Colleagues Carry On a Tradition & Make Winners of Young Writers by Mike Pekarofski

Nearly a decade ago, Professor Barbara Grossman chaired the 1st Annual High School Seniors Writing Contest, sponsored by the Humanities Division and organized by ECC faculty members.

Though Barbara has since passed on, others have continued this important activity which provides outreach, inspiration and encouragement to high school students from various public and private schools located in Essex County.

The Barbara J. Grossman High School Writing Contest and Conference, as it has appropriately come to be known, is now co-chaired by Professors Carol Kushner of Humanities and Jessica Vanderhoff of the West Essex Campus Library. This coming spring, the 10th annual contest will be held at the Main Campus, as visiting high school students and aspiring young writers are treated to a full day of interactive activities, including workshops conducted by ECC faculty members, a literary trivia contest, a musical performance by Richard Alston, and lunch, preceded by a welcome from Dean White.

Of course, all of these activities lead up to the announcement of the contest winners in several writing categories: personal and analytical essay writing, poetry and short stories. At the end of the day, more than one thousand dollars in prizes is awarded, thanks to the generous support of Dean Susan Mulligan and donations given by various publishing companies.

By tapping into students’ creative abilities, the contest seeks to reach students who may not excel in traditional academic activities, but who thrive when given the opportunity to be creative. “Hopefully, we can reach students who may not normally be college bound,” observed Professor Kushner. Adding to her co-chair’s remarks, Professor Vanderhoff noted that the contest “opens the eyes of students who aren’t your average academic achievers.”

As the contest comes together each year, the hard work of the Co-Chairs and many faculty organizers and presenters seems to be its own reward. “When I started doing it,” admits Kushner, “I mostly did it for Barbara – it was her life – but each year, I see that it gets the students extraordinarily excited and motivated.”

From Vanderhoff’s perspective, the contest also represents a great introduction to ECC and the community college in general, as students see that “the college is comparable to any four-year school” they might otherwise choose. While the contest will continue to focus on the literary arts and feature workshops on topics such as poetry and songwriting, Professor Vanderhoff would like to branch out and include...

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2009 Book Club Review: *House of Cards* by Jeff Lee

In the early 1990s, I went to a train and toy show in Jersey City. (I am into model trains, toy cars and other trappings of my '80s childhood.) While standing at a table with old Hess trucks for sale – the same ones Hess stations sell around holiday time in November – one man noted that one of the more popular trucks was worth $45. The dealer, without missing a beat, said simply, “It's only a $45 truck if someone gives you $45 for it.” This real-world economics lesson explains much about William Cohan's book *House of Cards: A Tale of Hubris and Wretched Excess on Wall Street*. On Wall Street, you are only worth what others think you are worth. And when others think your value – or your company's value – is worthless, the interconnected net that is the world financial market can fall like the cards in the book’s title.

The book is split into 3 sections. The first covers the 10 days in March 2008 when Bear Stearns went under and almost dragged the world’s markets with it. The second looks at the first 85 years of Bear Stearns history and the colorful characters associated with it through August 2001. The third section, aptly titled “The End of the Second Gilded Age,” covers from Sept. 11, 2001 to just before March of ’08. Each section averages 150 pages and could probably be read out of sequence without losing context.

While events are too recent to call this a historical book, it is definitely a worthy documentation of recent events. Cohan has gotten most of the players in this story to discuss what happened and how they saw things from where they were. While some individuals declined comment for the book, the ones who did talk seemed comfortable and frank in discussing their roles – and the roles of others – in the Bear Stearns collapse. It is their discussions that make this an enjoyable, if lengthy, read.

I read this book in just over 2 months with several stops in between. However, just as in good fiction, once I started reading again all of the previously covered material came to mind rather quickly. Also, there will be a new afterward for the paperback edition of the book, due out in 2010, covering the additional fallout from the Bear Stearns bailout that has occurred since the hardcover edition was released in 2009.

Review of “The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” by Jeff Lee, MIT class of ’82

If you want to take courses with some of the best writers in America, where do you go? Harvard? (No.) Berkeley? (No again.) Iowa. (Nah.) Princeton? (Maybe, but the turnover is on par with the Burger King on Nassau Street.) Try MIT. What, that engineering school down the street from Harvard?? Yes, dear friends. A. R. Gurney, Alan Brinkley, Steve Tapscott, Elizabeth Bishop – OK, Liz died before she got to The Infinite Corridor, but she'd already signed the contract so she counts – they all could be found at one time (except Liz) teaching Intro to Fiction or French Poetry to the Techno crowd before “hitting it big” in the literary world. The latest example of academic prowess from MIT’s Humanities Department is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the Pulitzer Prize winning book by MIT writing professor Junot Diaz.

The book is, in essence, a 335-page discussion on the life of the title character, a Dominican-American living in Paterson. Jersey figures prominently in the book: Don Bosco, the Bergenline and Middlesex County College all get mentioned. Significant parts of the story also happen in Wildwood, Paterson and Rutgers-New Brunswick. (Can’t wait for the movie!) And the book is written in a style that makes you feel less like you’re reading a book and more like you’re at a restaurant on Kennedy Boulevard sharing a meal with the book’s Dominican storyteller and listening to his family tale of triumph and woe (heavy on the woe). The narrator tells this story, though at times it is told from his perspective and at other times it is told from the perspective (and relative times) of Oscar, his Mother, his sister, grandparents and other relatives, though still in the Narrator’s voice. (Hey, it’s all about *familia*!) This moving back and forth in time and perspective provides a nice way of tying together all the things that make Oscar who he is (or, rather, was). The book is relatively

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Writing Contest—continued

faculty participation from other disciplines and a focus on research and documentation. Also, in addition to awarding prizes for student writing, a scholarship has been established, thanks to Barbara Grossman’s daughter Helena.

The Barbara J. Grossman High School Writing Contest and Conference will take place in April 2010, but since it is never too late to plan ahead, Professors Vanderhoff and Kushner invite ECC faculty to offer workshops, help behind the scenes or just stop by to see some smiling young faces.

Oscar Wao —continued

heavy on the Spanish (but you won’t need the Spanish-English dictionary. Trust me.), Dominican history (Yes, read the footnotes, even if you know the history!), parentheses (‘nuff said!) and Science Fiction references (At one point, Diaz makes indirect reference to a short story that last showed up in a ‘60s era collection of Sci-Fi short stories for kids. Book’s out of print now; costs 3 figures on e-Bay today. There’s a copy on our shelf at home; my wife’s favorite book from her childhood.)

Good Cop/Bad Cop: A Different Take on Cell Phones
by Mike Pekarofski

The sixty-something bailiff was personable with a good sense of humor. He also had a gun. Before the judge entered the courtroom, he made it clear that there was to be no gum chewing or eating, and then he made an embarrassed seventy-year-old woman throw out her soda. As flashbacks of Catholic grammar school and junior-high football practice coalesced in my mind, he handed down the clincher: “Turn off your cell phones. And, if you don’t know how, I’ll be glad to do it for you!” No one dared argue, and as citizens were selected for jury duty over the next 90 minutes, not one person even thought about texting, “twittering,” or taking that “emergency call.”

Then, there is the “good cop” approach. It was a ballroom dancing class in an upper middleclass town. There were doctors, a lawyer, corporate executives, a nurse, parents, and me – such a horrible dancer I’d have traded this experience for more jury duty in a heartbeat. But, despite the cadre of “important” people with huge responsibilities, not once in twelve weeks did someone walk out to take an “emergency” call. Even more astonishing is the fact that the instructor of this voluntary non-credit course never once mentioned cell phones. People automatically left their BlackBerries and phones with their street shoes and coats and were simply out of reach for the 90-minute class.

Both of these anecdotes say a lot about where our priorities lie and how they can suddenly shift when prompted a little by the proverbial carrot, or the stick. They often reflect the “good cop/bad cop” approach we, as educators, take when it comes to fighting the ever-escalating battle for our students’ attention.

With this in mind, I regularly share these experiences with classes on the first day. In addition to laying down the law, the goal from that point is to transform required learning into something so fun and engaging that students forget about those “emergency” calls. At the end of the day, there is the loftier goal of having students re-prioritize when it comes to all the forces competing for their - and our - attention. Ultimately, I try to pose the bigger existential question: why are we here - in this class, in college?

But, competing for students attention in the classroom is only half the battle. The other half is getting them to resist the ever-growing temptation to plug in and tune out, and to think of learning as just another button to press or application to click. Whether it be the cell phone or the iPod, students, and we as a larger culture, now leave little time for social interaction and perhaps less for personal or intellectual reflection. A paper topic, math problem or question of immense social importance usually does not have time to percolate between 11:30 a.m. and 12:50 p.m. Learning needs to be a part of you, something you own, something that fundamentally changes some element of who you are and how you see the world: your intellectual DNA.

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Cell Phones—continued

Too touchy feely? Too philosophical for you? Well, a couple of years back, I came across a newspaper piece which really hit the nail on the head. The article asked what the most important job skill was for potential employers. Before sharing this same article with them, I often ask my students to take a stab at this question. Their responses are usually no different than most of ours might be; computer, writing and math skills often top the list. But, the answer, according to the article? Listening! It got my attention. Since that day, I have shared this with many groups of students; hopefully, it has gotten theirs.

Once, while observing a language class, I watched a very competent instructor field questions and give clear explanations – the same explanations three to four times! While she explained the point once, other students chatted in another area of the class. When she was done explaining, the group that had been talking asked the very same questions. The pattern continued as she diligently and generously – perhaps to a fault – explained and explained some more. As I left the session, I could not help but think about how these students were talking themselves out of an education. Most alarming was the fact that they were very interested in the material, the instructor, and the class. They were just interested at their convenience, as if the course came with a menu: play, pause or rewind.

However, before we blame the new generation, it should be noted that in general, there were not traditional college-age students, nor was the near-seventy-year-old man who decided to call his son while sitting in the front row of my class a few semesters ago. But are our students any different than the toll taker or cashier who appears to be speaking to us as s/he takes our money – come to find out that s/he is just chatting to someone on a Bluetooth? Do we need any further evidence than the shouting matches which have recently passed for town-hall meetings in order to realize that the best repellent for learning and mutual understanding is that all-American art form known as “speaking over one another”?

In recent trips to London, I realized that few people walk around talking on their cells. At pubs and restaurants people talk to one another. On the tube, they do really strange things, like reading … or thinking. The reason for this immense cultural difference is purely economic. Ringing a mate on your mobile is so bloody expensive, blokes save their chats for “emergencies” only.

In one of his better stand-up routines, Chris Rock suggested charging ten thousand dollars per bullet in order to cut down on gun violence in America. I wonder what would happen if we did the same with cell phone minutes and text messaging? Interruptions would surely go down as prices went up, maybe along with grades.

In the meantime, the battle continues, as we struggle to open the minds and the ears of our students. At the end of the day, could there be any more righteous or important task than trying to reshape our culture and our values, one student at a time?
Alvin Williams, Mila Bruan & Jose Chestnut get the evening started.

His stare makes it clear that Leon Bolden is the photographer—not the photographee! Angel Millan mentally composes another impromptu toast.

The always dignified Paulette Longmore

August Roggerio and Ken Sieben discuss the merits of retirement while trying to figure out why Kevin Hayes brought his own take-out to the party.

Evelyn Marquez says, “You don’t wanna go there!”

Gwen Slaton and Enid Friedman are still trying to figure out why Kevin brought his own take-out.

Mike Frank tries to figure out if there is still some honor not yet bestowed upon Don Yee.