

Queens College

History Alumni News

Volume 10, No.1, Summer 2009

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Dear History Alumni,

The Academic Year 2008–2009 has been a year in which many good things happened in the department, but it has also been a sad year. In the early fall of 2008, Bob Haan, who retired a number of years ago, died. Most shocking was the death of Benny Kraut a few weeks later. Late in the year, Allen McConnell who, like Bob, had retired a number of years ago, died. And this spring we learned that Jay Kinsbruner had died in the fall of 2007. Later in the newsletter, I will say a little more about each of our four colleagues. I am also printing Elisheva Carlebach's eloquent words at the college memorial for Benny Kraut.

One of the good things that has happened is that our two new members are off to a fine start. We have lacked stability in Russian history since Paul Avrich and Allen McConnell taught, and we have never had an historian of Islam. Kate Antonova, in Russian history, and Kristina Richardson, in Islamic history, promise to give us stability, enthusiasm, and high quality teaching and scholarship.

In addition, we are looking forward to three new faculty members joining the department in the fall. All are in an area of Jewish History, which is important given the loss of Benny Kraut and Elisheva Carlebach's move to Columbia. Two of the lines resulted from Mark Rosenblum and the Jewish Studies program's ability to obtain donor support.

The three new members will be Francesca Bregoli in Sephardic Jewish History, Elissa Bemporad in Eastern European Jewish History and the Holocaust, and Arnold Franklin in Pre-Modern and Medieval Jewish History. All have exceptional credentials and promise to maintain the high quality of the department's Jewish History courses.

Other good things have happened during the year. Professors Sarah Covington and Amy Chazkel were awarded tenure. One of our auditing senior citizen couples, Elmer and Flora Beberfall, and their daughter, Susan, donated money for a prize for a history major going to law school. The World War II Veterans Project under the direction of Professor Bobby Wintermute has a website (<http://qcpages.qc.edu/history/wwiiveterans/index.html>). Our Phi Alpha Theta students are continuing to interview the college's World War II veterans; World War II veterans receiving this newsletter

should contact Prof. Wintermute. And one of our excellent junior history majors, Lawrence Capello, was chosen to give a paper at the Mid-Western Political Science Association.

During the year, there has also been a college-wide endeavor to remember the Queens College students who went south during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. The project was started by an alumnus, Mark Levy, who has donated his papers from his Freedom Summer experience to the library. There was a Women's Studies Conference that had Queens women students who went south recounting their experiences; two, Lucy Komisar and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, were history majors. Another alumnus—not history, but a philosophy major who became a well-known historian—Harvard Sitkoff, has donated his earnings from his new book on Martin Luther King, Jr. for a Queens College Civil Rights Award. And members of our department, particularly Professors Premilla Nadasen, Carol Giardina, and Bobby Wintermute, have played a role in developing a variety of activities on civil rights throughout the year.

Although we have lost several of our retired professors, other retirees are still active. I'm in regular communication with Mike Wreszin, and he came to campus for the presentation of the Wreszin Writing Prize. I have seen Vivian Gruder and Jon Peterson several times during the year. And I received an email from Ralph Della Cava (busy as ever). Martin Pine and Leo Hershkowitz, though retired, continue to teach, too, as adjuncts, and Martin keeps me informed about Stuart Prall. And occasionally we receive a note from Keith Eubank.

You will find in this newsletter Katherine Antonova's and Kristina Richardson's pieces on their experiences in their first year at Queens College. Carol Vogt, a graduate student winner of the Arnold Franco Prize, has a piece in which she discusses the impact of the department on her life. Finella Balsamo, a graduating senior, also discusses the importance of her study of history. And there is Elisheva Carlebach's fine tribute to Benny Kraut and my reminiscences of our colleagues who have died.

Finally, please stay in touch with what is happening at the college by going to the Alumni Affairs website at www.qc.cuny.edu/alumni_affairs.

Frank Warren

REMEMBERING

I knew Allen McConnell before I came to Queens. Allen was a young instructor at Brown University, and I was a graduate student there. We socialized, especially in the early summer of 1962 when Allen had returned to his Rhode Island home after, I believe, his second year at Queens and while I was just completing my PhD. And it was Allen who paved my way to Queens, informing me of the opening and calling attention to the chair, Charles Hallberg, of my credentials. I therefore owe a lot to Allen who through the years, despite differences over issues on campus, remained a good friend to me and my whole family. Allen was a reserved person, but he had strong beliefs and opinions that sometimes ran counter to my strong opinions, but he never let those opinions interfere with our friendship. I always enjoyed his company, his wit, and the droll comments he made on academic life at Queens. One of his former students, Mark Simon, now teaching part-time in the department, remembers him as a fine teacher, scholar, and always a gentleman. That's also how I think of him.

Bob Haan came to Queens the same year as I did: 1962. As newcomers, we immediately had much in common teaching multisections of the old CC 1 and 2, although I am sure Bob as a Europeanist was far more effective than I, an Americanist struggling to stay ahead of the students by one day. In the mid-1960s, my wife and I used to have beach parties (afternoons at the local beach and back to our house to cook out) that involved many of the younger and part-time faculty: Bob Factor, Jay Gordon, Ruth Graham, Vivian Gruder, Jon Peterson, Harvard Sitkoff, Steve Buttner (maybe you'll remember some of the names), and Bob. Bob wasn't much of a water person, but he seemed to always enjoy himself and the company. Bob was quiet, thoughtful, a voice of reason in the days when political passions were high. In our internal political battles where, for years, I was on the losing side, Bob was the strategist. We couldn't boast many—or any—successes, but we had a lot of fun—and laughs—along the way. When the college developed its ties with the reopened Townsend Harris High School, it did well in choosing Bob as the coordinator between the college and the high school. Bob's first priority was always teaching—he was an exceptional teacher himself—and the job required someone

Continued on page 2

A TRIBUTE TO BENNY KRAUT FROM ELISHEVA CARLEBACH



Elisheva Carlebach

Dear Friends,
Several months have passed, and it is still difficult for me to conceive of Professor Benny Kraut in the past tense. Benny was such a life force: a pillar of strength,

of good counsel, of ultimate integrity, a wonderful colleague, and a good friend. It is very difficult to summon the right words to paint a picture of a person of so many dimensions, whose accomplishments extended in so many directions, who excelled at so many things. Benny had a rare combination of lightness and depth: on his light side, always ready with a joke or quip, ready to roll up his sleeves and work. Yet, there was nothing superficial about him. He was a brilliant and productive scholar, a builder and visionary, an eloquent speaker, and a nurturing teacher.

Benny Kraut arrived at Queens College from Cincinnati approximately a decade ago, with a vision of what a Jewish Studies program should look like. He was that rarest of creatures in contemporary academia, a person who wore his Jewish identity with such grace and in such a positive way that he was able to galvanize an entire campus and the world beyond it into a powerhouse that became a model for universities and faculties across the nation.

He created a sense of community out of disparate elements, by making so many people who had been indifferent feel that they were stakeholders. It is of the very essence of true education to bring together divergent paths, approaches, and personalities; to unite them in the quest to break down barriers to

human knowledge and to spread this knowledge to the world beyond the ivory tower. Taken in the aggregate, the lectures, concerts, films, and dances that Benny brought to Queens create a vast monument to Jewish culture and creativity. The audiences who came to hear his lecture series came away uplifted, invigorated, replenished. Benny worked tirelessly for Queens College and for the Jewish Studies program. He turned the superlative into the normative, for the sole reward, as the Queens College motto proclaims, in order to serve.

Benny made path-breaking scholarly contributions to many important fields. He situated Jews between Protestants and Catholics in early twentieth century America, he guided the perplexed through the maze of innumerable variations of Jewish thought, and his case studies of individual thinkers read as just that: rich portraits of the entire person, the process by which each arrived at his conclusions.

Modern Judaism, the Holocaust, the history of anti-Semitism, American Jewry, Jewish reaction to suffering, modern Orthodoxy—a roll call of the most urgent subjects about Jewish life. Benny did not just write books and hundreds of articles about the subjects that interested him, he was the ultimate teacher, conveying to his students his passion for the subject, for rigorous analysis, for its intellectual excitement. Students would tell me that they had never worked so hard, nor felt as inspired, as they had in Professor Kraut's courses. He loved his students as though they were family (and especially loved it when his students became families) . . . He was the launching pad for several distinguished scholarly careers.

He had a probing intellect. When candidates came to interview, guests to lecture, when he annotated the papers of students and colleagues alike, he would focus his questions like lasers. On the

innumerable search committees, after the guest lecture, Benny would inevitably be the first with questions. He would tell the rest of the committee members: "It's not that I really

need to know the scholarship about Russia or India or Africa. I want to know how they think." Benny was a thinker for whom thinking things through mattered deeply, but unlike so many people who lived the scholarly life, he was a doer, a person who lived to do for others, always putting off his own work to make someone else's shine. Benny always showed immense respect for every human being, and they responded in kind. Benny was a straight arrow, a person who didn't know how to be false.

Because I had the privilege of having two of Benny's children, Yehuda and Sefi, as students, I always asked about them. He could not have been prouder of them. He knew the special intellectual and spiritual abilities of each one. On the wall of his office he pasted up the pictures of his granddaughters. His regard for Penny, his wife, shone through whenever he spoke of her. Benny's family was his pride and joy; whenever they attended college events he was proud to introduce them.

Benny inspired so many people on this campus. He left an indelible mark on so many young minds and hearts. As time passes, we are grateful that we were able to draw from Benny's well of strength, of wisdom, of passion, of integrity. We will never find his like, but we can, and I know that his many students will, continue to nurture his legacy.



Benny Kraut

Remembering continued

dedicated to teaching. Perhaps some of our alumni remember the board game Bob invented that involved European military and diplomatic history. I can't remember the details, but his students used to come into the office to play with him and each other. It was a way he involved students in active learning. Bob suffered from cancer for a number of years; I was glad that through John Catanzarita I was able to have one last conversation with him in Michigan where he had gone when he required greater care. We reminisced, discussed politics and old friends. I didn't have to say good-bye, but we both knew that the end was not too far off.

Thinking about Jay Kinsbruner takes me back to the mid-1960s. Jay arrived two or three years after I did. And my oldest memories are of Jay, Sol Lutnick, Stanley Hirshson, and myself meeting in Stanley's office on Friday afternoons to talk history. Inevitably the conversation would go on to social matters. Stanley, unmarried at the time, was very shy socially, and Jay was the outgoing single man who knew the social life

of the Catskills through his father. Jay would give Stanley social advice, while Sol and I would watch bemused at the incongruity of Stanley being able to follow Jay's advice. I guess Jay had a liking for office gatherings because my most distinct memory from later in the 1980s and 1990s is of Jay along with Jay Gordon and Frank Merli—sometimes joined by David Syrett and occasionally I'd wander in—meeting regularly in Jay Gordon's office on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons to discuss academic life, the economy, and politics. It seems to me like yesterday, but almost fifteen years have passed, and now all three, along with David, are gone.

While the deaths of Allen, Bob, and Jay take me back to the distant past, the death of Benny Kraut forces me into the present. His death this past fall at a relatively young age was shocking to the department and to his students. His vibrancy and his enthusiasm seemed eternal. The day before his heart attack, I had met him on the stairs and we had discussed the future. He seemed to have a permanent place in the department. From our first extended conversation when,

recently hired as Director of Jewish Studies, he came to me to let me know he wanted to be an active part of the History Department, to our second to last conversation where he expressed his appreciation for a reduced schedule that would allow him to complete a book, he was an ideal colleague: committed and willing to do the work. We did not always agree on issues, but we always respected our shared commitment to the department and the college. Most of all, I will always remember Benny as a teacher—articulate, dynamic, forcing his students to think about the big issues in history and in life. The shock and sadness of his students when I informed them of his death was pervasive. A week or two after obtaining a replacement for his History of Anti-Semitism colloquium, I asked his replacement how it was going. She told me that she had asked the students on her first day of class why they were taking the class. She said that she was a little surprised that almost everyone's answer was not the subject matter, but that Professor Kraut was teaching it. I said "I'm not surprised."

Frank Warren

My First Year at QC

Katherine Antonova

As I know from perusing previous issues of the alumni newsletter, it's becoming repetitive to the point of excess to say that it is a joy to join the History Department at Queens College. However, the truth, in fact, is that Queens was my dream job from the start: A good liberal arts college in NYC with a student body diverse in every respect, including émigrés from the region I study, Russia and Eastern Europe, and part of the unique and historic CUNY system—what's not to love?

As I'm now nearing the end of my first year, I'm still pinching myself that I was lucky enough to end up at a place with congenial, warm colleagues who do exciting work and students who keep me on my toes in the best possible way. As a graduate TA and instructor at Columbia, I had taught the “non-traditional” students of the Columbia School of General Studies, which has a student body similar to that of QC. Teaching Columbia GS students had been my favorite experience there, and I looked forward to something similar at QC.

I was right to look forward, but perhaps didn't fully appreciate either the benefits or the challenges of a student population like this one. My students here exhibit more deference than entitlement, which seems increasingly to be a rarity in any sphere. But their occasional deference doesn't stop them from asking questions and offering ideas in class, and this is perhaps my greatest pleasure in teaching here. Not only are my QC students more likely than others I've had to offer a wide variety of perspectives, but they also seem less shy of making mistakes or asking a “dumb” question and more relentless in seeking a satisfying answer. In short, they help enormously to foster an enriching learning environment.

At the same time, many Queens students (in addition to also holding down jobs and in some cases supporting families) arrive with inadequate preparation for college, lacking the practice and principles in reading, writing, and critical thinking that we can more often take for granted in elite private colleges. QC students often have more difficulty than I expect in analyzing a text in writing. Yet, when I ask the class to reason out real-world questions like: “What does the Cuban Missile Crisis look like from the Soviet point of view? Why did they put missiles there? What did they hope to gain? What were they afraid of?” my QC students are quick to perceive both the obvious and the subtle and to leap easily from there to raising other questions of their own.

My best experience this year was an experiment. I tried out two role-playing games in my survey class on Russian history: one based on a murder trial of revolutionary terrorists in the 1870s and one based on a factory purge in Stalin's USSR. I structured the games as solidly as I could and held my breath, hoping the students would prepare well and take it seriously. They outshone

my wildest dreams—both games were uproariously funny at times, and they served well to bond the class and generate discussion. But the best result was how each student stuck to the historical characters they'd been given, making choices and acting according to how they believed that person would have done in the circumstances. The outcomes of both games were remarkably accurate historically, and, most impressively, I found that some of those students who were struggling most to express their understanding in writing were able to show great depth of understanding of historical events and concepts when allowed to express it by this other means. I couldn't be happier with the results. I hope this first year marks just the beginning of a long career at QC filled with exciting experiments and the rich satisfaction that comes from knowing a class has accomplished something concrete and important.

IT'S TIME WE MET

The first year anywhere is one of countless introductions—on the first day of class (and again in office hours, where the one-on-one setting and the personalized space elicit different sorts of questions: “Are you Muslim?”), around the department, in meetings, at lunches and banquets, and in the chance hallway encounter. In these conversations I have learned how the lives of our students and faculty extend far beyond our 77-acre campus through work obligations, children, families with branches in the city and outside the United States, community work, pet projects. Their identities are complex, and, as such, they engage with course material in unexpected ways. Thankfully, for synergy's sake, so are mine, and so do I.

I am a Detroit native who feels most at home in Paris, France; a woman who can unintentionally pass as male; a black mother with an Italian-American daughter; an atheist; an aesthete; an Ivy League graduate; a state school graduate; a multilingual woman who too often finds herself tonguetied in any language; and an able-bodied historian of disability cultures and male friendship in the late medieval Middle East.

For my students and me, how do some of these apparent contradictions—between religious fundamentalism and queer rights activism, between femininity and masculinity—make us ask unusual questions about history and shape our academic work? How have we reintroduced history, as practice and past, to ourselves and to each other? Together in class we confronted, though not always overcame, the cringe factor associated with so many terms like “fundamentalism,” “abortion,” and “graffiti,” and our discussions were for the most part informative and entertaining.

A student in my “Place, Travel, and Self” seminar was a graffiti artist who had worked in Afghanistan and New York City and was particularly intrigued by an upcoming week's session on anonymous medieval Arabic graffiti. He had

read ahead on the syllabus and wanted to discuss his reactions with me. He was blunt; he didn't feel that his art had anything in common with the verses and murals of artists who had inked and carved their poems and pictures on walls and boat hulls in Iraq. We stepped outside our classroom and walked past oversized photographs of Queens scenes hanging on the corridor walls. He stopped to explain graffiti tags visible in the pictures (the tag “TRU” signifies “The Racking Unit,” a group so named because its members steal spray paint and markers) and related anecdotes about key New York City artists, reorienting me to Queens and its elaborate social history.

Graffiti, in my student's imagination, centered on local fame and group solidarity. I could see why medieval Arabic graffiti had struck him as obscure and lofty, like an academic exercise. I needed to reintroduce the topic to him and show how public recognition may have been an aspect of this art, as well. I raised the possibility of the anonymous medieval works having been composed by women, slaves, barely literate individuals, or other socially disadvantaged people whose stories are so often obscured in “traditional” archives. Their graffiti, like this student's identity or work, could contain many complexities. A slave who created graffiti art in medieval Baghdad may very well have been seeking to claim forever a public presence, or may have been saying by way of introduction: “You may not know me, but lo, here I am! And isn't it time we met?”

Kristina Richardson

<http://qcpages.qc.edu/~krichardson>

Graduate Student Carol Vogt

Graduate study in history was a dream deferred for me but not a dream that dried up like a raisin in the sun (apologies to Langston Hughes). I thank the History Department at Queens College for that bit of luck.

I did graduate work in social studies education earlier in my career and worked as a high school classroom teacher, a social studies methods instructor, a consultant for the Board of Regents, and a Curriculum Assistant. I care deeply about education and have spent my professional life working to improve social studies teaching and learning. But history has always been my intellectual passion. I was hesitant about going back to school after retiring and feared I would be uncomfortable as a student among much younger people. I wondered how faculty members would react to teaching someone my age and how my presence in a class might alter other students' experiences.

I needn't have worried. From the very first day, it was clear that there is no typical graduate history student at Queens. What students and faculty have in common is a shared passion for historical study and an open and welcoming manner. Everything else is irrelevant.

I have been given an extraordinary opportu-

nity, one that allows me to pursue a dream rather than regret a path not taken. The History Department and the greater Queens College community have given me an academic home in which I can become the historian I've always wanted to be. For that, I will always be grateful.

Graduating Student Finella T. Balsamo

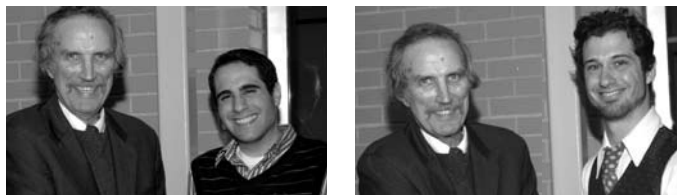
In the summer of 2008, I decided to major in history. At the time, I only knew one thing: that I had some sort of fondness of history, and I wasn't sure if it was because I did well in the subject as a high school student, or simply because I truly had a passion for it. In the past year-and-a-half at Queens College, I have truly discovered how much I love history.

A professor of mine once said: "History is wonderful because it repeats itself, and yet is created each and every day of our lives." This in many ways is true, and, as a history major at Queens College, the pure importance and the purpose of historical knowledge is now clear to me. My experience at QC has been a truly gratifying one that has well prepared

me for my future as a history teacher. I have learned so many new things that were once unimaginable to me. As a student of Professor Frank Warren's, I am honored, and I am thankful for his lectures. His course that was focused on the 1920s and the 1930s was a class that I will never forget, because it inspired me to teach. What I gained from this course was not only a very broad amount of historical information, but also that spark in my mind that made me realize what topics I love the most and what I would enjoy doing for the rest of my professional life.

Another member of the Queens College History Department, who sadly passed away in September of 2008, also made a huge impact on my decisions as a student. In the short amount of time that I had Professor Benny Kraut as my teacher, he pulled me into his classroom in a way that I was so interested that I never wanted to leave. He was passionate, intense, and just an amazing professor. Even though it was a very short time, I feel lucky to have been able to have that experience of Professor Kraut, as well as all of my other history professors at Queens College.

HONORS PARTY MAY 2008



At left, Professor Frank Warren with one of the student prizewinners, Jonathan Giead; and at right, with Merli Prizewinner, Tom Hatsis

ARNOLD FRANCO LUNCHEON MARCH 2009



Arnold Franco with Professor Bobby Wintermute

Franco Prizewinner, Carol Vogt and Arnold Franco

Wreszin Prizewinners



Prof. Carol Giardina, prizewinner Adrienne Motel, Professor Emeritus Michael Wreszin, prizewinner William Gschlecht, and Frank Warren smile for the camera.

**QUEENS COLLEGE
HISTORY ALUMNI NEWS
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
65-30 KISSENA BOULEVARD
FLUSHING, NY 11367**

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
FLUSHING, NY
PERMIT NO. 48