As TC pushes forward with new partnerships, direct school interventions, and its very own public school, perhaps many in the neighborhood identify the institution with this project. It is dual research and support—the intersection of TC's academic and practical worlds. It brings the Ivy League to Harlem.

Professors must operate in these two worlds, and it's not always easy. Malik Shabazz, another kindergartner testing out MathemAntics, staring at 16 animals on the screen, is unsure of where to begin. His mind wanders, and he fiddles with the mouse. "That was harder than I thought," he says.

But, at the end of the day, the answers lie inside the classrooms and in the Harlem neighborhood, says Gordon, IUME founder. And because of that, it can be an uphill battle for TC. "Most of the senior professors ... did not grow up thinking that their future and their academic status were tied to what was happening in the ghetto." ●



A cooking lesson during the Tuesday night class of the Columbia Bhakti Club

Inside the Ashram

cooking with the bhakti center in the east village

BY JOSEPH CASSARA
PHOTOS BY ANTHONY CLAY

The Bhakti Center of New York City is in East Village, within a three block radius of a funeral home, a nail salon, two housing projects, a cemetery, three gay bars, and a Jewish deli. Their ashram, or spiritual place of residence, is tucked away in a quiet five-story walk-up on First Avenue, above The Bhakti Cafe, a vegetarian and raw food luncheonette run by the center's practitioners. It is almost 10 a.m. when Dave buzzes me into the building.

As I walk up the stairs, I pass a framed print of a toddler Krishna with big eyes and slightly blue skin. I pass a water cooler. I pass an empty stroller on the fourth landing. I pass a twenty-something monk sitting on the steps, deep in prayer. As I take off my sneakers, hoping that the smell from my earlier cigarette isn't stuck to my jacket, Dave pops his head out of the kitchen doorway. There is something about the way he smiles, the way he moves, the enthusiastic manner in which he speaks that exudes what appears to be an authentic kind of happiness.

Enthusiasm is not necessarily a quality you find in a city of millions who try their hardest to avoid eye contact on the subway while purposely numbing their face to any kind of emotional expression. Isn't the archetypal New Yorker supposed to be clad in black, downing a double espresso while angrily marching to work? That is not the case with Dave. He appears to love everyone around him, truly and genuinely, and that is evident to even the hardest New York heart.

Dave welcomes me in and shows me the ashram, which is next to the kitchen. The devotees are on the floor of the bright yellow room, finishing up their breakfast and morning prayers. Like Dave, some are donning saffron-colored robes to designate the monastic life, while others simply wear white. Most have shaven heads. An iPod is plugged into a set of speakers just off the ashram, in the kitchen, playing one of many musical versions of the Hare Krishna chant.

An ashram is a spiritual place of residence perhaps best known to literary New Yorkers from the book-to-movie powerhouse *Eat, Pray, Love*. In the movie, Julia Roberts's character eats in Italy, prays in an ashram in India, and finds love in Bali.

In this case, the word 'ashram' can refer to the monastery building, or to the specific room within the building on the fifth floor. As the practitioners leave to go back to their rooms, one of the white-clad followers sweeps the ashram. It is similar to an all-purpose room: there are sleeping bags, a set of 10 lockers, a desk, multiple bookshelves containing hardcover volumes upon volumes of *Conversations With Srila Prabhupada* and tiny, soft cover pamphlets titled 'Meditación y Superconciencia,' various small pictures of Krishna, and three very large framed portraits of Prabhupada, the man who brought the Hare Krishna movement to The States in 1966. A man no older than 21 curls

"I LIKE TO THINK OF A POTATO AS A WHITE SHEET OF PAPER," HE SAYS WHILE GATHERING THE BLACK PEPPER, SALT, TURMERIC POWER, PAPRIKA AND OIL.

up in a sleeping bag on the floor. The man in white sweeps around the room, which noticeably lacks chairs, and then places the broom next to a multi-gallon tub of creamy peanut butter.

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY HE SMILES, THE WAY HE MOVES, THE ENTHUSIASTIC MANNER IN WHICH HE SPEAKS THAT EXUDES WHAT APPEARS TO BE AN AUTHENTIC KIND OF HAPPINESS.

Today, Dave is preparing food for Columbia's Bhakti Club, which meets in Lerner for a cooking class every Tuesday night. He pulls out a bottle of sunflower oil ordered from Bulgaria and tells me that we will be preparing rice, potatoes, fried plantains and a salad. "I like to think of a potato as a white sheet of paper," he says while gathering the black pepper, salt, tumeric powder, paprika and oil. "I've never heard of home fries, but someone once said these are like home fries."

If I did my math correctly, Dave is 26 years old. He is a California native, and was studying psychology in his second semester at UC Irvine when he "found [his] spiritual path" and joined a monastery in Laguna Beach. He lived there for three years before finally coming to New York. He has been here for five years. He explains to me that the food he's preparing is vegan because he wants to cater to all the dietary needs of Columbia students. But followers of Krishna do not necessarily believe in veganism because cows and humans have a symbiotic relationship. "If you take care of the cow," Dave says, "it will be happy to share its milk." He did add, however, that they disagree with the manner in which milk is extracted in the American dairy industry.

As Dave shreds carrots in the food processor, we are joined by a practitioner who calls himself Jagannath, which directly translates to "lord of the universe." He is around the same age as Dave, and wears white garb, a necklace of wooden beads, and Prada glasses. "The name is a little self-aggrandizing, but we let him get away with it," Dave says with a smile.

Jagannath is originally from Canada, and studied economics and philosophy at the University of British Columbia. As I slice the plantains, he tells me that he first found his spiritual path when his sister brought home a book by Prabhupada from the library. The librarian was going to throw it away but his sister took it home with her and gave it to him, and he says it answered a lot of questions he had about life that weren't answered by the Western philosophers he had been exposed to in school.

I empty out bags of triple-washed lettuce and pour them in three metal trays as Jagannath sings "Hare Krishna" to himself. As I mix in shredded carrots, apple chunks and raisins,

Dave tells me that Krishna is a god from Vedic literature who appears in different ways and forms. "An infinite variety of ways," he says. He is charming, he is beautiful, he is sweet, he is a great dancer, he plays the flute, he is loving, he has a great sense of humor. "We believe that when Muslims, Jews and Christians pray, we're all praying to the same person."

"Our job is to do good work in the world," Jagannath says, "and to please Krishna and help all his children."

When the salad is finished, Dave prepares dried chiles and cumin seed powder to add to the tomato sauce that will eventually be poured on the fried plantains. The boy who was napping in the ashram walks into the kitchen and Dave introduces me. His name is Peter, he is from Maine and has been here for a year. As I take notes in my notebook, Peter stares at me and, in a monotone, reminds me that I am very lucky to be here cooking with Dave. He then walks back into the ashram to retrieve his iPod.

As I stir the vat of tomato sauce, Dave adds in the chiles and the cumin powder, and I can feel my sinuses start to burn. He grinds coriander seeds and explains the meaning of 'bhakti.' It is the means of connecting through devotion. And I learn that there are many ways that such a connection can be made. Jagannath, for example, shares that he practices *bhakti* yoga to control his mind, to train it to always think of Krishna. With this connection in mind, as the food is finished cooking, a small portion of everything we made is prepared as an offering to Krishna. The idea is that before Columbia students can enjoy the food later that night, it must be presented to Krishna. In fact, everything that the monks cook is first shown to Krishna.

The devotees fill small silver bowls with food, place the silver bowls on a round, silver platter, and cover everything with a blue cloth so that Krishna can be the first person to fully see and appreciate the food-as-offering. I take an elevator down three floors with a man named Joey, who is in charge of placing the platter before Krishna. We enter the prayer room and Joey instructs me to stand in the middle of the room as he goes into a back room with the food. I notice that Peter is also in the room. He is pacing, looking at the floor, clutching prayer beads, rapidly chanting under his breath: *hare krishna hare krishna, krishna krishna hare hare, hare rama hare rama, rama rama hare hare*. The ceiling is painted like a blue sky with clouds. There is an altar with flowers and small dolls that takes up the entire width of the room. The Krishna doll is about a foot high, standing mid-dance while playing the flute in the center of the altar.

I am slightly startled when I realize that the man sitting in the corner is not actually a man, but a life-sized sculpture of the founder, Srila Prabhupada. As I study the sculpture, the curtains in front of the altar mechanically close so no one can see the offering taking place. As the curtains shut, Peter belly-flops onto the floor as if a rug has been pulled from under his feet. The offering is being made at this very moment, behind a curtain, to a one-foot-tall, anthropomorphized elephant Krishna. Peter is on the ground, chanting even more rapidly under his breath.

I walk out of the room and back upstairs to the kitchen where Dave leaves me with one final bit of advice. He says that we will always know frustration as long as we realize that selfish motivations guide us. "I think Jimi Hendrix said that," he says. ●



Institutional Critique

nicolás guagnini's abstract look at art education

BY JULIA MILLER

ILLUSTRATION BY MADDY KLOSS

Barnard professor Nicolás Guagnini is not necessarily what you would expect from an educator. A well-known and received visual artist in his own right, Guagnini engages many questions in his artwork, including those of political and institutional framing, which he reveals are also taken up in his art criticism seminar and drawing classrooms.



“ACADEMIA IS STILL A PLACE FOR THE OPEN EXCHANGE OF IDEAS.”

Where were you born? When did you become familiar with fine art, and how?

Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1966. At home, my grandmother was an art dealer, my grandfather was a collector. It's not an incredible story; essentially they were upper middle class, but they were very educated Jews. My father was a journalist, my mother a psychoanalyst. The ideological configuration was existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. I was born in '66, so the ghost of '68 pervaded my childhood. This had a strong anti-imperialist tint. The idea was that television was a means of mass domination. Essentially I grew up in high culture, and

the decorations in my room were paintings by modern and contemporary artists.

Were they feeding you the critical art and text of the seventies?

That was the prevailing ideology and they were friends with artists. ... Revolution was in the air—that was the culture and the people I grew up with.

Why did you decide to go to art school?

The institutional life in Argentina did not compare to the life I was having at home. Essentially, there were two military coups—one in '66, and there was a succession of military and civil governments, and another in 1976 that heavily persecuted my family. So by the time I was out of high school in '83, the dictatorship was about to finish, and the people in charge of the institutions were essentially accomplices or builders of the dictatorship. So I did go to art school, but there was nothing in there for me. ... My real education came from a combination of home and the old way of coffee tables: Modern café culture in which, when you start making art, you have to show up at the table for younger people. ... It was a lot more ruthless than an institution in the sense that there are no boundaries, and someone can come right up to you and tell you, “Your art is shit. This has been done ten times before, this is nothing new,” and essentially tear it apart. And afterwards, [you must] stand up to that level of criticism.

Now the institution holds water for you—you're a faculty member at Barnard.

Yes, but to an extent also by chance, in the sense that I didn't seek that. When I arrived to the United States, I noticed the intense reciprocal relationship between museums, the academic institution, and the art market itself. Regardless of how critical we can be of the institution in and of itself and its economic underpinning—of how it is quintessentially unfair or how the race and class divide is epitomized in higher education, and so on and so forth—universities are still a relatively open institution, and more so compared to the brutality of the art market as the dominant force of a social form of exchange. Academia is still a place for the open exchange of ideas. ... Yes, it certainly does hold water.

Barnard and Columbia are institutions under the pretense of being a space and forum for the exchange of ideas. How do you live up to that objective? How do you cultivate that in your drawing class? In your seminar?

They are very different undertakings. The criticism class is a seminar. There is a fixed object of knowledge we run against, a set of texts and artistic practices by third parties. ... The object

of knowledge is external to us. In a drawing class, we generate knowledge internally: a set of premises or instructions or ideas are thrown to the students, the students get back at me with what they have. Both modes of teaching have an underlying or core component of the free exchange of ideas, but the terms in which ideas are exchanged are different within a seminar and in a drawing class. In a seminar, knowledge is somewhat incremental, you learn A and then B comes from A, and you won't understand C if you don't understand A and B.

Are you in charge of A and B? Then are C and D spaces in which they explore more complex concerns, like formal and social critique?

I'm not sure if I'm in charge of A and B when teaching art—certain tension happens in the relationship between incremental knowledge, typical of the hard and social sciences, and art making. The paradigm of incremental knowledge, by which the university naturally must live, expects that the student meets the benchmark of a product. The product is typically the paper, or an exam, or a test. In art making, the way of transmitting critical thought is not the product, it's the process. The emphasis is in the process, not the product. The process, to be successful, encompasses crisis. To teach crisis, you come up with something and you kind of dismantle or show the other possibilities, or reverse (that something), and that brings about a crisis. That is the very structure of art making. Of course there's the technical aspect which is naturally incremental, because all technique is incremental, but those increments come out as necessity through successive crisis. This often brings about fear of failure—academic and otherwise.

The way you described the incremental nature of learning in the drawing class: Are you mimicking that process, a progression?

For the diagrammatic portion, we try to represent events that happen in time. Representing space in drawing would be mapping, right? But then representing events in time as drawing—I think of musical notation and all the possibilities within it—opens another space. One of the exercises is that you have to retell a film, your favorite film, and you can't use language and you cannot use recognizable imagery. For example, you cannot make a portrait of Paul Newman, or something like that. It needs to visually articulate the symbolic level with some kind of structure.

I would want to make a portrait of Paul Newman, wouldn't you?

No, I don't. But I'd certainly would like to see a diagrammatic drawing based on *The Hustler*. [laughs]. ●

Living Alone, Sort Of

awkward silence, ramekins, and what was left behind

BY JON EDELMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY MADDY KLOSS

Living on my own felt like a necessary step, though I hadn't come to the formal conclusion that I was, in fact, "ready." It wasn't even something I really wanted to think about, but I had been offered university apartment housing from the wait-list and thought that I should take it. As I walked through the chilly January air, I decided on optimism, so I optimistically climbed the stairs to 4C and knocked. The door swung open, revealing a big guy with long hair.

"Hi, um, I'm going to be living here," I said.

"Hi," he said, and went back to his room.

It was the first few weeks of the term so I was still in a making-an-effort mode, plus I needed the WiFi password, so conversation needed to happen. I crept past the kitchen, turned right, and knocked softly on his door. Then harder.

"Come in," came the distant voice. Gripping the knob tightly, I slowly opened the door. After a moment, he turned to me. He was playing something that looked like *World of Warcraft*, and had to remove one of those microphone-equipped headsets.

HE WAS WORKING ONE DAY WHEN HIS FOOT SWELLED UP TO THE SIZE OF A BASKETBALL, AND WHEN HE WENT TO THE HOSPITAL THEY TOLD HIM THAT HE NEEDED TO BE ON DIALYSIS, STAT. HE DATED THE NURSE WHO INSERTED HIS CATHETER AND LOVED TO SALSA DANCE.

"I was, uh, wondering if you happened to have the password, to, you know, the wireless internet here."

"Uh, yeah." As he fished through his desk drawers, I decided to take a stab.

"How are classes going so far?"

"Oh, I'm not in any classes this term."

"Oh, I thought you needed to be taking classes to be in University Housing."

"Well, last year, I had a kidney transplant and I didn't take any time off. Then Columbia found out and sort of forced me to take some time off. But they sort of forgot about me in the system, so I'm still here. They

haven't told me to leave, so..."

Stunned but cautious, I replied. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

I took the slip of paper and crept back to my room, still stunned.

A week later, I forgot his name. He never left my mind, but I just couldn't remember it. I went to look it up in my phone, but then I realized we weren't friends and I consequently never asked for his number, much less a nickname. He wasn't discourteous, just aloof. Nevertheless, I never saw him, so I didn't have to pretend that I knew what to call him. In my mind I came to know him by his detritus, the Domino's boxes that would appear in the refrigerator, the black bag under the sink that slowly filled with empty beer bottles. I was happy with this. He didn't bother me, he was no-maintenance, a sort of neutral ghost. I remembered his name again after a while.

It was spring. He was walking around the living room, which was surprising enough, when he casually mentioned: "I'm moving to California at the end of the week."

"Oh, ah, wow," I said.

"Yeah."

"Um...can you give me a copy of the power bills so I can pay you back?"

"Sure."

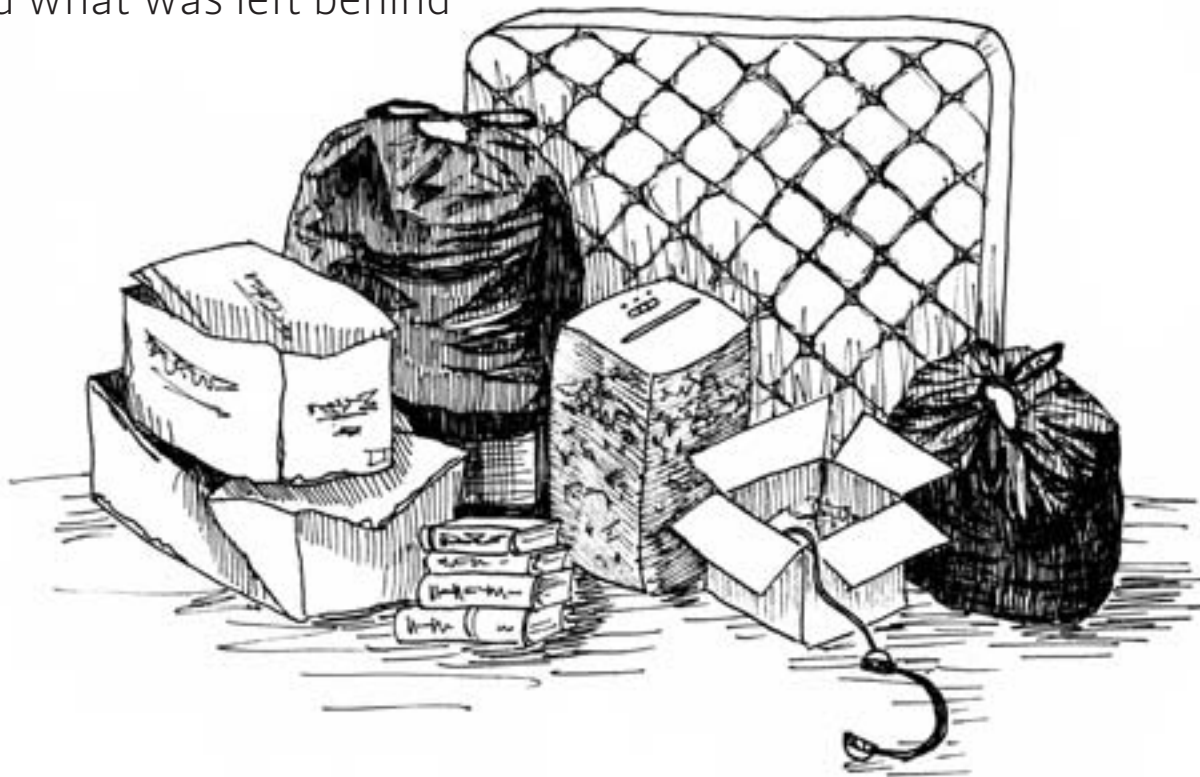
"So why are you moving out there?"

He was going to California, he said, because his mother was sick. There was something wrong with her hormones, and the doctors thought it was because of the number of times she had been pregnant. "By the way," he told me, he had been raised a Mormon, went straight to BYU out of high school. He was later kicked out for having premarital sex. Then he had been one of the few, the proud. After his tenure as a Marine he interned in Governor Schwarzenegger's office. He was once married, he had a son, he came to Columbia

to study engineering. Then he switched to philosophy because it was too easy. He was working one day when his foot swelled up to the size of a basketball, and when he went to the hospital they told him that he needed to be on dialysis, STAT. He dated the nurse who inserted his catheter and loved to salsa dance. He was getting divorced and it wasn't amicable. He hoped that he would be able to see his son in California. He walked into the kitchen, pulled open a cabinet. "Do you want any of this?" he asked. Not knowing what to say, I gratefully took his spice rack, his ramekins. It was "too much," he told me, to bother trying to take on a plane. A friend would come by in a week or two to pick up the rest and ship it to him. And then, he was gone.

Weeks passed by and no one came for Steven's stuff. Columbia's Housing Services called me and told me that someone would be over to repaint his room. It would have to be empty. So, early in the morning, I walked there and dragged out everything inside of it. My back aching, I stood there and looked at the pile in my living room: sweat-stained mattresses, white and thick, books of Russian philosophy, condoms. Curtains, spilling packages of hooks and nails, highlighters. Sets of headphones, an electronic shredder, mink oil. His military uniform in a garment bag, with a badge for sharp-shooting. A pill organizer, framed photos, a mirror I cracked in ripping it off the wall, a lined-notebook. I wanted to read it, piece together some story, some coherent narrative out of barren outline and those much-to-be-desired fragments. I flipped through it, but there was nothing that made him more coherent.

I left him many messages reminding him pick up his things, asking him to have someone take his stuff, threatening consequences if someone didn't take his stuff. Summer passed and new roommates moved in. Sometimes we sit in the living room and do our homework in silence. His uniform lies draped on the kitchen table, his polished shoes sit under it. ●





*5th graders at
P.S. 92 in Harlem
learn how to build
robots during
after school
sessions with
Teachers College's
Harlem Ivy
Program.*

**CHECK ONLINE AT
EYE.COLUMBIA
SPECTATOR.COM
FOR VIDEOS OF
THE PROGRAM.**