CONNECTING CULTURE

Nerissa Paglinauan is instrumental in student-centered initiatives at TU's Asian Arts & Culture Center

A DREAM COME TRUE INTERNSHIP

The Importance of Developing Positive Relationships

THE ART OF ACTIVISM

Interdisciplinary course empowers COFAC students to focus creativity toward social solutions.

YARDS FOR SUCCESS

Van Brooks '12 scores Open Society Institute grant for community service foundation.
Dear Friends, Families, and Colleagues,

Welcome to our sixth, biannual issue of COFAC Today. In this issue, you can read stories about our students and of significant events in COFAC since fall 2014.

We are thrilled to highlight the unique opportunities our students have had to showcase their talents in the greater Baltimore community. This spring students have had the opportunity to use their creativity and artistic expression to make a difference. Through the interdisciplinary fine arts courses, students were able to use their skills not just to create art, but to come up with creative solutions to social problems like food justice and animal welfare. In addition to the unique opportunities to explore art and social action, the Department of Art and Electronic, Media, and Film teamed up to offer a course on stop motion animation, under the instruction of Phil Davis, assistant professor and Lynn Tomlinson, visiting assistant professor and Greenpeace award winner. The college continues to encourage students to make connections in the community and gain real-world experience. This spring Department of Theatre Arts’ students inspired inner-city third graders to be lifelong readers through dramatic storytelling. MCCS student and Presidential Ambassador Megan Cronhardt ’15 has been reaching the community on a larger scale as an intern at the State House this legislative season. Much closer to home, Nerissa Paglinauan, program manager for the Asian Arts and Culture Center, has been extremely instrumental in involving students in the work of the AAACC. She has also enrolled at Towson University to pursue a master’s in professional studies with a concentration in museum studies.

In addition to our students our alumni have made a noteworthy impact. Inspired by his motivation to make a better life for himself and his family, Brandon Broady ’08, has hit it big as the host of BET’s new flagship comedic variety show. After a football injury that left him paralyzed at the age of 16, Van Brooks ’12, came up with Plan B. Brooks has just been awarded an Open Society Institute grant for his nonprofit, S.A.F.E. (Safe Alternative Foundation for Education) to inform young people about the importance of obtaining an education and having an alternate career plan.

Our faculty continues to make an incredible impact— even those who are no longer with us. Legendary jazz composer and much-loved faculty member, the late Hank Levy truly made his musical mark. Levy’s “Whiplash” became the title track for the Oscar award-winning major motion picture by the same name. We were fortunate to have the Hank Levy Legacy Band, composed of TU alumni and local jazz musicians, on campus this spring presenting a concert to benefit the endowment in his name.

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 countless dance, music, and theatre performances, art exhibitions, film screenings and community programs in the Arts & Culture Calendar (see www.towson.edu/main/artsculture).
Nerissa Paglinauan is a busy woman. On top of her full-time position as program manager at Towson University’s Asian Arts & Culture Center (AA&CC), Paglinauan is pursuing a master’s in professional studies/art history (museum track) here at Towson University. (That’s in addition to raising her two elementary school-age sons and singing with the Baltimore Choral Arts Society.)

With her packed schedule, Paglinauan wasn’t planning on entering a graduate program, but when she realized how applicable the course work, which covers topics including museum management, care and handling of objects, museum education and exhibit design, would be to her current work at the AA&CC, she couldn’t pass up the opportunity.

“It’s professional development for me,” says Paglinauan.

For instance, the Baltimore County native currently attends a museum education class in which she is learning strategies for engaging museum visitors and teaching them about a work of art. Paglinauan says this experience directly enriches her ability to do her job because students from elementary school through college visit the center. “They’ll just pop in, so we have to be ready,” she says, to “engage them appropriately for the age group.”

First steps toward this goal include the creation of a student advisory board so that the AA&CC’s main audience has a voice in its programming from the start. Pecore and Paglinauan are also developing an exhibit focused on TU’s Asian history that they hope to open in spring of 2016. Data collection entails interviewing all the Asian student groups on campus, a process that is both opening up lines of communication between the center and the students it serves, and expanding awareness of the artistic and cultural programs and exhibits the center offers.

Another layer of student engagement, explains Pecore, is involving students in the work done at the center through internship, work-study and graduate assistant (GA) opportunities. The Asian Arts & Culture Center is “a place where students can learn how to work in a nonprofit,” says the director.

Having students employed at the center is a winning proposition for everyone involved. Not only do aspiring curators and educators gain valuable, hands-on experience in a real gallery, but the AA&CC also benefits from the diverse talents of students from across campus. One current graduate assistant with a background in collections management is helping the center organize and care for its permanent collection. Another GA is a psychology major from Egypt who is contributing to the interviewing effort for next spring’s exhibit.

Perhaps Paglinauan herself best represents the mutually beneficial partnership between the AA&CC and students, though.

During the several-months gap between directors, she led the center, continuing to offer programming, and even managed to open an exhibit presenting Filipino art.

“Nerissa held the center together,” says Pecore. “I can’t imagine having come here and not having her here to help.”

For her part, Paglinauan is grateful for the opportunity to work somewhere she loves and continue her education at the same time. “I feel like I’m in the right place,” she says with a contented smile. “I’m learning so many new things.”

Connecting Culture

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By Wanda Haskel

Spiritual Rhythms of Asia Concert Series: Sacred Music Sacred Dance for World Healing.
A Dream Come True Internship
The Importance of Developing Positive Relationships

By Ray Feldmann

Two days each week, while most of her Towson University classmates are still sound asleep, Megan Cronhardt ‘15 gets behind the wheel of her red 1999 Toyota Camry, navigating the 45-mile distance from campus to Annapolis. For the second consecutive year, Cronhardt has a coveted internship position in the Maryland General Assembly, working in the office of Delegate Patrick McDonough and alongside legislators, lobbyists, reporters, and even newly inaugurated governors.

“I’ve had my picture taken with governors Ehrlich, O’Malley, and Hogan,” the 21-year-old senior said recently during a break from her spring semester classes. “I remember one time I was in an elevator in the State House when someone reached his arm in to keep the door from closing. And it was Governor Hogan!”

“For someone who was a legislative page in high school,” she added, “this internship is a dream come true.”

Cronhardt’s twice weekly round-trips to Annapolis -- she habitually arrives in the state capital before 9 a.m. -- are part of a whirlwind weekly schedule that keeps the Hampstead, Maryland, native on-the-go from before sunup to well past sundown. In addition to her classes and internship, she works in the university’s mass communication department and is a university Presidential Ambassador. She is also active in the Zeta Tau Alpha sorority, working with her Zeta sisters to increase breast cancer awareness.

A mass communication major with a keen interest in politics, Cronhardt chose Towson partly because her mom is a TU alum and because her grandfather taught at the university. But to hear the personable North Carroll High School graduate tell it, her decision was based more on pragmatism than emotion.

“It honestly just made the most sense,” Cronhardt said. Unsure of a major in her first semester at TU, Cronhardt said she “fell in love” with a MCOM 101 class that ignited her interest in communications. Ultimately she selected mass communication as her major, with a focus on journalism.

“I’m fascinated by the journalism field,” she confessed. “I’m naturally a nosy person!”

Besides her inquisitive nature, Cronhardt also understands the importance of developing positive working relationships. One day last year while working in Annapolis for then Delegate Patrick Hogan (the current governor’s brother and now his deputy legislative officer), she was walking back to the House Office Building from the State House when she found herself alongside McDonough. She struck up a conversation with the District 7 representative and the rest, as they say, is history.

“He gave me his business card and when I called his office a few days later to follow up, he offered me a job!” Cronhardt recalled.

Two days a week during the 90-day legislative session, Cronhardt answers the phone, talks with constituents, researches legislation, and prepares talking points for McDonough to use in committee hearings and on the House floor. Her desk sits just outside the lawmaker’s private office, and it’s clear that Cronhardt has made quite a positive impression on McDonough.

“Megan is a very hard worker, very professional and very reliable,” McDonough said as he posed for a photo with Cronhardt in front of an American flag in his office. “I never have to explain anything to her twice. She is very mature for her age and I know she’s going to do very well in whatever she pursues after she graduates from Towson.”

With that graduation day just around the corner this May, Cronhardt may be a tad bit nervous that she doesn’t have a full-time job lined up yet, but she’s confident her future will be bright.

“I want to stay involved in politics,” Cronhardt said. “Beyond that, I wish I knew! I’d love to be able to do something in the communications field where I could combine my interest in politics with my love of journalism, writing, and meeting people.”

Perhaps someday she’ll pursue a political career of her own?

“I’m certainly not ruling that out,” she admitted. “But honestly, no matter what I wind up doing, just give me a power suit and high heels and I’ll be happy!”

Delegate Patrick McDonough and Megan Cronhardt ‘15 in Delegate McDonough’s office. Photo by Kanji Takeno.
Animation requires talents and skills both artistic and technical. Success depends upon a blending of creative vision and precise execution. That’s why faculty from the departments of art and electronic media and film teamed up to offer a stop motion animation class that groups students with different skill sets. Together, they’re making magic.

Show and Tell

Pat Hancock is a senior majoring in electronic media and film, who has a solid foundation in camera-work and editing software but for whom some of the more artistic aspects of animation are “completely alien.”

“It’s great to have these guys here,” says Hancock, gesturing toward two art students perched on tall stools in a dimly lit, gadget-filled room, “who think in that way.”

Hancock and his partners are working on a project for which they are creating a cutout puppet whose story will play out in a 3-D stop motion animation film. Alister Miller, a senior digital art and design major, trims the team’s paper prototype of a man in a business suit. “He runs in fright, the dapper fellow gets covered in cobwebs and other underground gunk.”

“Eventually he makes it back to the manhole,” says Miller with a devilish grin, “And some other guy thinks he’s the monster and starts running away!”

Clearly, these students enjoy the class, approaching their project with enthusiasm and focus. They are also getting experience under their belts that will ready them for their dream careers.

Producing Filmmakers

Hancock plans to move to Los Angeles this summer, hoping to break into the film industry. He’s grateful for how the course is preparing him for what’s to come. “These kinds of skills will play out—production, especially post-production and special effects,” he says. “We’ll have a chance to really understand how putting together each frame works. A lot of these skills are universal for making any kind of film—thinking about timing and perspective.”

Assistant Professor Phil Davis, art, co-teaches the class with Visiting Assistant Professor Lynn Tomlinson, electronic media and film. “What we’re trying to do is give them experience in all aspects of the production,” says Davis. “From creating and designing characters, actually shooting and animating and doing the editing and sound and any kind of visual effects and post-production work.”

And just as critical as the “how to” of the class, is the teamwork and collaboration, which simulates real-world working environments in the film industry. “That is probably the most important thing they’ll take away in terms of professional practice,” says Davis, “how do we work together and accomplish the goal.”

When the class ends, students will have four-to-five short films for their portfolios. And after completion of the last project, which requires groups to create 3-D scenes and characters, Davis and Tomlinson plan to edit together a reel featuring all the final projects strung one after another. A product that will certainly reveal the exchange of skills and collaboration at the heart of the class. “Not sure what it will look like combined, but it’s always interesting,” laughs Davis. “They feed off of each other’s energy—getting ideas from each other.”

Assistant Professor Phil Davis, Department Art + Design, Art History, Art Education. Photo by Kanji Takeno.

Tomlinson created the animated short as her MFA project while a graduate student at Towson University. She used an innovative clay-on-glass technique to paint each frame by hand, which gives the film an exquisite texture and depth. Told from the house’s point of view, the story is a haunting tale on the impact of sea-level rise.

“Winning this award from Greenpeace is an honor and a tremendous chance to reach a wide audience,” says Tomlinson. “I hoped that this one story might connect with people and move them, and I’m so pleased that it’s happening.”

That wide audience may be even wider than Tomlinson hoped. Since ‘Holland House’ was featured on the popular art and design blog, Colossal (www.thisiscolossal.com), the film has gotten thousands of views on Vimeo; and awards and accolades continue to pour in.

In March, the film was honored at the Environmental Film Festival in Washington, D.C. It has also been selected for numerous other film festivals worldwide, including the Arney International Animation Film Festival in France, which is considered the top animation festival in the world.

Check out the film at: www.lynntomlinson.com/hollandislandhouse

By Wanda Haskel
New Game Plan

With inspiring tenacity, the teenager chose not to accept his prognosis and pursued physical therapy with an eye toward increasing his mobility. At the same time, he hit the books, graduating high school with his class in spite of extended hospitalization after the accident, and later earning a degree in mass communication from Towson University.

In 2012, after eight determined years, Brooks did the miraculous—he began taking steps. Days later, the idea for a new venture came to him in a dream: “I woke up one day and said I want to share my story and try to help other people prepare for the ‘what if’,” says Brooks.

Brooks’ nonprofit Safe Alternative Foundation for Education (S.A.F.E.) was born. Its mission: “to inform others about the importance of obtaining an education, as well as having an alternate career plan in anticipation for life’s deviations.” Its motto: “Be strong. Be safe. Be prepared.”

S.A.F.E.’s flagship program, Yards for Success, gives inner-city kids a chance to learn life lessons through football and experience a range of educational opportunities that may just help keep them on track for bright futures.

Each spring, students from Franklin Square Elementary/Middle in West Baltimore (located in the community where Brooks grew up and still lives) participate in a six-week program, meeting three times per week. Kids spend the first 45 minutes in a classroom exploring topics, such as financial literacy and leadership with guest speakers. Then they go outside for football practice and games against firefighters and police officers eager to connect with the city’s youth.

Brooks says bringing the kids together with authority figures helps, “bridge the gap between the kids at a young age with the leaders of the community.” In the city, he adds, “a lot of kids grow up thinking that any dealings you’re going to have with police are going to be bad, and we’re trying to break that down.”

According to Brooks, the sports portion of the program is an attractive incentive for the students to keep coming back. With scarce resources in the city, opportunities to engage in athletics are limited. In turn, participants are held responsible for their grades and behavior in school.

“They have to be a model student; they have to start bringing their grades up and changing their behavior,” says Brooks, “in order to stay in the program.”

Thanks to a $60,000 grant from the Open Society Institute—awarded to individuals who are “implementing creative strategies to assist and revitalize underserved communities in Baltimore,” Brooks is expanding the program, offering multiple sessions to reach more kids. Plans are also in the works to open SAFE Center (grand opening is slated for August 15), a youth center in what was an abandoned building across the street from Franklin Square Elementary/Middle. The facility will host Yards for Success, and serve as a venue for after-school, weekend and after-summer-camp activities, providing a safe place where kids will be off the streets and under the supervision of folks dedicated to helping them grow into productive citizens.

Additionally, the center will offer free educational assistance, workshops, mentorship, meals and more to at-risk and underserved community members of all ages.

To find out more about the Safe Alternative Foundation for Education and Van Brooks, visit www.safealternative.org.

Van Brooks, pictured in 2013, graduated from Towson in May 2012 and later that year walked for the first time since being paralyzed from the neck down while making a tackle in a 2004 high school football game.

“Yards for Success” by Van Brooks’12

“The best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry.” -Robert Burns

Nobody understands this quotation better than Van Brooks, who, in 2004, was a sports star at Loyola Blakefield High school set on a career in athletics. “The only option,” recalls the Baltimore native, “was to be successful at football.” That plan indeed went awry when Brooks broke his neck during a routine tackle and found himself, at the age of 16, paralyzed from the neck down.

Not only was his football career over, but doctors also told him he would never walk again.

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Levy’s Legacy

Legendary jazz man
Hank Levy’s composition “Whiplash” gets play as title track for Oscar winner.

By Wanda Haskel

Since 2001 when jazz great Hank Levy passed away, a group of his former Towson University students and fans have faithfully met every Sunday on campus to keep Levy’s music alive in their favorite way—by playing it. Some travel several hours after work to tackle the legend’s odd-metered arrangements, composed for the likes of internationally acclaimed big band leaders Stan Kenton and Don Ellis.

“To be able to play Hank’s music, which is some of the most challenging music there is,” says Chris Hutton ’94, a professional musician and lead trumpet in the Hank Levy Legacy Band, “is a real treat and an honor to do every week.”

Play On

On a recent Sunday afternoon, instead of rehearsing as usual, Hutton is traveling from his home in Pennsylvania to the Bethesda Blues and Jazz Supper Club, where he and his bandmates are putting on a rare live performance to celebrate “Whiplash” being featured in the 2014 major motion picture by the same name.

Speaking from his car on the way to the gig, Hutton describes the phone call the band’s manager, trombonist Bernard Robier, received two years ago from writer/director Damien Chazelle requesting Hank Levy’s tune for use in a movie he was developing.

Little did the legacy band members imagine that the film, which depicts the relationship between an ambitious music student and a tyrannical band leader, would wind up winning three Academy Awards in 2015. Although Hutton speaks highly of the film and appreciates the recognition for Levy as composer of the title track, he wouldn’t want anyone to confuse the cruel character portrayed by J. K. Simmons with his kind former teacher.

“Hank was a gentle soul, a very happy man, just great to be around. He loved to teach,” says Hutton, who was the last lead trumpet in TU’s jazz ensemble before Levy’s retirement in 1991.

All that Jazz

TU’s current jazz orchestra director Jim McFalls, who has also been asked by reporters if there is a comparison to be made between Levy and the band leader in “Whiplash,” agrees with Hutton.

Levy “was nurturing; he was respectful,” says McFalls. “He got what he wanted out of musicians, but he was never abusive in any way.”

And while the legacy band focuses on playing Levy’s music to honor him, the TU music department also emphasizes Levy’s gifts as a teacher and composer.

“We do play his music,” says McFalls, “but he was such an innovator, and that’s part of his legacy…we’re trying to capitalize on.”

A prime example of how the department is walking in Levy’s pioneering footsteps, adds McFalls, is a jazz residency series began in 2007, which brings artists to campus to work with TU music students.

“All of the artists that we’ve brought in have been innovators in the field of jazz. It’s a really great experience for the students.”

Surely Levy would approve.

When he founded the jazz program at Towson in 1968, Levy was breaking ground in the world of jazz, experimenting with time signatures in ways that were considered revolutionary for those days.

“His students were like his lab for the music he was writing,” says TU adjunct music history professor Samuel Fine, also a member of the legacy band. “The students got to play [Levy’s compositions] before [Stan] Kenton did.”

Subsequently, Levy earned national recognition for Towson as a top jazz school. In the 1970s and ’80s, his student ensemble won the famed Quinnipiac Intercollegiate Jazz Festival’s Eastern Competition multiple times, playing Levy’s challenging odd-metered compositions.

“They would go to this festival every year and play his music in odd meters,” says McFalls triumphantly, “and nobody could touch ‘em!”

Levy left Towson a rich legacy of jazz innovation and education, attracting top music students.

“A lot of us who went to Towson,” muses Hutton, “went because of Hank.”

And by all accounts, Levy was an important figure in jazz history, but many in the jazz world describe him as “under-recognized.” That’s why the Towson community is so pleased that Levy’s tune is the title track for “Whiplash.”

McFalls imagines that if Levy were here today, he would be equally delighted.

“I’m pretty sure,” says the man who describes himself as serving in Levy’s former position but not filling his shoes, “he would be pretty happy that his song is in a movie that won a couple of academy awards.”
Brandon Broady makes his living clowning around. But his career is no joke.

From his days double majoring in acting and electronic media and film at TU, to his current packed schedule as host, stand-up comedian, actor and writer, Broady knows that success requires hard work and a serious approach to his funny business.

The Silver Spring, Maryland, native attributes that work ethic to his family, rooted in a tough southeast Washington, D.C., neighborhood.

“My grandfather was the first to ‘make it out the hood,’” quips the comedian, and instilled in Broady’s mother a diligence that she (a lawyer) and Broady’s father passed on to him.

“My family is all hard workers,” says Broady, “Everybody wants better for me, and I want better for my family.”

Some would say you can’t get much better than what Broady has achieved, landing a plum hosting gig on BET’s new flagship comedic variety show.

But his career is no joke.

Brandon Broady ‘08 hits it big as host of BET’s new flagship comedic variety show.

By Wanda Haskel

Brandon Broady. Photo by Bry Delicia.

“I know all these stereotypes out there in the world—but I also know what spices their mama cooks with. I know the secrets. I know the accents.”

And while Broady certainly takes risks and probably offends at times, his humor is smart and balanced by a prevailing pursuit of social justice that affords him a license to joke fun at everyone in his path, including, more often than not, himself.

Laugh Track

Always the class clown, Broady’s sometimes disruptive desire to entertain meant trouble in school until he focused his talents. Acting in plays, emceeing pep rallies and talent shows, and co-anchoring Springbrook High School’s morning announcements helped the academically gifted student stay out of the principal’s office.

At Towson, Broady took every opportunity to test his material and his mettle—hosting campus events, doing stand-up in venues throughout D.C., Virginia and Maryland, and performing in TU theater productions. He also appeared in “The Wire” and the first two “Step Up” movies.

A big break came when Broady began filling in as a guest host on BET’s longtime “106 and Park,” which led to the job on “The Xperiment.”

“It’s been wonderful; it’s been crazy,” says Broady. “But that’s OK with the funnyman because this is what he’s been working toward.

“I’ve been preparing for this my whole career,” he adds.

And that, says the humorist, is the key to success—always preparing, always performing, always creating and getting your material out there.

“You have to create your own characters, create your own scripts,” says Broady when asked what advice he’d give students hoping to break into the entertainment industry. He also advocates taking advantage of the Internet, particularly YouTube, to develop your own buzz.

“Once you build that following,” says Broady, “the numbers don’t lie. People don’t shut doors on you if you can bring them that huge following. They may not like you, but they’re going to like those numbers.”

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Let Me Entertain You

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The Art of Activism

Interdisciplinary course empowers COFAC students to focus creativity toward social solutions.

By Wanda Haskel

Amanda Ferrarese is an artist with a purpose. The loquacious one doesn’t just want to make films. Her dream is to make films that make a difference. “I want to do both documentaries and fictional narratives, but even with my fictional narratives,” says the double major in fine art and design, “I want them to speak to some level of injustice happening.”

That’s why IDFA 480 Topics in Art, Media, Communication and Social Action was an attractive option for Ferrarese. The idea behind the interdisciplinary course, says co-developer Associate Professor Elisa Lankford, is to help students learn to focus their talents as artists on creative solutions to social problems—while earning credit toward their majors.

The class aims to offer a “whole other avenue of thinking,” says Lankford, “and how you can use these skills not just to create a piece of art or a piece of audio or an article...they can do so much more.”

Each section tackles a topic, such as homelessness—a problem in society. Class meetings include guest speakers offering content expertise and real-world examples of how artists are using their creative gifts to advance social change. Students also do a project, in which they test their wings creating and sharing art that addresses the societal injustice they’re studying.

Food Justice

Ferrarese’s class, Food Justice, is co-taught by Lankford and Associate Professor Meg Aldrich. Course content includes exploration of issues such as the politicization of food production and USDA guidelines, how food relates to culture, the economics of food, and nutrition and access to food.

The Gaithersburg native is especially enthusiastic about Food Justice’s culminating event—a student-run food and film festival, featuring food samples, student-produced film shorts, a documentary screening and information tables relating to food justice issues, such as urban farming, hunger and sustainability. According to Ferrarese, it’s “really cool to remind students who are already aware and teach those who aren’t about the benefits of eating sustainably and hopefully instill a change in them and make them work to seek out healthier, better options. I think that using film as a vehicle to do that is really great. It’s a really great visual aid.”

Animal Welfare

Another section of the course focuses on animal (specifically cats and dogs) welfare in Baltimore. Students investigate issues, such as animal abuse, overpopulation and neglect, and explore ways to put art into action for the betterment of companion animals through a final art-based project.

One popular guest speaker was David Walega, a painter/photographer who Skype’d in from California. Walega runs Art for Animals’ Sake, a nonprofit organization providing art education workshops that promote compassion and proper care for animals and companions pets. The class also participates in March for the Animals, the Maryland SPCA’s annual fundraiser at Druid Hill Park; and hosts a dinner at which area animal advocates, many of whom are members of the Mayor’s Anti-Animal Abuse Commission, share their stories of activism.

On top of time in the classroom and organized activities in the community, students are required to do 25 hours of service as either “dog deputies” or “cat cuddlers.” (volunteer designations assigned by the Maryland SPCA, which is the class’s main partnering organization) at local animal adoption centers.

Volunteering, says Visiting Assistant Professor Kate Collins, who teaches the Animal Welfare section, is “meant to give the students a real window into the world we’re trying to be engaged in.”

Junior Gabriele Durastanti enjoys working at the cat adoption center in White Marsh, especially when he’s able to send visitors home with newly adopted felines. The electronic media and film major, concentrating in radio/audio, wants others to get the same joy from their pets as he does from his dog Zoey and cat Nala, who he calls “the core of happiness in our house.”

Durastanti was drawn to Animal Welfare in Baltimore both because of his affection for animals and for the opportunity to combine art and activism, which he finds inspiring. “A class that relates to activism and art in the community can help,” he says “because it teaches you that one person can affect anything—not only with your job, but if you ever want to do anything in your life, you can’t be afraid that...I’m just one person. I feel I can still make a change.”

Art’s Impact

Professors and students agree that art and activism are a perfect fit. “A lot of what art can do is to challenge people’s thinking,” says Collins. “It can shed light on issues that are being ignored; it can create space for conversation; it can provoke, catalyze change.”
Bringing Books to Life

Towson University theatre students inspire inner-city third graders to be lifelong readers.

By Wanda Haskel

Sometimes interactions touch us so deeply that they permanently affect how we relate with the people around us. For TU senior Jacob Johnson, participating in the theatre arts department’s reading encouragement program did just that. It was an experience that he calls “life-changing.”

Using his dramatic skills to get third graders at an East Baltimore public elementary school excited about reading was transformative for Johnson because he got to witness his efforts make a big impact on a classroom full of small children. “In the 10 weeks that we were there,” says Johnson, “the difference in them from the beginning to the end was mind-blowing.”

**Not Just Words on a Page**

Johnson had the opportunity to engage with the youngsters as part of THEA 401 Community Outreach in Theatre, a course in which teams of TU students visit a third-grade class once a week throughout the spring semester, giving overworked teachers a break and sparking young imaginations with their energy and creativity. Lesson plans are based on beloved Baltimore storyteller and former TU instructor Beth Vaughn’s three-part structure—“listen,” “become,” “read,” which involves the children in activities relating to selected picture books, all of which feature characters overcoming challenges.

Johnson recalls exploring The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson with the third graders. Woodson’s tale focuses on two girls of different races who are divided both by a fence and by their mothers, who instruct them not to associate. Before the kids even set eyes on the book, Johnson and his TU partner drew them into the story with a dramatic telling, in which they acted out the narrative in the classroom. During the next class visit, they tied long strings between chairs and had their charges draw pictures of their fears to be hung on the metaphorical string fence. As a group, holding hands, the children and their college students broke down the “fence” and their fears by walking on the strings—just as in the story the two girls become buddies in spite of all that keeps them apart. The book’s themes proved highly relevant to the inner-city kids, all too familiar with socioeconomic challenges. Johnson says the activity helped the children see “that we’re bigger than all of our fears—we’re stronger than anything that gets in front of us.”

Finally, Johnson shared the actual book with the third graders in the reading portion of the lesson, to which they responded with gratifying enthusiasm.

One way Johnson could gauge the students’ eagerness was through an additional component that he added to the program—providing the students short, inspirational quotations to memorize for the next class. While the exercise was not mandatory, Johnson did reward the children’s work by teaching them a mudra—a symbolic Indian hand gesture representing spirituality and authenticity. “They loved it,” says Johnson. “Each time that I would see them, they would run up to me and say, ‘I know the quote!’”

The approach of engaging the third graders in reading through drama and creative activities had positive results beyond what Johnson imagined going in. He saw the kids gain not just a heightened interest in learning but also an increased awareness of opportunity available beyond the walls of their underfunded, overcrowded city school.

**Win-Win**

TU adjunct professor Sarah Lloyd teaches the class, which also involves training the TU students in classroom management and storytelling techniques. Lloyd says the program is “a chance for mutual positive impact,” pointing out that “everyone is winning in a lot of ways.”

For their part, the TU students gain a valuable perspective on social responsibility. “I think having this experience is something they can take with them,” says Lloyd. “It makes them more sympathetic, more empathetic and maybe will dictate how they make some choices when they get older.” Johnson’s not waiting until he gets older. He attributes a shift in himself that is happening right now to being part of the reading encouragement program.

“This idea of giving back and helping others,” Johnson says earnestly, “has really changed my outlook on life, not only with what I do but how I act to everyone.”

For the Love of a Good Book

The Department of Theatre Arts’ Reading Encouragement Program began in 2002 as a partnership between Towson University and the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. The project, originally titled the Clifton R. Wharton 3rd Designated Reader Program, was named for a children’s librarian at the Pratt whose death at a young age inspired his parents to fund a program in his memory connecting underprivileged children with books.