IT MUST BE DESTINY

Mass Communication and English double major roars for human rights and a healthy community.
Dear friends, families, and colleagues,

This fall we kicked off our first college theme: Politics and Change through the Arts. The adoption of an annual theme is an exciting new COFAC venture, especially considering the breadth and depth of faculty-initiated programming. After all, an emphasis on politics and change is most timely given the tenor of this year's election cycle. Music inaugurated the theme with a concert in September followed by Electronic Media and Film exploring the theme through ten films in their fall series.

In the pages to follow you will have a glimpse into the lives of our amazing students and alumni who encourage change in their communities and abroad.

Human rights activist Destiny Watford ‘18 led a fight alongside Baltimore’s Curtis Bay community to stop the nation’s largest incinerator from being built in their backyard.

Kanwal Rehman ‘17, a member of the Muslim Student Association, worked with the Asian Arts & Culture Center to increase the understanding of Islamic culture by bringing to light misconceptions about being Muslim in America.

Speaking of promoting harmony, Darren Schmidt, ’17, has been making musical harmonies for years. The French horn player not only won the prestigious Diabelli Contest a Germany-based composers’ competition, his barbershop quartet, Pratt Street Power, won the 2016 Barbershop Harmony Society International Youth Quartet competition.

Harrison Hart ’17, uses photography and film to bring awareness to the native youth of South Africa as seen in his first solo exhibition, TRAVEL, hosted by the Baltimore County Arts Guild.

Similarly, dance alumna, Amber Merrick ‘10 works to inspire confidence in young women, by sharing her talent and experience through her performances in Cirque du Soleil, but also with her merchandise and clothing line that promotes the “brown ballerina.”

Editor-in-chief, Cody Boteler, of Towson University’s student newspaper, The Towerlight, has honed his journalism skills by sharing these stories, and many more, with the University community.

Department of Theatre Arts alumnus, Ian Belknap, artistic director for America’s leading professional touring theatre, The Acting Company, launches a three-year initiative with TU theatre students and faculty including the presentation of Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar” and Marcus Gardley’s newly commissioned play “X.”

To read more about our students and the wonderful projects and events happening in our college, please visit the COFAC website: www.towson.edu/cofac. You’ll also find listings for all our programs in the Arts & Culture Calendar at www.towson.edu/main/artsculture/.

Susan E. Picinich, Dean
College of Fine Arts and Communication
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BY WANDA HASKEL

Destiny Watford may consider herself shy, but this Towson Tiger can roar when she’s fighting for human rights.

Just ask residents in the Curtis Bay area of Baltimore who dodged having the nation’s largest incinerator built in their backyard.

“I live in Curtis Bay, my family lives in Curtis Bay,” says the Towson University junior. “Even the thought that the incinerator was proposed is an absolute violation of our basic human right to live in a healthy community.”

The plant would have burned 4,000 tons of trash a day, emitting up to 1,240 pounds of lead and mercury per year into a neighborhood already plagued by some of the worst air pollution in the nation.

For Watford, that outcome was unacceptable. So she did something about it.

Standing UP

In 2012, when Watford was a senior at Curtis Bay’s Benjamin Franklin High School, plans to construct the giant incinerator less than a mile away from her school were a go.

Permits were approved and entities, including state agencies and local schools, had contracted with the developer to purchase energy—produced at a different location—from the incinerator.

But Watford and others in Free Your Voice, a student-led advocacy group born at Franklin High, had other ideas.

She and her classmates had just seen Henrik Ibsen’s play An Enemy of the People when they heard about the incinerator plans. They began drawing connections between Ibsen’s plot, in which residents are forced to choose between wealth and public health, with their own community’s circumstances.

Inspired, the group decided to embark on what turned into a multi-year battle to keep the incinerator out of Curtis Bay.

They knew they couldn’t do it alone. The way to stop the incinerator was to “build relationships,” says Watford. That meant mobilizing residents and local businesses to join the cause, which they did. And together, the community collected hundreds of signatures and participated in protests and rallies, putting intense pressure on big industry, government and others supporting the project.

Watford, who is a double major in Mass Communication and English at Towson, was central to the organizing effort. But her work stands out particularly because of her role as a brave and influential mouthpiece for the community.

Watford and company are also working toward the establishment of a community land trust in Curtis Bay to ensure that local stakeholders have a real say in how the land in their community is used.

Moreover, they are continually expanding their network, forming ties with like-minded groups and individuals, including those at area colleges and universities. And, of course, Towson.

Several members of the original Free Your Voice group matriculated at TU after graduating from Franklin High, just as Watford did. Since then, additional members of the Towson community have gotten involved with the 21-year-old’s mission. Students in Assistant Professor Nicole Fabricant’s anthropology classes, for example, are reaching out to Franklin High-schoolers, working with them directly on environmental justice issues.

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Thanks in large part to Watford’s leadership, Free Your Voice was able to declare victory in 2016, when the state revoked the developer’s permits—halting plans to build the incinerator indefinitely.

Not Giving UP

Now a committee attached to the nonprofit activist organization United Workers, Free Your Voice has only just begun to make an impact. The group is committed to working on a range of human rights issues, such as housing inequality and systemic racism.

“Don’t get me wrong, the incinerator is huge,” says Watford, “but it’s just one small piece in a huge struggle.”

Environmental justice remains a priority for Free Your Voice, however. Currently, Watford is leading an effort to convert the 90-acre incinerator site from a giant problem into a progressive solution—such as a solar farm or a recycling plant. Some alternative to the incinerator, Watford says, that would provide a valuable service and employ local workers without “sacrificing our health in the process.”

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In a year when the College of Fine Arts and Communication has selected politics and change as its theme, Watford’s work with Free Your Voice is a good example of how art and communication can be powerful tools—from inspiring change agents to persuading decision-makers.

Watford’s communication skills, which she’s developing at Towson studying public relations and writing, were key to the campaign’s success, though she shows no interest in taking individual credit.

“One thing we were really good at was telling the narrative,” says Watford, whose group incorporated poetry and performance as they went about changing hearts and minds. Humble as she is, Watford could not avoid being singled out for her part in stopping the incinerator.

She is the recipient of the 2016 Goldman Prize, a prestigious international award for environmental activism, and was also featured on Time.com as one of the magazine’s 2016 Next Generation Leaders.

“I’m incredibly honored,” says Watford, “but this is something that we all built together.”

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SAFE SPACE

Kanwal Rehman ’17 increases understanding of Islamic culture through art

WANDA HASKEL

When Towson University senior Kanwal Rehman was in eighth grade, certain kids in her Baltimore city school would harass her, demanding to know if she was related to Saddam Hussein and “begging” her not to bomb them.

Just because she is Muslim.

Aside from being deeply hurtful, this treatment made Rehman realize that there existed major misconceptions about her religion. And that she wanted to find meaningful and respectful ways to help the people around her better understand her beliefs.

That’s why the theater major jumped at the opportunity to participate in the TU Asian Arts & Culture Center (AA&CC) exhibition Asia@Towson last spring.

Organizers reached out to Asian culture student groups, including the Muslim Student Association (MSA), for which Rehman served as programming director. The idea was for the groups to share their culture’s activities and the passions behind their pursuits in the exhibition.

Rehman devised and created most of the MSA installation, and is grateful to the Asian Arts & Culture Center for facilitating this work, calling the center’s director Joanna Pecore and program manager Nerissa Paglinawan, “absolutely amazing and so supportive.”

For the MSA section of the exhibit, Rehman created what she calls “a room within a room,” where visitors could put on traditional clothing and try out musical instruments from south Asian countries, such as Pakistan, where Rehman’s parents were born. They also got to peruse showcases with information on Islamic language and culture, and take home samples of artificial henna “tattoos,” representing an art form that plays an important role in Muslim holy days and celebrations.

Additionally, visitors were invited to use the space, which was equipped with cozy seating, to meditate, learn, reflect, or just relax.

A lot of the learning and reflecting happened in response to the exhibit’s central attraction, a wall with the painted words, “My Jihad Is.”

The goal, says Rehman, was to educate about the concept of “jihad,” which is widely believed to mean “holy war.” The true translation from the Arabic, she adds, is actually “struggle,” which additional text on the wall explained.

Paper and pens were available so that visitors could anonymously write down their own personal struggles and display their notes with others tacked on a corkboard.

“We had students coming in and reading them,” remembers Rehman, “and slips of paper in all different languages. It was fabulous. It was beautiful.”

Not for everyone, though.

Some visitors (not TU students, points out Rehman) were offended by the word, “jihad,” and were vocal about their belief that using it was inappropriate, especially in a university setting.

That was OK with Rehman, though. In fact, it was just the sort of conversation she hoped the exhibit would spark, and an example of the power of art to surface important issues.

“Art pulls people in,” says Rehman, “and that is an opportunity to educate.”

Art pulls people in and that is an opportunity to educate.

Kanwal Rehman
Amber Merrick is on a mission to inspire confidence.

“I want girls who grow up looking like me,” says the Baltimore city native, “to know that they can do it … whether that’s dancing or anything else.”

It’s hard not to be inspired by the Towson University dance major who leapt from Baltimore to Broadway.

The Lyric Theatre, to be exact, located in the heart of Manhattan’s Times Square. That’s where Cirque du Soleil’s Paramour has been in residence since April 2016. And where Merrick gets to sing and dance as part of a cast breaking new ground.

Known the world over for its eye-popping acrobatic spectacles, Cirque du Soleil makes its Broadway debut with Paramour, blending the group’s signature high-flying flips and jumps with classic musical theater.

“I feel really blessed to be part of something brand new,” Merrick told Newsday in a behind-the-scenes interview when the show opened. “It’s really nice to be part of something inaugural and as big as this.”

And because of the financial security this job offers, Merrick has the freedom to pursue her overarching goal of helping others. Such as starting a merchandising and clothing line for the promotion of “brown ballerinas,” and attending additional courses to prepare for both a transition to acting and a future as a teacher.

Personally inspired by Towson University faculty members, including former principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell, and Runqiao Du, an alum of The Washington Ballet, Merrick is looking to “touch every aspect of performance” in order to maximize the professional experience and training she’ll eventually bring back to the classroom.

Many opportunities to do that happened during her time at Towson. From chances to dance works by Fisher-Harrell and Du, as well as Bill T. Jones and Alvin Ailey, on TU stages, to performing as a guest artist for Die Theater Chemnitz during her study abroad term at Palucca Schule in Dresden, Germany.

When classes weren’t in session, Merrick did summer intensives with professional companies, including Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Miami City Ballet.

After she graduated, Merrick spent three seasons as a company member with Dallas Black Dance Theatre—the city’s oldest, continuously operating professional dance company. In between performances and rehearsals, she led classes in the company’s academy, which emphasizes how studying dance can help students develop self-esteem and make positive life choices.

“I really enjoy teaching,” says Merrick. “Sometimes feedback I get from students keeps me going.”

Like when a former student informed her recently that he got a full scholarship as a college dance major, writing, “Thank you Ms. Amber. You inspired me!” Mission accomplished.
Music major Darren Schmidt ’17 takes first place in international composing and vocal competitions

BY WANDA HASKEL

Some students spend winter break relaxing. Not Towson University music major Darren Schmidt.

Last January, the senior worked day and night to set the Wessobrunn Prayer, an early German poetic work to music. “The message resonated with me,” says the Baltimore native. “I thought, ‘there’s no way I can’t set this text. I have to write a piece.’”

The result was an innovative choral work blending archaic elements with contemporary harmonies, which became Schmidt’s entry in the Diabelli Contest, a Germany-based composers competition.

His piece was in good company alongside 116 others submitted by musicians hailing from Europe, Asia, Africa, and South and North America. Entries were posted online for public voting, and the composers of the top 10 got invited to Germany for an all-expenses-paid long weekend in July.

Schmidt was ecstatic when he realized that his work was among those top 10. “That means I get to go to Germany,” he remembers thinking, “I was so excited.”

Given VIP treatment by one of the contest organizers, the Towson composer enjoyed touring historic landmarks and sampling the famous brews in Munich. But the main event was a concert premiering the 10 nominees’ works, at which a jury selected the three contest winners.

Schmidt’s came in first. That meant 5,000 Euros in prize money, but maybe more meaningfully, the delight of witnessing his work being professionally performed. “It’s extremely gratifying to hear a talented choir interpret your piece,” says Schmidt.

Germany was not the only first for Schmidt last summer. Around the same time, he learned that he would be this year’s recipient of the prestigious Presser Foundation Undergraduate Scholar Award—given to an outstanding student in the music department.

And, just a week before he left for Munich, Schmidt’s barbershop quartet Pratt Street Power won the 2016 Barbershop Harmony Society International Youth Quartet competition in Nashville.

Schmidt’s smooth bass blends beautifully with the voices of tenor Vincent Sandroni, baritone Ben Hawker (both former TU Tigers), and lead Ed Schabel, who blew away the judges with their renditions of “Cry Me a River” and “Rock It for Me.”

As reigning champions, the group gets multiple performance opportunities, with dates up and down the East Coast in the coming months. “We’re going to be all over the place,” laughs Schmidt, who is grateful for the chance to promote barbershop with young people during Barbershop Harmony Society district shows.

The predilection, admits this all-rounder, is that he can’t decide if he wants to focus his work in vocal or instrumental music. Fortunately, TU’s music department is helping him prepare to do either.

A graduate of Patapsco High School and the Arts magnet program for band, and the Maryland State Boychoir, with which he sang for 10 years, Schmidt says Towson was the right choice for him because of the “great music faculty.”

In his time at TU, Schmidt has played with the brass quintet, orchestra and symphonic band. But he also wanted to take his vocals to the next level, which he says voice lessons with TU professors Phillip Collister and Teri Cockeysville, Maryland.

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Get the feeling Schmidt’s a busy guy? You’re right.

The Honors College student also spends Sundays singing with the professional choir at Saint John’s Church in Baltimore. Weekends include performances with Pratt Street Power or the two other barbershop choruses with which he’s affiliated, as well. Not to mention his work with Quorus, a premier men’s choral ensemble in residence at St. Joseph Parish in Cockeysville, Maryland.

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World traveler and photographer, Harrison Hart, ’17, experiences have had him focus on his life’s work, the South African Lacrosse Project (S.A.L.P.).

Towson University senior Harrison Hart is going places.

Not just across town or even the country.

At 22, Hart, an art major concentrating in photography and minoring in film, has seen more of the globe than most of us will in our whole lives. He’s already hit Europe, Africa and the Americas multiple times.

“I’m a world traveler. That’s what I do,” says the Towson native. “My favorite part is immersing myself in new cultures, meeting people, learning languages, eating the food …”

And, of course, taking pictures.

This past fall, the public got to see the world through Hart’s lens in his first solo exhibition, The Art of TRAVEL, hosted by the Baltimore County Arts Guild.

The experience was thrilling for Hart, who describes the opening event with wonder.

“When I came back, I just knew that’s what I wanted to do.”

So, for the past 10 summers, Hart and his family have returned to South Africa (with side excursions along the way). Working with children in this wild and stunning setting has inspired Hart to celebrate natural beauty and compassionately depict people and situations that “call out for our attention” through his photography.

With each trip, his portfolio grows. A semester at sea in 2015, during which he visited 10 countries in 109 days, also provided endless subjects for the evolving artist.

On-the-Job TRAINING

The far reaches of the world aren’t all that fill Hart’s frames, though. Capturing life on campus has been an important part of his photographic training, too. Working as an assistant to TU Director of Photographic Services Kanji Takeno, for The Towerlight student newspaper and for the Student Government Association, Hart has documented countless campus activities and events.

But it was the middle school lacrosse player’s first journey to South Africa when he was 12 that really brought his goals into focus. Two game-changers happened on that trip.

With the help of friends in South Africa, Hart and his friend Kip, who was 15 at the time, founded the South African Lacrosse Project (S.A.L.P.), a nonprofit organization that has provided an annual lacrosse clinic to children in the Vaalwater region of South Africa since 2007. S.A.L.P. began with 25 kids and a couple of coaches that first summer, but through generous corporate and community donations, the program has expanded to two weeks and 15-20 coaches, and has served more than 1,000 children.

In addition, expansion has included an HIV/AIDS education component and a literacy program. To date, the organization has put more than 20 impoverished South Africans through high school and six all the way through college.

It was also on that first trip to South Africa that Hart got serious about photography.

“I picked up a camera and took pictures of the wildlife and the native peoples,” he says. “When I came back, I just knew that’s what I wanted to do.”

Hart’s passions for travel and photography are intertwined, developing together and feeding each other through the years.

It didn’t hurt that his family has always made exploration a high priority, treating him to European vacations in his boyhood.

He also credits the TU photography faculty, particularly Associate Professor Jenee Matter, who calls Hart’s work “stunning,” with helping him gain the technical knowledge and skills he’ll need to make it as a professional photographer.

“But it was such a valuable experience to be a photography major here at Towson University,” says Hart. “I don’t know where I’d be as a photographer without it.”

As for the future, Hart already has a thriving freelance business photographing weddings, homes for real estate agents and sporting events, and doing portrait photography. He also specializes in drone photography and video. Plus, this year he had the opportunity to take his gear up to Fashion Week in New York City as a freelancer for the branding and public relations agency Access by NKC.

But ultimately Hart hopes to be employed by an entity such as National Geographic, which provides Hart “the opportunity to travel the world and tell stories.”

Hart’s aspirations simply:

“I want to travel and take pictures.”
Senior Cody Boteler laughingly describes himself as a “giant hippie.”

That’s because of his passion for the environment, sustainability and other green-hued matters. And why he came to Towson set on studying environmental science.

But it didn’t take long into his first year for the Frederick, Maryland, native to realize that journalism was his true calling.

He declared a mass communication major, with a minor in environmental science and studies. And he attended an open house in the offices of TU’s independent student newspaper, The Towerlight, where he would spend hundreds of hours in the semesters ahead.

Starting as a reporter freshman year, Boteler steadily moved up in the ranks of the award-winning news organization, taking on the role of news editor as a sophomore and senior editor in his junior year. Now, wearing the editor-in-chief hat, he is responsible for every single story the weekly paper publishes, and its growing online presence.

Along the way, he’s gained valuable experience practicing skills that journalists need—from research and writing to running a newsroom.

In one standout Towerlight investigation, Boteler led staffers in filing a Freedom of Information Act request for a high-profile story.

“That experience, figuring out what we can ask for, what’s going to tell the best story if we can get those documents and then actually asking and having to deliberate,” says Boteler, “that’s a really important part of a journalist’s training.”

Boteler has also gotten significant training through internships and jobs during his time at TU. Stints at WMAR-TV, Baltimore’s City Paper and Circa, a mobile- and digital-focused news outlet based in Virginia, have exposed him to different professional settings and scopes of work.

Plus, the City Paper internship turned into an opportunity for freelance work. He recently got to do a story on—you guessed it—an environmental concern, educating readers on how the chemicals in road salt are seeping into the Baltimore water supply.

Throughout his time at TU, says Boteler, he has been supported by outstanding journalism professors, who provide an excellent classroom experience and are ever-available for help and advice.

Thom Lieb, professor of journalism and new media, is one of those faculty members.

“Cody has impressed me in the classroom, showing me that he is not just a good journalism student, but also a good journalist,” says Lieb. “But he made the most powerful impression on me—and others—when he was chosen to work in the student newsroom at this year’s Online News Association annual conference. He showed himself to be a serious professional with great ideas for coverage.”

Not only was his selection, from a pool of hundreds, to be one of 20 student newsroom journalists at the Denver Conference, a big honor, but it was just one more professional experience that has readied Boteler to jump right in to whatever position he lands after graduation.

He’s not sure what that will be yet, but there’s no doubt that Boteler will go on to have a big impact on the world of journalism. Thanks to getting the classroom fundamentals and on-the-job training that have prepared him for the next step.

“There’s no better way to learn,” says the newshound, “than by doing.”
IN GOOD COMPANY

BY WANDA HASKEL

Towson University theatre major Isaiah Harvey was already a fan of contemporary playwright Marcus Gardley when he heard that the award-winning artist was coming to campus. In fact, he had recently read Gardley’s work “The Road Weeps, The Well Runs Dry,” and loved it.

So applying to participate in a workshop with Gardley last spring was a no-brainer.

“It was really cool,” says the Baltimore native, “that this playwright with all this amazing work wants to come work with us.”

Not only did the sophomore, who himself is a playwright, get “useful advice on writing and creating,” during the intensive four days, but he also had the opportunity to be part of the development of Gardley’s new play, titled, “The Road Weeps, The Well Runs Dry,” which explores the assassination of ‘60s activist Malcolm X.

That part of the audience, Harvey will be watching closely to catch how the “X” script has changed since May. Particularly the part of Brother Eugene, for which he read during the workshop.

The Towson community will also have additional opportunities to interact with Belknap and Gardley in the days surrounding the workshop. The students will be in residence at TU, visiting classes and leading campus-paired discussions and post-performance talks at which organizers look forward to interdisciplinary conversations exploring the history and social and political issues the plays highlight.

Better TOGETHER

These special programs are available to Towson students thanks to an artistic and educational collaboration between The Acting Company and Towson University. The residency is part of a new consortium model for the famed touring company, through which it offers high-quality theater activities, performances and discussion forums for college and high school students around the country.

And in a year when the College of Fine Arts and Communication has focused programming on the theme of politics and change, The Acting Company partnership also opens up avenues for the whole campus to explore these issues. “Julius Caesar” and “X” are excellent points of departure for conversations about history, politics, social justice and rhetoric, all at the forefront of the national dialogue surrounding the 2016 presidential election.

Work with The Acting Company is a rich complement to the TU Department of Theatre Arts curriculum. Visiting artists, whom the department has a robust, ongoing tradition of hosting, provide valuable perspectives. Students also learn from interacting with professionals who model what department chair Robyn Quick calls, “pathways to the profession.”

“When students have the opportunity to work with people like Ian Belknap and Marcus Gardley, they see how the lessons they’re learning in the classroom and processes they’re working through are contributing to the careers and artistic lives of those artists,” says Quick. “It’s one more way of layering into their education what that trajectory can be.”

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Theater, argues Harvey, can shine a light on problems that need attention, spark meaningful discourse and inspire audiences to take action toward positive change.

“Not a lot of people can see what’s in front of them unless you hold it right up to their faces,” says the young artist. “That’s where art can be really important.”
THE TOWSON UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS PRESENTS

THE ACTING COMPANY PERFORMING

FRIDAY, MARCH 3, 8 P.M.

X
by Marcus Gardley, directed by Ian Belknap, ’06
Artistic Director, The Acting Company

The assassination of Malcolm X—both the story we think we know and illuminating details that have seldom been shared—is brought to vivid, lyrical life in award-winning writer Marcus Gardley’s new play. Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar provides a framework for Gardley to deepen our understanding of one of America’s most complex, compelling historical figures and examine the tumultuous landscape of ideology and activism in the 1960s.

SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 8 P.M.

Julius Caesar
by William Shakespeare
directed by Devin Brain

Tackling essential questions about the balance of ambition, personal loyalty and love of country, Shakespeare’s timeless political masterpiece has never been more relevant. Through the story of Julius Caesar, a rising political star torn down by his most trusted allies, audiences witness the art of persuasion, the ugliness of backroom politics and the historical patterns we can’t stop repeating.

STEPHENS HALL THEATRE
$20 regular price; $15 TU faculty, staff and seniors; $10 students
FOR TICKETS: TUBOXOFFICE.COM
Content recommended for mature audiences. Proceeds benefit the TU Foundation

Towson University has been selected by The Acting Company to participate in a three year national consortium-based performance and education initiative. Additional performances will be held at Morgan State University, Bowie State University and CCBC. Major production support for Marcus Gardley’s X is provided by The Roy Cockrum Foundation.