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# the eye



## SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

by Rebekah Mays





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# SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

Is the University Chaplain doing her job? pg. 07

*by Rebekah Mays*  
*cover photo by Anthony Clay*

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Everyone remembers their first time at St. Paul's Chapel.

Dedicated in 1907, St. Paul's was the first building on campus *not* designed by McKim, Mead & White. And it shows: the exterior defies Low Library's classical pillars with Northern Italian Renaissance architecture designed by I.N. Phelps Stokes. Once you walk through the building's portico, proceeding inside to the salmon-colored brick and terra cotta accents, it's hard not to be awestruck by Stokes' creation.

The place is clearly different from the rest of the buildings at Columbia, even for those who don't take part in religious observances there. It's a quiet place of reverence and reflection—similar to what you'd get down the street St. John the Divine—not a place of vigorous academic study. And this is a huge part of its appeal.

In the stained glass triptych in the rear of the chapel, St. Paul is depicted preaching to Athenians in front of the Parthenon. Wait ... the

Parthenon?

St. Paul's website explains that “the presence of the Parthenon serves to remind visitors to the chapel that they are on Morningside Heights, a neighborhood dubbed ‘the Acropolis of New York.’”

The synthesis of religious life and academic life can be a tricky one, particularly for the Office of the University Chaplain, Jewelnel Davis. She's come under fire for controversial choices in the past, and in this week's story by Rebekah Mays, students speak out about frustrations they've had working with the office.

Faith-based discussion can be a difficult subject to navigate on a campus like ours. But it's one that must be confronted and questioned no less vigorously than we assess our academics. The existence of St. Paul is a daily reminder.

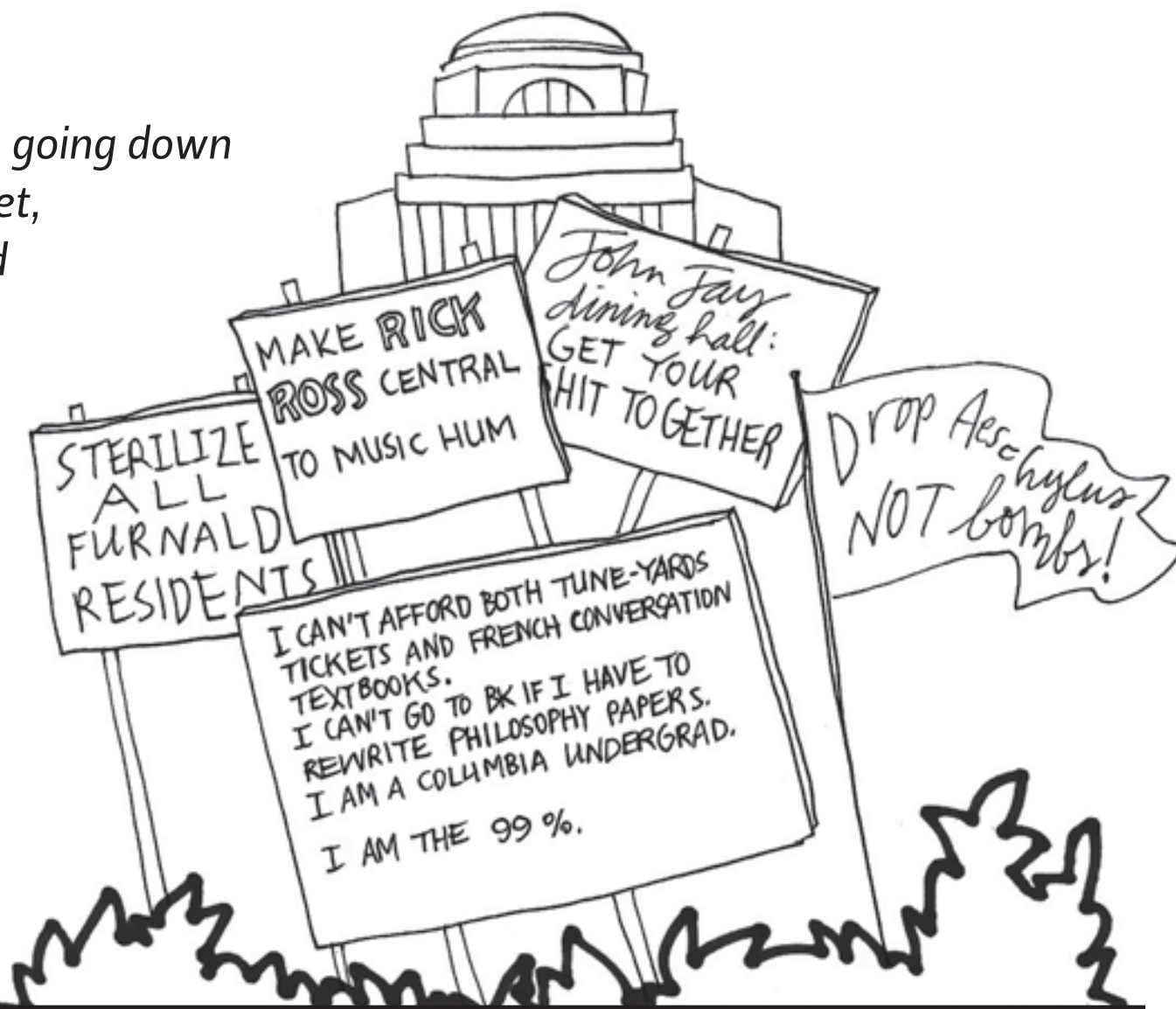
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# TAKING A STAND EYESITES PROTEST

BY P.J. SAUERTEIG

ILLUSTRATION BY CINDY PAN

In light of all the fun going down at Occupy Wall Street, Eyesites has banded together to think about the things that we really should be protesting—forget government buy-outs and financial dictators. We're concerned about the real issues.



EYESITES

## EDITORS' PICKS REMAKING IT BIG

COMPILED BY MARGARET BOYKIN

Fall brings a lot of things—Halloween candy, the reinstatement of that confusing newsboy cap trend, midterms. But this week, it's also bringing a little slice of the past into our present with the remake of 1984's *Footloose* hitting theaters this Friday, Oct. 14. The Eye editors tell us what other glorious films from the past they'd like to see remade into current cinematic gold, and why.



I'd remake *Pretty in Pink* with Molly Ringwald and cast it with Molly Ringwald as she is now, to add an interesting layer of age issues to this tragic tale of interclass romance. And to give the poor woman work outside of *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*.

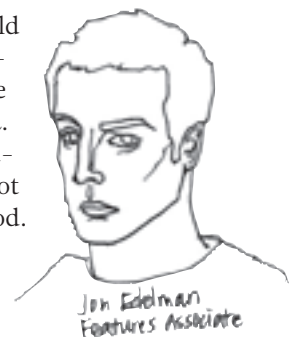


Remake *Pretty Woman*—same life transformation, from hooker to classy beauty, minus the '80s hair. Definitely minus the '80s hair.

*Star Wars*. This might be blasphemous, but can you imagine *The Empire Strikes Back* with kung-fu light saber action and Ryan Gosling as Luke Skywalker?



They should remake the upcoming remake of *Spider-Man*. That situation does not look good.



*The Graduate*. Imagine the possibilities—I personally would like to see it recast now that the whole May/December thing is kind of passé. Would it be as powerful with three gay men?





# Cinema Verité

maysles creates cinematic discourse uptown

BY ANNELIESE COOPER

ILLUSTRATION BY CINDY PAN

“Excuse me, can I interest you in some information on upcoming screenings at the Maysles Cinema?”

This phrase tumbles out almost mechanically after hours spent repeating it, my handful of fliers dutifully thrust forward into a stream of oncoming pedestrians. As the Cinema’s new graphic design intern, I initially imagined myself more on the crafting than the distribution side of the promotional process—but, after only a short time behind the scenes, I know I’m exactly where I want to be: on the steps of a local Harlem church, making sure everyone I can possibly reach knows about the cutting-edge sociopolitical discourse going on only blocks away at 127th and Lenox. Still, as might be expected, these attempted handouts are met mostly with brush-offs, a few acceptances and, occasionally, a “Maysles? Wait, like, that Maysles?”

Yes, that Maysles—Albert, to be exact—one half of the sibling documentarian duo famous for films like *Grey Gardens* and *Gimme Shelter*. It was that very legacy of filmic expertise—along with the creative and vocational drive of his children, Philip, Rebekah, and Sara—that inspired the family to open the Maysles Institute and its corresponding nonprofit Cinema in 2005, as a space which “exhibits independently curated films to inspire dialogue and action, and advances community-produced films through education programs,” according to their mission statement. As Albert explained to me, “I make documentaries, so it was only natural that the theater show documentaries—with the unique feature of having the director, or someone else deeply involved in the film itself, do a Q&A.”

This is one of the most remarkable things about the Cinema: that almost every screening is followed by some kind of talk-back with the film’s maker, often, even subject. Moreover, these discussions take place in a small, fifty-seat theater—an intimacy of scale that Jessica Green, Cinema Director since 2008, believes enhances the discourse: “There’s something to be said for being in a smaller space, feeling

comfortable and feeling safe, versus a five-hundred seat theater, where the director is way down there at the bottom and you feel like you’re performing if you raise a question.” At the Maysles Cinema, any filmmaker or panelist is quite literally on equal footing with his or her audience, encouraging a more fruitful back-and-forth.

“We believe that film should be open for people to see and talk about,” explains Facilities Director Rebekah Maysles. “We believe everyone should have access”—a sentiment reflected in the Cinema’s every aspect, from its entry fee as a suggested \$10 donation, to the varied topics of the films screened—including, just in the past month, a series on post-9/11 New York, the Black Panther Film Festival, and now the upcoming series “Congo in Harlem,” a week-long celebration of Congolese filmmakers.

“What we try to do here, day in and day out, is create space for people of different backgrounds to have this discourse and share in these films,” Green explains. “We think people need to come together across these different lines to really develop their community.”

This is a line that ought to hit home with constituents of Columbia—an institution that, though geographically a stone’s throw from the Cinema’s Harlem address, often feels worlds away. “At least in my somewhat brief experience at Columbia, I felt that students often didn’t get out into the surrounding area,” recalls Sara Maysles, an alumna who now serves as the Cinema’s New Media Director. “I don’t want to sound scolding—I know there are so many opportunities at Columbia, and it’s easy to get lost in that—but there are also lots of opportunities just a 1-2 train ride away.”

In the wake of Columbia’s Manhattanville Expansion project, this chance to explore adjacent neighborhoods couldn’t be more significant. To that end, the Cinema’s locally curated documentaries can play a crucial role in making the plights of our neighbors real and present. As Albert puts it, “Photography and cinematography can do this amazing thing of humanizing—of giving the viewer an engaging experience with the experience of the people on the screen.”

Exhibit A: during the Q&A after a screening of *Justice on Trial*, Kouross Esmali’s 2009 documentary about the Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal, now in his 27th year on death row, the Cinema produced Mumia himself, by telephone. There, patrons could hear this man—whose innocence they had just seen all but demonstrated on screen—answer their questions about his still-pending case, his voice vibrating through each of the bodies crammed between the Cinema walls.

**“WHAT WE TRY TO DO HERE, DAY IN AND DAY OUT, IS CREATE SPACE FOR PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS TO HAVE THIS DISCOURSE AND SHARE IN THESE FILMS.”**

“Sometimes, we’ll have a turn-out of like ten, and it’ll be the best conversation you ever had,” says Rebekah. “The only problem with having a small number of people is you end up being like, ‘Ugh, I wish there had been more people there to experience that!’”

It’s a feeling I’ve had many times since joining the Cinema staff—that desire to shout the screening times from rooftops, hire a skywriter—anything to get people to 127th & Lenox to witness the feats these artists and organizers continue to accomplish. Because if you measure success like the folks at the Cinema, in pots stirred and discourses opened, then you know that involving more people can only enrich the experience.

“So, what do you think?” I end my curbside spiel, smiling expectantly at some poor soul in laundry day clothes whom I’m clearly blocking only steps from his apartment door. “Yeah, okay, why not,” he says at last. Then, chuckling: “Your enthusiasm is infectious.” Honestly, I can only hope so. ●



# Blast Off

looking for astronauts and success

BY P.J. SAUERTEIG

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOCKING FOR ASTRONAUTS

*Looking For Astronauts is an indie rock band formed a few short years ago in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where they've risen to premier status in the fledgling local music scene. After self-releasing their first EP, "For The Birds," this summer, they were approached by Bon Iver's producer. The band announced in September their plans to embark on a nationwide tour, which will include a stop at Columbia. Just recently, they added a new band member who left everything to experience life as a rock star, or at least an aspiring one. Sarcastic and witty George Gardner and James Wadsworth, two of the band's members, enlighten us about pillaging fruit vendors, sleeping in vans, and the difficulties of making it in the music industry.*

**Tell us about the tour you're raising funds for at the moment. I heard you're planning on hitting every state.**

George [lead singer, songwriter, and guitarist. He is a connoisseur of jean shorts, and his mutton chop sideburns make him seem much older than 18]: Well, the plan is to hit every state, at least the lower 48 for right now. We can't really accomplish Hawaii and Alaska ... yet.

**How are you going to get around? An RV, perhaps?**

James [the band's drummer, who often sports a mustache-and-Hawaiian shirt look]: We found this RV for like \$8,900 and we were like, "There's no way we can get funds for that." Luck-

ily, I think we're getting a van for free, through relative connections.

**You'll have to pay for hotels and ...**

James: No. We're sleeping in the van.

**Food, though? You'll probably have to eat something every couple of days, at least?**

James: Here's the deal. We got water, a loaf of bread. We'll steal from some cornfields and some fruit vendors for our veggies and fruits. And, uh, ramen noodles, of course. And then maybe chips and salsa for a delicacy—if we're lucky.

**So each member of the band, as of right now, has to raise about \$300 for the trailer. How are you trying to raise money for that?**

James: We've all done odd jobs. I'm painting a fence this week. Sort of reminiscent of Huckleberry Finn.

**Have you considered prostitution?**

James: Of course.

**Has that panned out?**

James: Not one bit.

**The market's not ripe right now?**

James: They're not lookin' for guys with mustaches right now.

**Tell us about the recent departure of your back-up vocalist and keyboardist, Katie Humbert.**

George: Yeah, we're still kind of sour about it. She told us she needed to talk to us, so we met her at a coffee shop ...

James: I didn't go. I knew it was coming.

George: ... and she proceeded to act goofy, and then she said, "Oh, I'm gonna quit the band because I want to get married, and I'm going to Africa."

James: She's been dating this guy for a week.

George: God told her to do it, man.

**How does a typical band practice play out for you guys? Are there fights? Orgies? How many people end up in fetal position?**

George: We usually start off by waking up at around nine o'clock, driving to Kroger [for groceries], and making ourselves a large, good breakfast—a nice breakfast for band bonding time. Then we'll watch three hours of *Law & Order: SVU*. Then we decide to go practice.

James: ... or play Parcheesi or Clue.

George: Or play Clue. Then we usually go down and pick our instruments up—sometimes the wrong ones.

James: I tried to hop on bass today. They didn't like it.

George: And then we play.

James: As far as playing goes, it's a beautiful thing. It's hard to explain—it's like a good group of dudes doin' it. There's no anger or anything. It's just straight happy dudes playin' the music they love.

## AS FAR AS PLAYING GOES, IT'S A BEAUTIFUL THING. IT'S JUST STRAIGHT HAPPY DUDES PLAYIN' THE MUSIC THEY LOVE.

**What is the hardest thing about making it as a band, in your opinion?**

James: The hardest thing is to find people who are willing to drop literally everything they have to go for it. It's the hardest thing to find four or five people whom you love and who are musicians and who are willing to drop everything for you and the band.

George: And people who you can spend all your time with.

James: Yeah. It's basically like finding five wives or girlfriends.

**What keeps you guys going, especially given all these bumps in the road?**

George: The desire to play music.

James: And each other.

George: The fans pitching in and singing along.

**What's the best experience playing you've ever had?**

James: It was at our CD release show. I felt this surge of energy within me. I remember it 100 percent, like it was yesterday. I was playing and a surge of good feelings—just a chemical reaction in my brain—and I just immediately felt energized and really good. And I was, like, "This is what love feels like." And ever since then I'm, like, "Wow—this is what I'm going to do."

**Metaphorically speaking, is this a long-term love affair, or a brief summer tryst with music?**

George: This is hardcore love here. ●



George Gardner (lead guitarist), second from left, and James Wadsworth (drummer), center



# Secret Supper Clubs

dining underground in the illegal restaurant scene

BY KIERSTIN UTTER  
PHOTO BY ANTHONY CLAY

In the past few years, talented chefs across the city have sought employment in official dining establishments less and instead have turned to something called the anti-restaurant. Skirting around health-code regulations and licensing, these unregulated restaurants operate out of private homes, charging guests modest, prix-fixe prices for top-notch food in a low-key setting. The catch, of course, is that without a license, taking any amount of money from diners is entirely illegal. These secret supper clubs are continuously discovered and shut down. Some manage to avoid authorities, but active internet presences—their main source of advertising—prove to make staying secret a difficulty.

A lack of advertising may contribute to the allure and exclusivity of the trend, however. Figuring out how to get in to one of these “underground” restaurants is in itself an adventure. Only through contacting the chef directly are invitations granted. Or not granted, if the chef doesn’t like the looks of you. Some ask for links to prospective diners’ Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, or websites, even asking questions like “What do you do with your life?”

But it isn’t just about being hip. It’s about saving money. Ben Lawrence, assistant professor of food and beverage management at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, says that besides being “a way to develop an image and persona,” he can see “a huge cost advantage” in operating underground.

**“ALL YOU HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT ARE FOOD COSTS—EVERYTHING ELSE IS GOING TO YOUR POCKET.”**

“If you want to start a restaurant in NYC, you could actually need as much as eight—or nine—hundred thousand dollars,” he says. “About seven to ten percent of your costs will be associated with rent, plus there’s payroll and taxes. [Underground], all you have to worry about are food costs; everything else is going to your pocket.”

The relative predictability of the underground system is extremely cost-effective. “They can know in advance exactly how many people they have coming, plus they charge a fixed cost, so they know how much revenue is coming in, and

therefore they know exactly what they can afford to buy or make,” says Lawrence. While it may seem a legal risk, unofficial restaurant operation may really be the safer financial bet in hard economic times.

4 Course Vegan in Williamsburg is a local dining venue that doesn’t believe “underground” has to mean elitist. Only hours after contacting them I received a response from chef Matteo, inviting my brother and me to the next Saturday night dinner, no questions asked. Happily disregarding everything our mother ever taught us, we followed this stranger’s directions (given via email) to a nondescript apartment building, where we proceeded to let strangers guide us inside, up a flight of stairs, down a hallway, through a courtyard, and into a cozy, aromatic living-room-turned-restaurant. Eighteen places had been set across three tables, adorned with candles and individual menu cards. A happy acoustic tune weaved between tables, inviting us to sit. We had arrived.

The food, made from all organic and local ingredients, was unbelievable. I am not vegan. I am not even vegetarian. Still, I found the meal beyond satisfying, full of flavor and texture, proving once and for all just how amazing a vegan meal can be. The majority of guests were in fact omnivores and yet, as one guest put it, “still perfectly happy.”

Matteo has nine years of experience operating 4 Course Vegan out of his home. The endeavour began with the realization that working in a traditional restaurant setting simply wasn’t right for him. He didn’t want to handle animal products, and found the few local vegan restaurants to be lacking creativity and professionalism.

An underground operation proved the perfect solution for Matteo. He has the liberty to create food exactly the way he wants, when he wants, though he sometimes rues the loss of the aspects of a more traditional restaurant operation. “I really wish people could just come in on a whim, off the streets,” he says. Spontaneity is of course impossible when your home and restaurant are one in the same. Events are planned, menus are predetermined, and guests are limited.

For this reason, Matteo hopes 4 Course Vegan will be a launch pad for opening a real restaurant. At first, he explains, “it was just my friends coming to these dinners. I never thought they would pay for it, because I cook for them all the time anyway.” But they did, and kept coming back for more. Soon friends invited friends, and today most guests are complete strangers. The exposure and revenue created by 4 Course Vegan give him hope that a more legitimate venue isn’t far off.

After nine years, 4 Course Vegan is hardly a secret, but that’s just fine with Matteo. The potential pitfalls of the underground scene may have scared him initially, but today, he says with a smile, “those fears are long gone.”





The Episcopal Campus Ministry, under the purview of the Office of the University Chaplain, is affiliated with the Church of St. John the Divine

# Scratching the Surface

Is the University Chaplain doing her job?

*by Rebekah Mays*  
*photos by Anthony Clay*

A week ago around lunchtime, I headed to an interfaith discussion hosted by the Office of the University Chaplain. But when I entered Earl Hall, a lonely flyer on a table greeted me. Apparently, the discussion was postponed in order to find a time better suited to students' schedules. A sign-up sheet lay next to it to collect the emails of students who wanted to attend future "People of the Book" discussions. There were two names.

This was less than a week after Chaplain Jewelnel Davis, the person in charge of providing an outlet for religious life on campus, had told me of her passion for interaction between people of different faiths. "So you're very committed to interfaith dialogue and discussion," I begin. She jumps in: "I'm defined by it."



# THE CHAPLAIN: A HIERARCHY

COMMUNITY  
IMPACT

There's certainly no lack of religious life on campus, despite conservative media outlets' portrayal of Columbia as an iron fortress of secular, radically liberal thought. The University is home to more than 40 different religious groups under the purview of the OUC, as well as an additional 40 groups under the umbrella of Columbia/Barnard Hillel. Altogether, hundreds of students are involved and represented, although there are no precise numbers available. But speak with the average attendee at one of these clubs' meetings and she will likely say she hasn't directly interacted with the chaplain, or anyone from the OUC. Talk with a random student on College Walk, and he probably won't even know the chaplain is a woman. He might not even know Columbia has a chaplain at all.

Even though she is rarely visible for most students, the chaplain has accomplished notable goals since she was appointed to the position in 1996. Several students I've interviewed said that they have been touched by her compassion and kindness, especially when they have approached her for help with personal issues. Additionally, she has tried to incorporate perspectives on sexuality into religious discussion—making positive ties with a community traditionally excluded from religious life. And while she's an ordained Baptist minister, she sees it as a crucial part of her mission to respect and include people of all different religious backgrounds.

Yet students have voiced concern about the way she has led, and with the way the office is structured. Though she has emphasized how im-

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UNIVERSITY CHAPLAIN,  
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EARL HALL CENTER  
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AND EARL HALL CENTER

UNITED CAMPUS MINISTRIES

22 RELIGIOUS LIFE ADVISORS

**“WHAT I DID GET WAS A  
CHAPLAIN WHO WOULD  
JUST TALK ABOUT SPACE  
AND MONEY.”**

portant student concerns are to her, the chaplain has made decisions that members of the faith community have protested.

Personally, I'm a Christian, a member of a Protestant church, and have been involved with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship since my first year at Columbia. I've also served as the “prayer coordinator” for the faith-based intellectual group, the Veritas Forum. But while I bring to the table my own opinions and biases, I have tried over the past few months to weigh fairly the wonderfully varied perspectives on all of these issues.

#### A step back

William Theodore de Bary, former provost of Columbia College and professor at Columbia since the '50s, knows quite a bit about the foundations of the OUC. De Bary explains that during a period in the '60s, the current chaplain's predecessor, Rev. John Cannon, allowed student protesters to use St. Paul's Chapel for their planning. This prompted a redefinition of the office's role on campus. After Cannon's resignation in '69, the OUC was abolished. The newly-created University Senate established in its place the Center for Religion and Life, which was to be a place where

OFFICE OF THE  
UNIVERSITY  
CHAPLAIN  
MUSIC AT ST. PAUL'S  
PROGRAMS INITIATED BY OUC  
CO-SPONSORSHIPS OF  
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students of all faiths could be welcomed and accommodated. In 1996, the position of chaplain was officially reinstated, with Jewelnel Davis at the helm. De Bary sees the purpose of the present OUC as being essentially the same as it was in 1971. “The key thing with regard to religious life on campus is the representation of the different faiths, and how well they support their own representatives,” he says. When asked about the work of the current chaplain, de Bary refers to her ability to treat groups equally: “I think she's done a good job of a difficult situation [which is] no longer difficult.”

In January of 2007, roughly ten years after Davis was appointed chaplain, the Student Governing Board was moved from the OUC to the Division of Student Affairs. Now, religious groups go through Lerner staff for budgeting and space requests, with the exception of Earl Hall and St. Paul's Chapel, which remain under the chaplain's authority. Additionally, the chaplain oversees United Campus Ministries, a group of 22 Religious Life Advisers who serve as counselors to their specific faith communities on campus.

During a conversation with the chaplain, it seems like she fits the bill well in light of the upheaval that preceded her arrival. I ask her whether her job is difficult.

“It is the greatest joy anybody could ever have,” Davis says. “Being the chaplain at Columbia University gets me up in the morning with just such delight about the grace of God.” She emphasizes how important it is to support people of all faiths, and discusses how the office is recognizing new student groups to meet the needs of particu-

lar religious communities. She also has an impressive background, from studying science at Brown before pursuing ministry to receiving her master's in social work in 1983, and receiving her ordination as a National Baptist minister in the same year. She has taught at several colleges, and served as both chaplain and assistant to the president at Carleton College.

But digging deeper, there are some problematic facets of her tenure and the OUC's current function at the University.

#### Accountability and function

The chaplain—who also serves as the associate provost and director of the Earl Hall Center—has a lot of power. Those in the OUC are either assistants to the chaplain in some way, or employees, and students occupy several different positions within the office. The 22 Religious Life Advisers are not employees of the University. They are paid by sending agencies, which creates an odd power dynamic by withholding any real authority from the advisers. Because, in the chaplain's words, they serve as the “eyes and ears of the office,” each adviser is required to submit an “annual report.” And each year, the advisers are “reviewed”—a subtle shift in the severity of the terminology. Columbia's peer institutions like Princeton, Harvard, and Yale have “chaplains” for each faith community, usually with a supervising director or dean. At Columbia, there is one chaplain, and those who do the footwork actually associating with students are just “advisers.” Additionally, directors at other schools don't also hold authoritative University positions like “associate provost.” I got a glimpse of that tension when I went in for an interview with the chaplain. Four of the advisers were present per the chaplain's request, and for the most part, they nodded or vaguely agreed with her when she solicited their thoughts on the issues I brought up.

On a college campus where students are in and out of the system in four years, faculty and staff accountability is particularly important—and hard to gauge. There is a lack of institutional memory, as even the student leaders acquainted with tensions are gone before the issues are fully resolved. Only a couple of the advisers have been with the office for more than a few years, so many of the current ones—like the new students they advise—are unaware of past conflicts and tensions.

But the revolving door and the structure aren't the only barriers to accountability of the chaplain. As the OUC oversees the distribution of the Kraft Family Fund for Intercultural and Interfaith Awareness and the Office of the University Chaplain Co-Sponsorship Fund, several student leaders have expressed their hesitancy to be interviewed and quoted—they don't want to risk losing a chance at these vital grants for their groups. As a result, the students most equipped to voice concerns are unable to speak out.

Some students I spoke with have questioned the chaplain's role, and why students and leaders of religious groups don't interact with her—except when logistical issues arise. Sana Khalid, CC '11, was involved in the Muslim Students Association and Ahimsa for a time, and served as the vice president of communications for the Columbia College Student Council. Khalid remembers a

meeting she and other MSA leaders had with Davis to secure a space for students to pray over the summer. “During the discussion, I realized that Chaplain Davis wasn't aware of our community's religious concerns,” she says. Davis did, eventually, grant the request. Khalid notes that she found the Office of Student Group Advising (now the Office of Civic Action and Engagement) much more helpful with issues like event planning. Infrequent meetings with the chaplain were limited to the most pressing issues, and so they were confined to discussing logistical problems. “My vision of the chaplain is someone you can go to when you have questions about religious or spiritual life, and not setting up an appointment and waiting a long time to see her,” Khalid says. “What I did get was a chaplain who would just talk about space and money.”

#### Conflict and tension

Davis, during her time, has made some more publicly controversial decisions. One area of consistent contention between students and the OUC has time and time again been the Baccalaureate Service, which Davis oversees. In 2010, the president of Columbia Catholic Undergraduates and other student leaders protested the invitation of Faye Wattleton to deliver the keynote address. Wattleton is a member of the Columbia University Board of Trustees and the daughter of a minister. She is also a former president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Lauren Ely, BC '10 and the president of CCU at the time, says in a statement via email: “It's unclear to me to this day whether this was a political stand or an act of complete ignorance and disregard on behalf of the Chaplain's Office ... I felt insulted and disappointed by Chaplain Davis' choice.” That the keynote speaker had a political stance strongly contradicting the values of several faith communities on campus proved deeply problematic for many students, who viewed it as strange that the chaplain would invite Wattleton to be the main speaker of a religious service, given she had no significant experience in faith or faith leadership. Ely says this wasn't a one-time phenomenon, pointing to Professor Akeel Bilgrami's 2009 Baccalaureate speech as another example of the chaplain's insensitivity. “The 2009 speaker

... was an ardent atheist and talked about how religion is a social construct,” she says. Together with other Catholic students and the president of Columbia Right to Life, Ely met with Chaplain Davis about Wattleton and Bilgrami's Baccalaureate invitations. “We were told that it was because Wattleton was a University alumna and had a connection to Columbia, but this did not explain why

**“WHY RISK CONTROVERSY  
IN THIS CONTEXT?”**

she was asked to speak at a religious event,” Ely says. “We did not feel as though we were given an explanation that made sense to us.”

Sy Hoekstra, a CC '10 graduate who served as president of the Veritas Forum and a member of InterVarsity, also wrote a letter to Davis questioning her invitation of Wattleton. “Why risk controversy in this context?” he says to me.

When posed a similar question, the chaplain referred to Wattleton's position as a trustee and minister's daughter. “She has done an incredible amount of good work, and continues to do a lot of good work for the University,” she says. “When you think about Baccalaureate, you really are thinking about, ‘How can you make the Baccalaureate be a reflection of the actual Columbia community?’” Are students of faith not a part of the “actual Columbia community?” But Davis points out that Cardinal Egan spoke in 2008, and that students objected to that, too. Cardinal Egan, the Archbishop of New York, was at the time was embroiled in a lawsuit for allegedly hiding sexual abuse cases by priests in his diocese—not what one might call a safe choice, either.

#### Mere coexistence

Contradicting the chaplain's apparent desire to rock the boat with her decisions about Baccalaureate speakers, much of the interfaith dialogue that she supports is watery, at best. I asked Davis whether she finds it important not to talk just about commonalities between faiths, but distinctions as well. Quoting a friend of hers she answers: “Particularity points to universality.” I am puzzled, but she goes on. “When you are strong in



Students in the Muslim Student Association pray in Earl Hall



your own faith commitments, it makes you even more interested in the faith commitments that other people are making.”

The chaplain has tried to provide venues for interfaith discussion, most visibly through Co-Sponsorships and the Kraft Fund. Student groups holding events apply for these grants to help defray costs. But the actual work of organizing and executing these programs is done by students.

One of the OUC’s favorite initiatives is the tradition of common meals—regular dinners with panels or interfaith discussions. Even though these meals have been happening for years, turnout has been somewhat scanty and unpredictable recently, ranging from roughly nine to 60 students. They aren’t advertised much outside of OUC emails, meaning that most non-religious students aren’t aware of the OUC’s events. The events themselves seem to lack direction: One upcoming initiative of the chaplain, for instance, is a harvest celebration to “reflect on food and faith.”

The OUC also started the Interfaith Fellows Program two years ago to enable interested students to be facilitators of cross-faith discussion. Lucy Sun, an Interfaith Fellow during the first year of the program and a former Spectator sex columnist, is grateful for the autonomy she had when planning events—she only had to check in with the chaplain and Fellows occasionally. “What’s most valuable about interfaith experience is the clash and the discomfort of it all,” she says. “It’s not about what’s palatable or ‘accessible.’” In that first year of the program, Sun was able to provide the campus with an opportunity for real dialogue, and she says that the office was always there to answer students’ questions about putting together events. But the chaplain’s notion of interfaith dialogue—a kind of holding hands—seems to undo the work of the students who see the importance of the “clash” that is vital to growth.

Sarah Ngu, a senior in CC, president of the Veritas Forum, and former Eye associate editor, argues that Columbia students, for the large part, do not interact with the University or utilize the University to get what they want. She names space and budgeting as the basic needs that the University provides, discussing how she goes to student leaders and not the chaplain when holding an interfaith event. “Yeah, there isn’t a strong support system, but that’s okay, and in fact, the support that’s been given out seems redundant,” she says. “The chaplain assumes what our interests are, and then puts on that event without trying to figure out, ‘What is your mission, what are your interests?’ I find that presumptive, and I feel no obligation to go.”

Yusuf Ahmad, a senior in CC, and co-founder and co-coordinator of the Columbia University Interfaith Collective, says that interfaith engagement is more than just “holding hands and singing kumbaya.”

“Meaningful engagement requires critical dialogue that not only recognizes difference, but grapples with it and the broader contexts in which difference is structured and articulated,” he says. He stresses that dialogue isn’t the full picture, but that it is the start to deeper connections, efforts, and friendships. “The Interfaith Collective has attempted to fill this void, by providing a space for open and honest conversation about often difficult faith and religious issues,” he says.

Even de Bary, who was very positive

AHISMA Jain Students Organization	OSGA Office of Student Group Affairs (now the Office of Civic Action and Engagement)
CCU Columbia Catholic Undergraduates	OUC Office of the University Chaplain, one office that the chaplain oversees
INTERVARSITY InterVarsity Christian Fellowship	RELIGIOUS LIFE ADVISORS The ministers for particular religious communities on campus
MSA Muslim Students Association	UCM United Campus Ministries, the 22 Religious Life Advisors
KRAFT FAMILY FUND AND CO-SPONSORSHIPS Grants by the OUC for interfaith and cultural events	VERITAS The Veritas Forum, a Christian-based organization that creates a space to explore difficult questions

about Davis’ accomplishments at Columbia, chuckles about her addresses at University ceremonies. “I think she has been very careful to try to address those large audiences in terms that were non-sectarian,” he says. “In some ways, you might say her invocations are rather bland. But nothing in it [to which] anyone would take offense.”

“WHAT’S MOST VALUABLE ABOUT INTERFAITH EXPERIENCE IS THE CLASH AND THE DISCOMFORT OF IT ALL.”

A legacy

Chaplain Davis’ impression on Columbia has proven positive in several areas. Lucy Sun brings up the safe space the OUC has provided to discuss questions of sexuality. And Barry Weinberg, a senior in CC, the chair of SGB and former president of Everyone Allied Against Homophobia, says: “The OUC has been an incredible partner to queer groups on campus, consistently co-sponsoring community outreach events and serving as a bridge between the queer community and communities of faith.”

Weinberg also notes that the chaplain supported students at a crucial moment when the school was reeling from the news of the drug bust last December. Weinberg and others saw to it that the OUC and several administrative departments joined students for an open discussion, free of the press, about the arrests and how undergraduates were coping.

But these merely scratch the surface. “It would take a leap of faith on both ends to truth again,” says Weinberg of the relationship between Davis and the student religious leaders.

The Interfaith Fellows are poised to play a key

role in bridging this gap. With the right training and proper correspondence with religious leaders on campus, they could provide an opportunity for students to talk about substantive issues of faith.

The chaplain could also initiate the use of Earl Hall as not just a building of offices and meeting spaces, but rather a student center for religious life, which Jewish students already have in the Kraft Center. There could easily be bookshelves in the common room with student resources, and coffee and tea throughout the day to encourage students to take their discussions to a centralized space. The chaplain could and should move her primary office from the 7th floor of Lerner to Earl Hall to become more accessible to students.

Sarah Brafman, Hillel’s 2009 president, suggests that for the chaplain to both bring religious leaders together and be more visible on campus, the OUC could host a town hall once a semester for representatives from religious communities. While the SGB has town halls for all of the groups under its umbrella, religious leaders don’t have a meeting to discuss their own particular interests.

Moreover, the chaplain could sit down with student religious leaders on campus, and simply ask, “What do you need?”

But a greater impact requires deeper transformation, and so the University must thoroughly examine the structure of the OUC and adjust the chaplain’s authority for maximum accountability. The trustees should sit down with each Religious Life Adviser and discuss his experiences and suggestions. They would be wise to talk with previous employees of the OUC, in addition to Columbia alumni who were religiously involved. When speaking with students—and the trustees have already attempted this once—they could ask these religious leaders specifically what they need or want from the OUC. But while the responsibility lies with the University to provide the resources for engagement, students are tasked with beginning or continuing the conversations, no matter how much—or how little—the University chooses to support them. ●

# Nude New York

baring it all in the big apple

BY DANIEL GIRMA

ILLUSTRATION BY MADDY KLOSS

“I would be naked right now if it wasn’t illegal,” Robert Redmond told me as we sped down the New Jersey Turnpike towards Gunnison Beach in Sandy Hook, N.J., one of the few clothing-optional beaches on the entire east coast. I had learned all too well Redmond’s views on nudity when I had met him for the first time three weeks ago, in his cozy Morningside apartment. Over refreshments, he explained to me in very simple terms why he enjoys being nude. “It feels great,” he laughed as he sat comfortably. “It just feels like freedom.”

Redmond is a New York nudist, part of a surprisingly large population of New Yorkers that prefer doing their leisure activities naked. Congregating at beaches, dinner parties, special events

at downtown clubs and bars, they believe nudism can help people enjoy being in their own skin.

Columbia, too, has a history with nudism. It saw a brief surge with the naked parties that occupied East Coast schools in the middle of the last decade, but the War on Fun quickly followed, preemptively squashing any resurgence of the movement. Some students view nudism as a liberation of expression and impression, while others tie it in with the publicity that it generates. But all that seems to be a far cry from Gunnison Beach, where volleyball players and seaside strollers enjoyed what might be the last chance to go to the beach for the rest of the year. There were a few families, but the majority of the visitors in this part of the beach were adults, couples or groups of friends.

When I talked to Redmond about the history of naked parties at colleges, he expressed worry about nudism on the college campus. “You don’t want a

bunch of students drunk and naked,” he says.

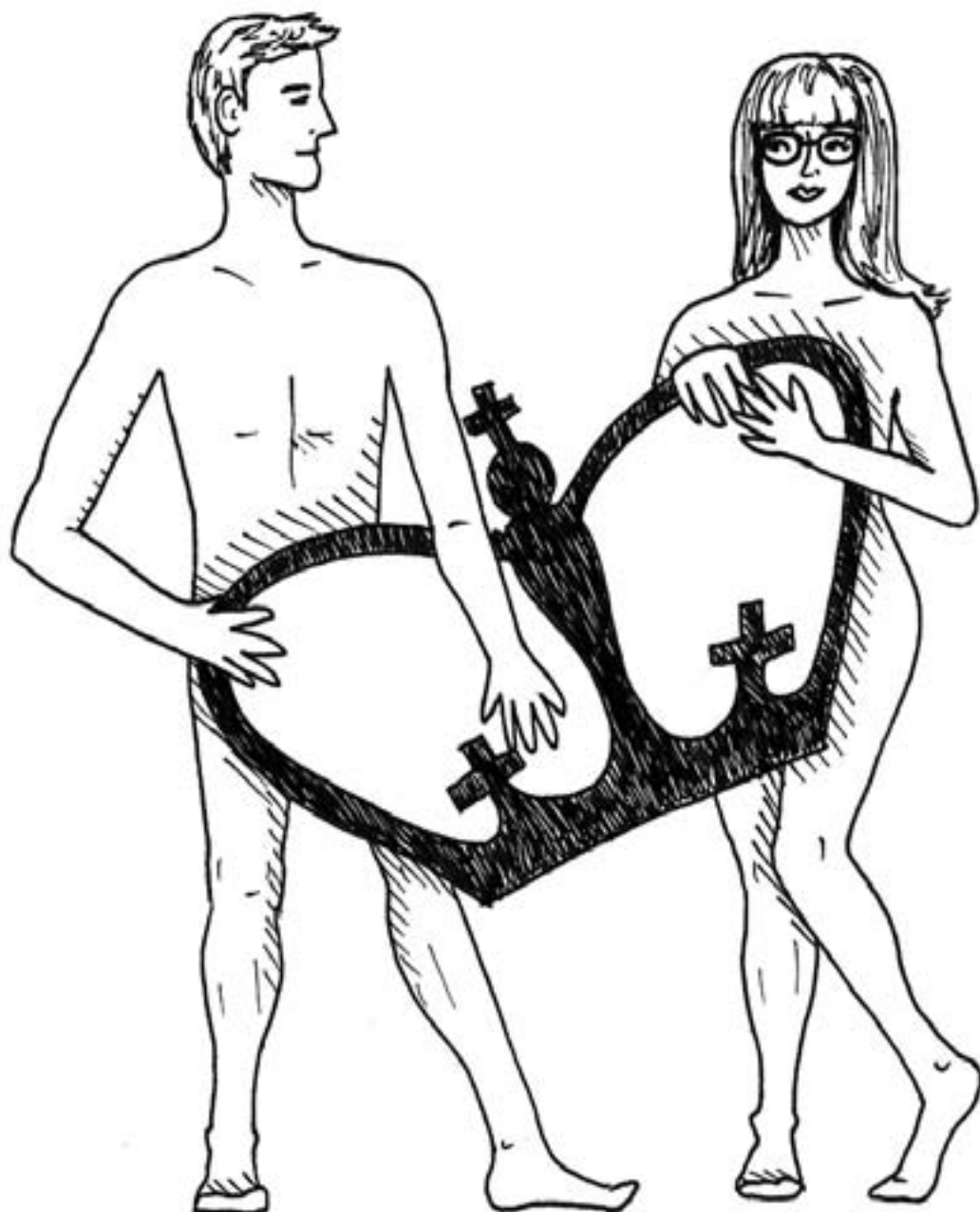
Recently, controversy arose at Yale when an accusation of sexual assault was made after a party hosted by The Pundits, an established prank group at Yale, known to host naked parties. At Columbia, displays of nudity have been marginally tame. Columbia lacks a strong community of students who throw and attend nude parties, and has few established traditions like Harvard’s Primal Scream, where students streak through Old Yard at midnight before finals.

It’s not as if living in a densely populated city makes it legally more difficult for New Yorkers to show a little skin. It’s been legal for women to be topless wherever men can for almost 20 years. And for those who want to bare a little more, there are many events in New York that encourage a lack of dress. From nude body-painting parties in the Village, to special dinner nights that cater to nudists wanting to have a casual night out, to allegedly naked video game parties that started popping up at the beginning of last summer, nudism seems like one of many of the city’s integrated subcultures.

**“IT FEELS GREAT,” HE LAUGHED AS HE SAT COMFORTABLY. “IT JUST FEELS LIKE FREEDOM.”**

So how would Columbia fit into a nude dynamic? Typically, clubs that incorporate partial or full nudity tend to focus on nudism as activism, as a way of actively rejecting societal expectations. But this hasn’t prevented the New York press from accusing the occasional Columbian foray into nudity of sexual deplorability. A December 2006 article in the Daily News painted Columbia’s nude parties as part of a cluster of hypersexual activities: “While their parents shell out \$33,246 a year in tuition, Columbia University students attend naked parties, flock to sex-toys workshops, broadcast porn on campus TV, bake anatomically correct pies for the ‘Erotic Cake-Baking Contest’ and heat up the library steps in a mass makeout session.” But in January of 2007, Columbia’s naked parties gained minor redemption in a New York Times trend piece on nude parties. The article quotes an email invitation sent to Columbia students: “Compadres, join us in refusing to comply with a culture that tells us to hide our body, to be ashamed of its scents, secretions, curves, and hair, to conceal those parts that have been dealt sexual connotations.”

To Redmond and the cohort of New York nudists, though, nudism is neither about experimentation or protest. At Gunnison Beach, I almost forgot that the swaths of people around me were for the most part nude, sleeping sprawled out in the sun. It was a casual scene that lent itself better to doing homework or reading, rather than flirting—almost more so than in Butler. ●







# What's In A Name?

a battle brews over george carlin's legacy in morningside heights

BY KAREN JOSEPH ADCOCK  
PHOTO BY ANTHONY CLAY

The comedian George Carlin was famous for courting controversy. A counter-cultural icon, Carlin took the stage in jeans, a pony-tail and a beard when other comedians wore suits. His often inflammatory perspectives on drugs, politics, and religion won him awards and an arrest record. Although he died in 2008, Carlin's divisive career is still causing controversy.

Carlin grew up and attended both school and church on the 500 block of 121st St., between Broadway and Amsterdam, in the 1940s. He drew on his experiences there for material, admitting in one routine that he and his friends called it "White Harlem," to make it sound tougher. Although Carlin is gone, comedian Kevin Bartini wants to ensure that he lives on—by naming Carlin's childhood block in his honor.

Bartini's Change.org petition to the District 9 Community Board was simple: "George Carlin, brilliant and prolific comedian, lived and went to school on this street. He loved this street and crafted many of his most famous routines around it. We, the legions of fans, admirers and fans of George Carlin believe that a street should be named in honor of the greatest comedian of all time, in his hometown, the greatest comedy city of all time!" It has already garnered more than 5,600 signatures and the support of many on the block.

Shaune Bornholdt, who lives in the building in which Carlin grew up, says that she's "Highly in favor of the renaming. [Carlin] was great, we love him. He was a very funny guy." However, others are displeased. Corpus Christi Church, the Roman Catholic institution on the block that Carlin attended as a boy, does not feel that Carlin is an appropriate choice. At a District 9 Community Board Meeting on Oct. 6th,

Bartini and his four or five supporters were outnumbered by close to 20 church members.

"The Corpus Christi community is opposed to the renaming because we feel that George Carlin and his comedy do not accurately reflect the values we uphold," Connor Hailey, vice-chairman of the church's Parish Council, and a freshman in Columbia College, says. Indeed, Carlin had included his rejection of the church's values in routines, describing his time at school there as "nourishing him in a direction where I could trust myself and my own instincts. ... They gave me the tools to reject my faith. ... It's a wonderful fairy tale they have going here, but it's not for me."

In addition to his unfavorable views of the church and religion, Carlin was a lewd comedian in general. One of his most famous routines, "Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television," was central to the 1978 Supreme Court case *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation*. In 1973, when a Pacifica Foundation FM station aired an earlier version of the routine, a man complained to the FCC that he had been listening with his son at the time it was played. The Pacifica Foundation received a citation from the FCC for airing "obscene material." The United States Supreme Court decided the material was indecent but not obscene with a 5-to-4 vote and that the FCC had the right to prohibit radio stations from airing potentially offensive things during hours when children are likely to be part of the audience.

It's easy to understand why someone might not want a street in their neighborhood named after someone whose most famous work has been deemed unsuitable for children by law. And it's easy to understand why a church might not want an atheist's name as part of their address. At the community board meeting, one church-goer suggested that a more appropriate location might be in the theater district. But if controversial figures couldn't receive tributes in

the form of namesakes, nothing would be named after Abraham Lincoln, JFK, or Martin Luther King, Jr.

On the other hand, can George Carlin compare to them in importance? Although Bartini spoke at the board meeting about Carlin's influence on him personally, and the comedian's noted advocacy for free speech, it's hard to argue that he shaped the world in the manner of other figures who have had streets named for them. Additionally, a solid segment of Bartini's signees hail from outside New York, let alone Morningside Heights. Whether their affection and respect for the comedian should affect a street far away is also open for debate.

**CORPUS CHRISTI CHURCH, THE ROMAN CATHOLIC INSTITUTION ON THE BLOCK THAT CARLIN ATTENDED AS A BOY, DOES NOT FEEL THAT CARLIN IS AN APPROPRIATE CHOICE.**

It seems the proposition has a long way to go. Bartini's petition must go before a council member, who will take it to the council board, where they will vote it either up or down, taking into account what they feel Carlin contributed to the community. However, Bartini must first meet with an appointed person from the church's side, to discuss their reasons for dissension. Whether any resolution can be reached is unclear. Still fighting the church after his death—it's an irony that George Carlin would have appreciated. ●

# Born With A Silver Mic

the celebrity-child mixtape is having a moment

BY KEVIN ROARK  
ILLUSTRATION BY THUTO SOMO

Bob Dylan, Tom Hanks, Tommy Hilfiger: legends in the fields of music, film, and fashion. Pablo Dylan, Chet Haze, and Rich Hil: the respective descendants of these men, and aspiring hip-hop legends. Awkwardly capitalizing on the reputations of their fathers, these young men have each released mixtapes in the past year, with the promise of albums to come. But for these privileged pseudo-rappers, talent isn't an issue.

In the case of Pablo Dylan, the 16-year-old grandson of the legendary folk singer Bob, and son of the film director Jesse, it's difficult to parse out how, exactly, he perceives his privilege: "I'm the grandson of a man / Nothing less than legendary / That's a lot of pressure / So I Berry Gordy / I am very Motown, bitch." Dylan is the only member of this unholy trinity with a musically-inclined forefather, and it casts a long shadow. His grandfather's fame is arguably the only reason his first mixtape, "10 Minutes," garnered any attention at all. "... We do two different things, and I don't want people to see me for what he has done," Pablo said in an interview with AllHipHop.com. But with lines like "I'm gone with the wind, so you should blow me," it's clear that part of his gimmick is subverting his dear old grandpa's lyrical

## CHET'S MIXTAPE, "GET HAZED," WAS RECEIVED WITH NEAR-UNIVERSAL CRITICAL DERISION, WITH THE A.V. CLUB DESCRIBING HIM AS "A REAL LIFE 'MALIBU'S MOST WANTED.'"

genius, and it's hard to imagine that he'll make enough of a name for himself for people to care.

It's unfair to judge Chet Haze, née Chester Hanks, as an under-stimulated and arrogant child of Hollywood just because his father is the star of *Cast Away*. Judging by a description on his formerly public Facebook profile, Chet could be like any other college student student—his days include "chilling with his boys, attending class, and taking care of business." In song, however, the contrast between him and his everyman-ish father couldn't be more clear. In "White and Purple," his popular Northwestern University-themed remix of Wiz Khalifa's

"Black and Yellow" these two lines come from a place far, far away from Forrest Gump's hometown of Greenbow, Alabama: "Hear the neighbors talk, but you know that they be losin' / I'm trying to walk the walk for the major of my choosin'," and "I got a call from the brothers in the frat house / I'm with my girl, tryin' to get up under that blouse / She a freshman / She a freak though / In the bed, but a lady in the street, yo." Chet's mixtape, "Get Hazed," was received with near-universal critical derision, with The A.V. Club describing him as "a real life *Malibu's Most Wanted*." Chet seems to perfectly embody the stereotype of a white rapper mimicking a culture that he fails to understand.

Rich Hil is an anomaly. Unlike Chet and Pablo, he actually has an arrest record and has been to rehab, facets of his person that *might* give him actual cred. Also, unlike Chet and Pablo, he has managed to gain a foothold in the industry: XXL magazine has written about his "dystopian, drug-fueled tales," and Complex magazine described him as "another success story in the making." Rich has collaborated with Kid Cudi and has signed a deal with Warner Bros. Records. Although Rich Hil is slightly more listenable than both Pablo Dylan and Chet Haze, his lyrics are still vapid,

full of lines like "Spanish bitch lookin' like she from a pageant / Heart as cold like the wind when it passed them / I give her all ma blunts and then she ash them." Although Hil repeatedly uses the phrase "no limos," to invoke his inability to relate to extravagant displays of wealth, it doesn't work too well.

But perhaps this wealth is a good thing for the music of these MCs. None of them are inherently gifted or original artists, but rather hackneyed products of the ultra-upper-class media-obsessed environment in which they grew up. But they've created a strange born-to-riches niche in the hip-hop world. Unlike a sizable portion of the hip-hop community, money is not a driving factor in their aspirations. These kids could have lived the prep school-attending, limousine-riding, polo-playing fantasies of many a Kennedy. As such, their emergence onto the hip-hop scene is only notable for its almost farcical hilarity. What do three white boys from the top one percent know about hip-hop? We'll only know if they continue to produce work. Flow on, forerunners of a new breed. Write rhymes because you can and because you like it, not because you are good at it or because you feel you must. Make your famous forefathers proud. Fuck the haters. ●





# Bursting the Columbia Bubble

the realities of finding work after school

BY MONICA CARTY

ILLUSTRATION BY MADDY KLOSS

Tim Reuter graduated from Columbia College in 2011, with a degree in U.S. History, a 3.9 GPA in his major, and a 3.52 overall. He prepared seriously for his career, taking on an internship in his chosen field at the New York State Department of Criminal Justice, working with the Center for Career Education on his resume, and sending out over 500 applications for jobs. But despite his efforts, Reuter remains unemployed.

Reuter's situation is not uncommon. While students with bachelor's degrees are more likely to find employment than their high school-educated peers, 4.3 percent of students with a bachelor's degree remain unemployed. Yet, despite these statistics, many students at Columbia or Barnard assume that unemployment will not be a problem for them. "The name helps you get a job, even with the economic state of the country," says Hannah Allaman, a Columbia freshman.

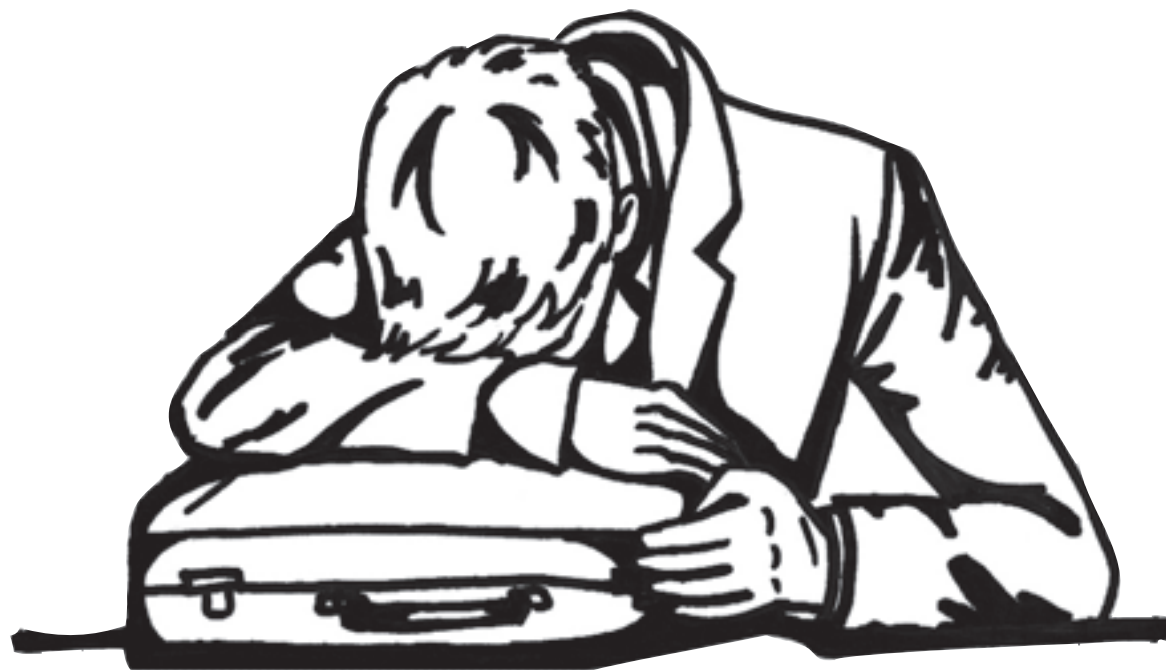
Reuter, too, believed he would not have trouble finding a job as a stop-gap before attending graduate school. But he was surprised to discover that when applying for a job, "competence does not seem to matter, what matters is if the interviewer likes you."

Reuter has found that even a seemingly-successful interview doesn't promise an upcoming paycheck. In an interview with the chief economist of an investment research firm, Reuter had a very productive interview discussing the changing prices of oil, bonds, and Europe's debt crisis. The assistant to the chief economist told Reuter his resumé was "impeccable and speaks for itself." But, more than a week after the interview, Reuter had not heard from the company. Concerned, he called HR and learned that he had not been offered the job. The report from the head of research said of Reuter: "good candidate, good interview, bad for the work culture."

"The Columbia degree can actually be a weapon used against you," Reuter says. Employers sometimes believe that when such students apply to entry-level jobs, they are using the position as a transition job, and will jump ship "when the economy turns around," as Reuter says.

CCE acknowledges that employers can be skeptical of applicants from prestigious schools. "Employers are cautious of their hiring. They want people who really want it, who will invest," Niamh O'Brien, Director of Undergraduate Career Development, says. "Will this student stick it out? Will this student stay with me?"

Different industries have different approaches to employee retention. Shira Schindel, CC '11, found the publishing industry difficult to break into, but eventually realized she would need an internship to land a full-time job. When in-



terviewing, she noticed that employers asked her what she would do if she found a full-time position. Schindel says that since it is common for recent college grads to first take on unpaid internships in the publishing industry, she is lucky that employers are not hostile to candidates who are looking for full-time work while doing internships. And with a steady supply of potential candidates, they are not as concerned that they will jump ship. "You very quickly realize that you're not needed," she says. "You need to prove that you have value."

Not everyone unemployed is unhappy with their prospects. Mia Neustien, BC '11, sees the stalled economy as a chance to take a break from work. Neustien plans to take a gap year, and is currently living rent-free with her parents at home. "I don't want real life to start yet," she says.

During her gap year, Neustien wants to pick up her old hobby of glass blowing, take language classes, travel western Europe, and volunteer. She is currently working part-time in her father's doctor office as an Patient Care Coordinator, where she says she is gaining new skills and experiences that will help her candidacy for jobs when she dives back into the job market.

"I relied really heavily on the Barnard Office of Career Development my senior year," she says, recalling when she applied for jobs. Because OCD was helpful to her then, she plans to use its resources again when she starts looking for work in the future.

Robert Earl, the Director of Barnard's OCD, has changed the office's approach to helping students during the recession. Since it is difficult for some students to find full-time work, he emphasizes looking at other options like internships, as Schindel did.

"Do not be discouraged with taking an internship, it is a way to have an extended interview process."

Nilkanth Patel, SEAS '11 and former Spectator Online Editor, landed his job by turning an internship into a full-time position. During the spring of his senior year, he secured an internship at The New Yorker, and now works at the publication full-time in editorial production. Patel partially credits his success to his connections at Spectator. "I knew people who were doing what I wanted to do," Patel says. "The students here are ambitious enough to find their own internships and jobs. We have a leg up here because people here are valuable resources."

**"YOU VERY QUICKLY REALIZE THAT YOU'RE NOT NEEDED. YOU NEED TO PROVE THAT YOU HAVE VALUE."**

What is crucial for unemployed or underemployed Columbia and Barnard alumni is that they have a support system, usually in the form of parents and family. Reuter says that throughout this aggravating process, his parents have been supportive and understanding of his situation, and are just as infuriated with it as he is. Neustien's parents believe that taking time off is the best option and recommended that she stay with them after graduation. Schindel says that her parents are supportive of her position and that having friends going through the same experiences helps: "I don't feel like a loser by moving back home." ●

# Going Postal

when a routine visit to the post office goes awry

BY JON EDELMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE MANNHEIM

I'm terrible at practical tasks. I mean, I'm not a fucking idiot, I can dress myself and stuff, but anything with, like, steps? Not my strong suit. I can't cook, I can't navigate anywhere, I can't set my alarm clock. So I get upset when I find out that I have to send a book to Texas by "Media Mail." I have no idea what "Media Mail" is. I looked at the USPS website once, and it was demoralizing. And the post office is never a win, because when my incompetence mixes with their incompetence, it's just bad.

Frankly, I'm lucky that I even have an envelope. But someone had sent me a book a little while back, and I had forgotten to throw out the packaging. Nice. All I need is tape, so I set out for the post office. As soon as I get there, I see this counter, with supplies on it, including tape. This is awesome, because I won't have to ask anyone and thereby expose myself as a dolt. After the requisite twisting-of-tape malfunction, I seal up the package and join the line.

While I'm waiting, I scope out the post office workers as they sit subdivided in their cubicles. On the left is this tall black guy, and I overhear him saying "have a nice day" to his customer and on the right is a fat woman, who seems disinterested. I hope for the tall black guy. Lo and behold, the light above his head comes on. It's my lucky day.

I approach the counter, prepared to act like a functional member of society, doing a functional member of society thing.

"Hi. I'd like to ship this, Media Mail."

He takes the envelope, looks it over. The stretchy cord hanging from his glasses smacks his chest.

"This has priority tape on it."

Damn. I'm not sure what that means. "That was an accident. I'm sorry. Uh, what should I do?"

"They might see that and ship it priority," he says.

Oh.

"It'll probably be fine, though."

Awesome. "Awesome," I say.

"But they might ship it priority."

Oh.

"Yeah," he says.

Where the hell does a person buy tape? Does the post office sell postal supplies?

"So, uh, is there any of the right tape that I can borrow? Or can I buy some here?" I ask.

"I don't know if I have any."

I see.

"So should I... What should I do?"

He pauses, and tilts his head to the side, as if to lament the cruel fate of dealing with the incompetent and moronic.

"Take the tape off of the envelope."

I slide my thumbnail under it, trying not to rip it further. He winces.

"You really shouldn't have done that."

This strikes me as a touch moralistic, but accurate nonetheless. Fair enough.

He starts rummaging under the counter, and without stopping, he says, "You really should have known better. You're supposed to be smart—you're in school."

What? No, come on. Can't my ineptitude exist in peace, behind close doors or at least unacknowledged? Maybe I'm not in school, for all he knows. Just because I'm a small white person in Morningside Heights with a huge backpack.

So I say, "Well, there's a difference between being smart and knowing things."

I'm not quite sure what I'm doing. He pops back up, tape in his outstretched hand.

"Oh, you're a smart-ass? See, I don't have no tape for no smart-ass. No!"

And he turns around and strides back towards the bowels of the post office. I don't remember much about what I said next, except that I thought that it was under my breath, and that it ended in "mother-fucker."

"The FUCK you say?!" He starts coming towards me.

"Don't do it," says the fat woman on the right.

"Whatchu said about my mother?"

"Don't do it," says the fat woman on the right.

He's opening the little gate that separates the workers from the customers. This is absurd. I'm ready. He's on the other side of the gate.

"You can't be doing that," says the fat woman on the right.

He lopez up to me. I'm staring directly at his sternum.

"Whatchu said about my mother?" he says. The people waiting on line say nothing.

"It's not worth it to be doing this," says the fat woman on the right.

"You can't TALK about my mother," he yells.

"It wasn't your mother, specifically," I say. I'm not sure what I'm trying to do.

"Don't TALK about my mother," he says. I don't think he heard me.

"I'll take him," says the fat woman on the right.

"You can't be TALKin' about my mother," says the postal worker.

"I will TAKE him," says the fat lady.

I look over.

"I'll take you," she says. I take a step over towards her booth. The postal worker mutters something, probably about his mother, and strides back to his side of the office, the gate swinging behind him. I head over to the fat lady.

"How can I help you?" she asks. She still seems bored.

"I'm sorry," I say. I don't really know if that's the right thing to say.

"We movin' past it," she says.

"I'm really sorry," I say.

"We past it."

I want to ask if that guy's normally like that, or

if he's having a bad day or if he's divorcing his wife because she's a smart-ass, but I'm not totally sure what she thinks of me, so I just ask for tape. She sells it to me, a brown roll in an unwieldy plastic holder. It costs \$6.49, which is ridiculous.

I seal the envelope with the correct tape, open the little plastic door on the counter, and place it inside. The fat lady opens her door, and takes it.

"Media Mail?"

"Media Mail."

She turns to put it somewhere. I stuff the tape in my backpack and look around. I can't see the guy, but the people on line are watching. I turn away and walk towards the door. I feel kind of drunk, or full of testosterone or something. I'm not sure what any of this means for my ego. But, whatever. I won. I got my tape. I mailed my package. We past it.

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Two weeks later, I'm online, and I get a message from the guy in Texas. The book arrived, he tells me, Media Mail. It was stabbed fifty pages deep. ●





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