Queens College

A LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Dear History Alumni,

Once more, I’m later than I wished. Maybe this year I should blame it on the long dreary winter, with its wet weather. But it’s beautiful on Long Island right now, so I shall get down to work.

My first task is once more to thank you for your continued support. The Newsletter, however, is about more than support. It is also about keeping in touch. We try to let you know of all the main things happening in the department, and, in turn, all the professors welcome hearing from you. From a communication from Clare Friedland, Class of 1957, we learned that Mark Willner, Class of 1961, was honored last summer by the Consul General of Japan for his contributions to promoting understanding of Japan among teachers in the New York City area. In addition, you can communicate with the college through the alumni email (alumni@qc.cuny.edu).

Another year has passed. Luckily, we have escaped the series of departmental deaths that have occurred in recent years, although there was a memorial in the fall for Paul Avrich who, as you know, died early in 2006.

Among the exciting events this year were the lectures and concerts Mark Rosenblum organized around his program to foster understanding between the Jewish and Muslim worlds. That theme is central to the class that he is teaching for undergraduates and high school teachers. And he is present in a series of events that were sponsored by the Jewish Studies program and the Michael Harrington Center. Whenever I think of Mark, I think of the famous quote from Eleanor Roosevelt, “I would rather light a candle than curse the darkness.”

Another moving event was the dedication last November of the memorial to Queens College’s World War II veterans. I think it is fitting that in this Newsletter, the originator, benefactor, and moving spirit behind the memorial, Arnold Franco, Class of ’43, describes his response to the dedication and the dedication.

This coming fall, our latest hire, Kristin Cellio, a specialist in United States women’s history, will join the faculty. The department continues to be productive in its scholarship.

This spring saw the publication of the second volume of the collected letters of Admiral Rodney edited by the late David Syrett. Elena Frangakis-Syrett has generously donated much of David’s fine book collection to the Queens College library. For those of you interested in news of retirees, I can report that Martin Pine and Leo Hershkowitz continue to teach as adjuncts in the department. Jon Peterson stops in from time to time; he is busy with his scholarship and his travels. Stuart Prall had bypass surgery and is doing well. I occasion-ally see Allen McConnell and except for some bulky feet, he, too, is doing well. I more often see (and exchange emails) with Mike Wrezan. A bad back has slowed him down, but he is as lively and spirited as ever. I also see Vivian Grader, who is just completing the index for a book to be published by Harvard University Press. A recent email from Jay Kinsbruner indicates that he is well.

What will you find in the Newsletter besides my ramblings and the above-mentioned piece by Arnold Franco? There are three pieces by our newest fall-term faculty members about their first year on campus. Satarud Sen and Bob Winternute are brand-new to Queens College. Peter Vellon taught here for several years before becoming a full-time professor. I think you will find their impressions interesting; they are linked by the common thought that it is not always easy teaching here, but it is always exciting and rewarding.

This May, we will celebrate another Honors Party, when the awards to our top students are handed out. As I think of another group of exceptional students graduating and of my long years at Queens College, I cannot help being proud. In 1962, I came into a department that already had a record of excellence. Through the period from the 1960s to the late 1980s, when we sometimes strug-gled internally, there was no question that the history department had a well-deserved reputation for scholarship and teaching. Then I come to our faculty in 2007—the majority of whom have been hired since 2000—a faculty I’ve been privi-léged to help shape. I think of the “old timers.” Professors McManus, O’Brien, Alters, and Rosenthal; they are still among our star teachers. I think of the brilliant scholar-ly and teaching careers of those who arrived in the 1980s—Distinguished Professor Morris Rossal and Professors Elshaya Cadebache and Elena Frangakis-Syrett. Next, I think of our young faculty. Starting with Permina Nadasen and Joel Allen, and thinking about each new hire, year by year, I am again proud of our fac-ulty. I am also proud of the students—both honors recipients and others—whose lives were touched by our professors. This exciting mixture of faculty and students attests to the continued possibility of excellence in public education, despite its financial limitations and all the other difficulties it faces.

Frank Warren
Honors Awards

President Warren and Phi Alpha Theta Advisor

Women’s Studies Director Joyce Warren and Women’s Studies Prize and History Honors winner, Marilyn Norton

President Muyskens, Arnold Franco, Professors Joel Allen and Frank Warren, Alumni Director Joe Brotek, and students who worked on the World War II Memorial Project

President Muyskens, Arnold Franco, Professors Joel Allen and Frank Warren, Alumni Director Joe Brotek, and students who worked on the World War II Memorial Project

the research into the veterans’ biographies be done by undergrads in the history department, so that in doing the work they could form a tie with the pioneer QC students. With his agreement, I called Professor Frank Warren, history chair, who was equally enthusiastic, and he decided to have Professor Joel Allen, Phi Alpha Theta’s advisor, head the team. And so the project was quickly underway.

With the avid help of many people on campus, the planning, design, construction, and dedication of the plaza took less than a year. I suspect that must be a record. During the construction period, I attended several meetings held by the history researchers. I was impressed by their growing involvement in the stories that they were uncovering. One student commented how moved he felt when he realized that all the men who died were younger than he was.

As this project came closer to fulfillment, it became a very emotional affair for me—the realization of something that was beyond my personal goals. At the dedication last Nov. 10, when I ended my speech with the words “these 59 men whose names are inscribed on this plaque have at last returned to the very spot they left over 60 years ago and this has now become hallowed ground,” my voice broke and I left the podium in tears.

The vision of the researchers and Professor Allen reading the 59 names at the dedication, with each veteran having a brief bio and each name accompanied by the ringing of a quiet chime, still brings a tear to my eye.

Arnold Franco ’43

THREE PROFESSORS TALK ABOUT THEIR FIRST YEAR AT QUEENS COLLEGE

Satasrul Sen’s First Year Review

Since joining the history department at Queens College in the fall of 2006, I have had many occasions to thank my stars that this new job—my third full-time position—comes with the added bonus of living in New York City. My formative years were spent in Seattle and the San Francisco Bay Area, where my family had migrated from. A period of living in the Midwest followed. To find myself once again in a crowded and lively coastal city with an immense diversity of origins, languages, and cuisines has been a terrific experience.

I am a historian of modern South Asia. Queens College, like other CUNY schools, has had scholars in my field in the past, and it was reassuring to me that I was a replacement hire rather than the first of my kind. It meant that some of the basics of teaching and doing research, such as pre-existing courses and perhaps a few shelves of library books relevant to my work, might already be in place. My hope about the library turned out to be largely illusory, but I discovered compensatory methods of finding what I needed: using the New York Public Library and Inter-Library Loans frequently, and applying for a research fellowship at Columbia.)

Another factor that encouraged me to come to Queens is that the department includes several junior scholars engaged in exciting areas of research and publication. Over the past several months, I have been fortunate to count some theses of these colleagues as friends and collaborators. They—and senior colleagues—have been extraordinarily supportive of me in a period of personal difficulties such as the recent death of my father, which required me to fly to India at very short notice. I am indeed very grateful for that.

An aspect of academic life at Queens College that I initially found a bit startling is the relaxed requirements of collegiality, i.e., the lack of a rigorous expectation that faculty members assemble often for some purpose or the other. It is quite possible here to go to an entire semester without seeing the faces or knowing the names of a significant part of the department. I have actually come to appreciate this, since few things are as aggravating as frequent department meetings about the minutia of administration. It is refreshing to discover academics (and students) who have lives outside the department and campus.

Collegiality at Queens College is substantially what you make of it. There are, I found, informal networks of scholars who meet to present and discuss their ongoing publication projects. I benefited from these discussions in my own work. Needless to say, these meetings also serve an important social-collaborative purpose by bringing scholars into contact with their peers within and across particular disciplines.

No review of a first year at Queens College would be complete without a few words about the undergraduates. I should say honestly that I have never before encountered students like these. My survey classes have drawn substantial enrollment from the South Asian diaspora community, but for the most part, these are not the children of the “model minority.” Many are the first in their families to attend college, and lack the conventional middle-class understanding of the requirements and objectives of higher education. The sheer diversity of their abilities is breathtaking: While some are highly gratifying in their personal curiosity, critical skills, and fluid writing, others are stunningly underprepared for college.

Finding such differently equipped students in the same class has forced me to rethink and retool my teaching. There have been episodes that I can only describe as spectacular failures to communicate: In my first semester, I assigned a paper on Rudyard Kipling and was confronted with an epidemic of plagiarism. This is obviously a challenge for me as much as it is for the students, and I am still learning, with many suggestions from amused colleagues who have seen it all before. On the other hand, when I guest-lectured in an interdisciplinary honors class, I found the students wonderfully eager to discuss the impact of Jeremy Bentham on modern identity, and walked away with what might be described as a “teaching buzz.” All things considered, I am very pleased to be here, and look forward to a happy association with the college.

Peter Vellon’s Official History at QC

For many reasons, Queens College was very familiar to me before I started last fall as a tenure track assistant professor. After growing up in Queens and living here for a large part of my life, I remembered Queens College campus as the place where you could sneak onto the tennis courts and play without a permit. (I’m sad to say I have recently relocated to Suffolk County, and I’m still not sure where that is.) I also remember the advertising blitz Queens undertook in the 1980s, when away placards asked riders, “Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Queens... What’s So Funny?” Not knowing much about the college at that time, I didn’t have an answer and was left to ponder more important questions, such as whether the Mets would win that night.

In many ways, my official history at QC began after I decided to change careers in 1992 (a story I will not bore you with) and pursued a PhD in history at the CUNY Graduate Center. During that process, I taught at QC as an adjunct lecturer, and then served in a dual appointment as director of the Calandra Institute and as a visiting assistant professor in the history department. After three interesting years in that role, I have gleefully settled in as a full-time member of the department.

Throughout my experience here, I have been consistently inspired by a diverse student body that cuts across racial, ethnic, and gendered lines. For the most part, these are hard-working folks, many of them are the first in their families to graduate from college.

While my expectations and standards remain very high, I empathize with their struggle to manage multiple jobs, attend school full time, and in some cases raise children. Although I understand the stress they are under (having endured the same pressures), I urge them to embrace the challenges of meeting their goals, but always keep life in perspective. In other words, sometimes a five-point quiz is not the end of the world.

I consider myself privileged to be in a department, college, and university where

Arnold Franco and Franco prize winner, Kevin T. McManus

President and award-winner, Eva Ruthner

President Muyskens, Arnold Franco, Professors Joel Allen and Frank Warren