LAUGHING MATTERS

HOW FOUR GRADS GOT SERIOUS ABOUT COMEDY

Janet Van De Graaff
of CBC's Royal Canadian Air Farce

Mars: the search for life
Inside the Innocence Project
Readers react to the new magazine. BY BERTON WOODWARD

Research in the real world. BY LORNA R. MAESDEN

Janet Van De Graaff didn’t plan to end up in the Royal Canadian Air Farce. Gerry Dee, Mike Nahrgang and Russell Roy followed their own offbeat paths to comedy. BY MICHAEL TODD

Leading Edge

Green Machine…Buried Treasure…Making it Work…
Sites Unseen…Booze Hound…Who Are York’s Students?…Tragic Waste…
Roots of Pain…‘Fringe’ Benefits

Take a tour of the cool new Technology Enhanced Learning Building. BY MICHAEL TODD

Diane Michelangeli and Peter Taylor are part of a grand red planet mission. BY DAVID FULLER

After a 30-year career that took her all over the world, renowned opera diva Catherine Robbin has brought her golden voice to York. BY MARTHA TANCOCK

It has been a 10-year dream for Karim Lakhani and his family. Now they have created a centre, and a York fellowship, that will bring new understanding about Islam. BY MARTHA TANCOCK

What happens to people jailed for crimes they didn’t commit? Ask the students in Osgoode Hall Law School’s Innocence Project – they’re devoted to freeing them. BY MICHAEL TODD

Social marketer Heather Campbell…Scientist Tony Szeto…Dancer Santee Smith

The virtual mentor…A call from Atkinson…Coming events…Class Notes

He was dirty, he collected rats – and he wanted to hug me. BY DIANE BAKER MASON
First Look

When I was appointed president of York seven years ago, the good news in Canada was the trajectory for Asteroid 3753 Cruithne, which had been discovered by York researchers Paul Wiegert and Kim Innanen. But the bad news was that while most people had heard about this fascinating discovery — the asteroid accompanies Earth in its orbit, making it the planet’s only natural companion besides the moon — the public failed to connect it to York University. That is our challenge — to get the world to realize the long and distinguished history of science, research and discovery at our University.

While the presence of research and an associate vice-president responsible is of long standing, it was only in 2000 that York appointed its first VP Research & Innovation, Stan Shapson. The aim of this new position was to bring focus and leadership to York’s research effort, to maintain it as a central part of the University’s long-term strategy and, above all, to get the word out about research at York. Our 21 research centres report to VP Shapson, as does the Office of Research Services, which works with researchers and applicants for grants in all 10 faculties.

The results of this organizational change are beginning to show. VP Shapson has made York’s presence felt in granting council circles and has supported the work of dozens of researchers. As he has guided us into a more sophisticated strategy for meeting our three goals of focus, strategic thinking and profile. The VP and his staff have recently undertaken a review of all the Office of Research Services, which works with researchers and applicants for grants in all 10 faculties.

That’s research in the real world. To find out more, just log on to www.research.yorku.ca and see how York is redefining university research in Canada.

As Vice-President Stan Shapson puts it, “Research at York tears down the ivory tower.”

Lorna R. Marsden is York’s president and vice-chancellor.

In the Real World

Getting the word out about York’s research excellence.

BY LORNA R. MARDSEN

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Pointing to the key interests of granting councils, the VP R&I has supported groups of interdisciplinary researchers in the important areas of health, sustainabilty and the environment, culture and entertainment, and international studies. York’s interdisciplinary and collaborative focus helps us to approach these issues in a truly unique way.

Innovation is key to this effort. So is working with the community, transferring technology and knowledge. York spin-off companies are contributing to economic development. Our researchers are helping to shape local communities like neighbouring York Region by contributing their expertise to businesses and public services.

Our health policy experts are providing new ways of thinking for governments. As Stan Shapson puts it: “Re-

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hey might be red, but they’re still green. York’s growing fleet of natural-gas powered buses is the environmentally friendly choice for shuttling people to and from York’s GO station and other spots. The University recently began switching to natural gas vehicles – NGVs – as an alternative to diesel buses and gasoline vans. Natural gas burns cleaner than diesel or gas and drastically reduces tailpipe emissions. Some bus basics:

- The switch to natural gas saves 25-50 per cent in fuel costs. Natural gas prices fluctuate according to the market.
- The capacity of the fuel stored on an NGV – usually in cylinders mounted on the roof – gives it about 75 per cent of the range of a diesel bus. It goes further in winter – natural gas is compressed, so more fits as it contracts in cold weather.
- Natural gas produces much less gunk (OK, particulate matter) than diesel fuel. That means less air pollution and longer engine life. Diesel fuel is highly complex, and its exhaust contains more than 40 compounds classified as known or possible carcinogens, mutagenic or endocrine disruptors. Natural gas buses produce almost none of these.
- Natural gas buses are less than half as loud as diesel buses. Testing shows NGVs operate around the decibel level of an electric shaver. Diesel buses operate nearer the level of a jackhammer.
- York’s GO NGV makes six round trips a day to and from the York GO station, backed up by other York vehicles as needed. The six NGVs also handle many of the Glendon-Keele shuttles as well as evening escort services.
- Aside from the big Orion bus shown here, York’s other NGVs are Ford factory-produced – there’s a 24-seat bus and four vans. They exceed Ontario vehicle emission standards.
- Big buses like the GO NGV can cost between $350,000 and $550,000 or more. They carry up to 70 people seated and standing.
- York’s Transportation Services plans to have its full 12-vehicle fleet running on alternative fuels within the next two years.
- The entire University community is going green. As recently as four years ago, 70 per cent of people arrived at the Keele campus in single-occupant vehicles. Now 60 per cent arrive by alternative means – mainly transit, plus car pools and bikes. Even so, University officials note that commuting problems won’t be solved until the subway reaches York.
Buried Treasure

Canada’s hidden history unearthed

Starting this year, York scholars will be unearthing a trove of Canada’s hidden history: previously unprocessed census records for the 40 year period from 1911 to 1951. Based at York and six other Canadian universities, the five-year Canadian Century Research Infrastructure (CCRI) project will develop databases derived from census records and other sources, such as newspaper reports and legislative debates. Mining 40 years’ worth of information should yield valuable insights into the country’s social, economic and cultural shifts, says Gordon Darroch, sociology professor and York’s CCRI centre director. “It will give us new insights into things like the changing character of labour, housing, immigration, families, education and urbanization,” Darroch says.

Among other topics, the data should also paint a clearer picture of children’s lives in those years, says Evelyn Ruppert, centre coordinator. “Children and youth are mostly absent from even well-documented historical archives. CCRI databases will enable research about their changing lives in the 20th century.” The national project’s databases will be available to students and researchers via the Web, and will link with existing census databases covering the years from 1871 to 2001.

Making it Work

Are good jobs more precious than ever?

Over the past decade, it has become a little harder to find a secure job. Though the majority of Canadians still hold full-time, permanent jobs, their numbers have dropped since 1989. At the same time, the ranks of those juggling two camps – those with full-time, permanent jobs and those with part-time, temporary employment. Instead, we should look at the cumulative effect of the reporting was as important as the

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A young rock star, Joe, dies when his electric guitar blows up on stage. Facing Judgment Day, Joe gets a little help from his friends – Wealth, Kin, Beauty, Knowledge, Strength and Good Deeds. So begins the rock musical, That's Life, which wowed critics on a six-city tour of Scotland this summer after opening at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Produced by Peter McKinnon, York theatre professor, That's Life is adapted from the 14th-century morality play Everyman. The play follows Joe as he sizes up his life. Critics raved about the “irreverent humour” and “heavenly” music, comparing it to Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar, and said it deserved a run on Broadway and in London’s West End. Families and punk rockers alike flocked to see the show, created and staged by a wealth of York talent.

McKinnon, an experienced Broadway producer and lighting designer, commissioned the script (by John Illingworth, BFA ’98) and music (by award-winning composer Alan Moon, BFA ’91) three years ago after noticing how intrigued his students were with the didactic Everyman. “It had never occurred to them that one’s life could be guided by an overriding moral philosophy” – like doing good deeds. Now, given its success, McKinnon is busy promoting licensing rights that would bring the show to an even wider audience.

The Roots of Pain
Reducing suffering from cancer

There’s no surefire cure for cancer pain, but there may be more helpful physical and psychological strategies to deal with it. Lucia Gagliese, a York kinesiology & health science professor, is studying how young and old patients alike cope with gastrointestinal cancer, to see whether there’s a link between physical pain and psychological distress.

“From preliminary findings, it looks as though the differences in pain lie in its impact and in how people cope – not in their age,” says Gagliese. She says that those who have not learned adaptive pain-coping mechanisms in their life are the ones who suffer most from cancer pain.

“We’re also looking at other causes of why people experience pain differently. We know that elderly people are less likely to be given painkillers, for instance, and we want to know why. That may be because some health-care workers believe elderly patients are more likely to become addicted to painkillers.”

Gagliese hopes her work will lead to new programs for helping cancer patients cope. Given Canada’s aging population, the study couldn’t be more timely.
Janet Van De Graaff is really two-faced. Actually, make that four- or five-faced. But that’s OK, it’s all part of the job. Over the last few years, Van De Graaff’s comedic alter egos have included the likes of Martha Stewart, the “annoying woman from that McCain’s commercial”, Barbara Walters, Rosie Rodriguez and Diane Sawyer, among others.

If you don’t recognize Van De Graaff’s name, you might recognize her face from the Royal Canadian Air Farce (check out her one-minute skit on the Farce’s Web site where she plays the female component of a sports announcer tag team who go “tongue to tongue in a reporting frenzy”).

Van De Graaff didn’t set out to be a comic, she says, but she was always a bit of a class clown. “For sure, I got in lots of trouble for goofing around in Grade 7. I think I was kind of acting out some stress at home. That’s what they say makes for comedy, having a sense of humour about these painful bits in life.”

A native of Chicago, Van De Graaff met then-York theatre professor Neil Freeman, an expert in Shakespearean text analysis, at a master class in the US. “I wanted to learn from him, so it was really a case of following him to York,” she says. In 1990, she got her York MFA in theatre. “After I was done I was convinced I’d be heading straight for Stratford. Unfortunately, Stratford didn’t seem to think so.” Instead, Van De Graaff ended up doing improv at Second City. And the rest was comedy history.

After a year or two with Second City’s touring group, Van De Graaff joined its Main Stage cast and wrote and performed five revues there, two of which received Dora nominations. She’s also worked the Toronto Fringe Festival, Theatre Passe Muraille as well as playing Yvonne, the bubbly co-host of WTN’s (now WN’s) “Go Girl!”

“I never wanted to do standup,” says Van De Graaff. “It’s very scary. Improv is collaborative and it keeps you fresh. And the best thing about it is, you never have to worry about forgetting your lines.”
Gerry Donoghue, or Gerry Dee as he’s now known on stage, is that rare thing in life – a clean comic. Avoiding being a potty mouth isn’t out of any big moral considerations, says Dee, “It’s just that dirty comedy isn’t my thing. It isn’t me.” But Dee’s no saint. “Sure I swear, just not on stage.”

Dee, who got his BA in kinesiology in 1992, is seeing more and more stages these days, a good thing in the competitive world of standup. He says he loved his time at York (he was a don in residence at Bethune College). “York was a great experience for me,” he says. “The people, the courses I took – all of it.”

Now the former high-school teacher of nine years has made the jump, quit his job in Toronto and moved to Los Angeles. “I’m giving myself a year to make it,” he says. While Dee is continuing to do standup both in the US and Canada, he’s set his sights on getting into film or the TV market. “My act is perfect for television. I’ve got my eye on sitcoms.”

Dee is a relative newcomer to the comedy scene. In 1999 he won “Toronto’s Funniest Comic With A Day Job” contest and was featured comic in the 1999 Just For Laughs International Comedy Festival held in Montreal. In 2001 he taped his own “Comedy Now” special and in 2002 was featured at the Halifax Comedy Festival, televised on CBC.

Born in Toronto, he grew up the son of Scottish parents in an Italian neighbourhood. “My dad’s a really funny guy,” he says. “I base a lot of my material on him and on my teaching days and my life in general, but I try to stay away from the usual comic fare of sex, dating and stuff like that. It’s all been done by other comics. It would be hard to put a fresh stamp on it.”

He took the comic plunge as a result of a dare by his students. “They said, ‘Hey, you’re a really funny guy, why don’t you try out on an amateur night for standup?’ I said, ‘OK, before the year’s out I’ll do it.’ And I did. I totally bombed the first night. But I got the bug. By the fifth time I was getting the hang of it. Then I won a bunch of competitions. And now here I am in LA!”

“My act is perfect for television. I’ve got my eye on sitcoms.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEOFF GEORGE
Mike Nahrgang’s got the kind of face a camera loves, which is why you may have spotted him on anything from a recent series of Chrysler commercials (as the spousal stand-in) to small parts in flicks like The Tuxedo, starring Jackie Chan, or Men With Brooms. He’s also appeared on a number of shows on the Comedy Network. But Nahrgang’s steady gig these days is mainly with Second City’s touring company. “I’ve never been much for standup,” says Nahrgang. “Although I’ve done it. I’m more of a writer, more into improv.”

Nug (he got the name in Grade 5 and it stuck) Nahrgang is a true small-town guy who’s making it big these days in the Toronto comedy scene. Born in Kitchener, he has lived in Elmira, Newton, Milverton, Clinton, Waterloo, Bramberg, and Wellesley. He settled down in the Big Smoke after finishing his joint degree (BA ‘93) in the York/Seneca College School of Communication Arts program.

“My dad was a chicken-feed salesman so we moved around a lot,” says Nahrgang. “I really came to York on a whim, because I thought being in Toronto would be cool.” Nahrgang honed a lot of his comedic skills on campus when he got involved in Vanier College Productions (he’s still director of Vanier’s improv company at York) and he learned the biz from the inside out by doing nine years’ worth of set construction, sound engineering, costume and lighting design and promotion for VCP.

Nahrgang is also part of the four-member “sketch mercenaries” troupe The Minnesota Wrecking Crew, named after one of his favourite pro wrestling tag teams and made up entirely of Vanier veterans. The Crew (John Caturci, Josh Glover, Ron Sparks and Nahrgang) won as best sketch troupe at September’s Canadian Comedy Awards and walked away with the comedy equivalent of an Oscar. “We got a Beaver,” says Nahrgang. “How Canadian is that?”

“My dad was a chicken-feed salesman so we moved around a lot.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY LINDSAY LOZON
Russell Roy got his taste for comedy when he was 12 and heard a Richard Pryor record. "It was the filthiest, dirtiest thing I'd ever listened to," he says. "I loved it."

But it wouldn't be until later that Roy would walk out of his office at a telecommunications company and join the ranks of the funny guys for keeps. Roy never had his eye directly on a career in comedy. He enrolled at York in political science and ended up in liberal studies. Working on his degree part-time, he got a BA in 1998 with a business major and a theatre minor.

Roy has done standup since 1995, but these days he's doing less of that in favour of better-paid work as a "corporate imposter," an area he has carved out pretty well by himself. It means he gets hired by companies to satirize the very white-collar kultur he slaved in during his days in sales and account management. So what's his shtick?

"Well, I'll show up at an annual general meeting, for instance, and give out mock awards -- like the ass-kissing award, you know! I'll name the nominees for that and then recount all the attributes that Bob Smith demonstrated to be the ultimate winner. People will come up to me afterwards, even the people I roast, and say, 'You know, that was very funny and I'm glad someone said it.'"

"One of my favourite things is promoting myself as the 'motivational' speaker," he says. "Except in this case I'll give a speech on failure with things like the '7 Keys to Procrastination'. It's basically a rap on how to fail."

Having an eye for the absurd is critical to any good comic, says Roy. "Are some people innately funny? 'Yes, I think so. The guy who fixes my car, for instance, and the three guys who help him? They're the funniest people I know. Whenever I go there we have a blast. That's true intuitive comedy.' And humans have an innate need to laugh, he adds. "Comedy is tribal."
SPACES

Imagine a university classroom that’s always open, spans the globe and is accessible from afar. Welcome to the new Technology Enhanced Learning Building.  

BY MICHAEL TODD

ALK THROUGH THE NEW Technology Enhanced Learning Building and you’re surrounded by light. It spills in from high glass walls, falls warmly over acres of honey-coloured maple and casts shadows across the pale limestone floor – all contrasted against brushed stainless steel detailing. This is a technology building? Right. And that’s the point.

The technology’s here, but it’s invisible. Ready to be accessed around the clock or whenever needed by profs or students. It’s a building that never sleeps, even if its users have to. So, no ugly cables, no monitors mounted on black brackets. Instead, it’s all very quiet, understated, clean and subdued.

Known to all as TEL, this ultra-connected building is an $84 million, York University/Seneca College joint project. The $46.9 million it got from Ontario’s SuperBuild program was the largest single grant awarded from that fund, created to help colleges and universities prepare for the double cohort’s arrival in 2003. TEL’s finishing touches were put in place this past fall. It now offers students from both York and Seneca programs in math, education, design, information technology, applied science, business, health studies, communications and multimedia. The hope is that TEL will combine the best of both worlds – York’s theoretical teachings with Seneca’s hands-on approach to applied education.

In academic users are taking full advantage of its innovations. York Fine Arts design Professor David Scadding says all the new media is perfect for his courses in the York/Sheridan Joint Program in Design, housed entirely in the building. “Designers are advocates of change and pursuing fresh directions,” says Scadding. “We’ve always embraced new technology.” This building may hug back.

Cool, Calm & Connected

A BIG PANE

A four-storey atrium is the central feature of TEL’s design and runs the length of the building. Starting on the second floor, it reaches up to skylights that provide an abundance of natural light and allow for good airflow. Skylights have automatic shades, and special glass ensures temperatures remain comfortable even on sunny days.

BEST OF BOTH

TEL features both wired and wireless technologies. Even the phone system is Internet-based. Flexible work spaces and wireless technology mean it is easy to adapt to programs’ changing needs.

DROPPING IN

There are 5,500 drops, approximately 500 km of category 6 cable (top-of-the-line communication link cable) and 12 data rooms.

WE NEVER CLOSE

TEL features innovative lecture halls, seminar rooms, video-conferencing rooms and experimental classrooms with 24-hour access to distance learning and the Internet.

ON THE SAFE SIDE

With all of TEL’s high-end computers, labs and public spaces to relax in, building and student security is a must. TEL has a sophisticated system of keyless entry for offices and labs as well as 23 security cameras that monitor such areas as lounges, basement classrooms and corridors.

INSIDE STORY

The five-storey building, designed by Moriyama & Teshima Architects, contains 360,000 square feet. Of that, 54 per cent goes to York, 46 per cent to Seneca College. Four thousand students – 2,000 from each institution – will use the building, which houses 31 classrooms, 42 computer labs and three resource centres.
It may sound like a recruiting poster, but for York researchers Diane Michelangeli and Peter Taylor, it’s the answer to the question, “So, why did you become a weather scientist?”

“I wanted to become an astronaut,” Michelangeli explains over the clatter of dinner dishes and children’s voices. “But I realized one day when I was car sick, that was not good for an astronaut. So I decided to specialize in science and get a job at NASA.” After receiving her PhD in planetary science and geochemistry from the California Institute of Technology in 1988, Michelangeli spent two years doing post-doctoral research on Mars at the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Ames Research Center. Then she headed home to Canada to start a family and a job with an environmental consulting firm researching earth’s atmosphere.

With an interest in aviation and intellectual adventure in mind, Peter Taylor took his doctorate in applied mathematics at Bristol University in his native England, graduating in 1967. Travel came later: a perfect hill in Scotland’s Outer Hebrides, windswept Sable Island on Canada’s east coast and a cottage research station at Grand Bend, Ontario, home of some of the best — that is to say worst — weather in Canada. Next up is a trip to the Arctic to study blowing snow.

But for both Michelangeli and Taylor, the greatest travel adventure will begin late in 2007. That’s when NASA launches the Mars Scout mission and its package of Canadian technology designed to study the Martian environment for signs of water, an essential ingredient for life forms past and present. The Canadian component was developed under the leadership of York Professor Emeritus Allan Carwell, chairman of Optech Inc., the Toronto firm that won the contract, along with Brampton, Ont.-based MD Robotics, to provide instruments for the meteorological package on the Phoenix lander. Michelangeli and Taylor’s work as mission scientists will give others an idea of what to expect when the landing module sets down on the red planet’s north polar plains in the spring of 2008.

Given Mars’ dust storms and 80-degree temperature variance between night and day, there will be no shortage of challenges for the “met” team as it works up detailed specifications for the meteorological instrumentation. After Phoenix arrives on the planet, the team will offer advice on how best to survey the Martian atmosphere using Optech’s laser-based light-detecting and ranging (lidar) technology. Once collected, data on temperature, pressure, atmospheric dust particles and water vapour will be fed into computer models developed in York’s Department of Earth & Atmospheric Science in the Faculty of Pure & Applied Science. The planetary modelling that will be used to analyze the data was developed within York’s Centre for Research in Earth & Space Science (CRESS).

Their part of the Mars Scout project, like most of the mission’s other components, has one purpose: to find signs of the conditions for life on the solar system’s most Earth-like planet. The mission slogan, says Taylor, is simple and to the point. “They told us, ‘follow the water.’” To do that, he will employ knowledge of wind flow patterns in earth’s boundary layer gained from years of research at the Canadian Meteorological Service and at York, where he has taught for the past 15 years.

Michelangeli’s research into the formation of particulate matter in earth’s atmosphere will help reveal how water vapour molecules combine with Mars’ fine dust particles to form ice crystals that collect on the planet surface. The York team’s interdisciplinary research efforts — which combine math, chemistry, physics and earth science — will give NASA valuable information on the existence and extent of this crucial element.

Searching the Martian atmosphere for signs of life may occupy a good deal of their working lives, but for both researchers attending to signs of life at home keeps them thoroughly grounded. Michelangeli, who has a 10-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son, admits to once squeezing in some sink-side work on her laptop computer only to hear the words, “Mom, watch me!” The lame reply, “I am, I saw everything you did,” quickly put thoughts of Martian dust clouds on hold.

Taylor, who has a 10-year-old son at home as well as five grandchildren, met his wife at the meteorological service, where she still works, so weather is never far from his thoughts. During this sabbatical year, Taylor has some time for reading and his duties as co-editor of the international journal Boundary-Layer Meteorology.

The colleagues will have some time to spare when the Scout begins its six-month space journey to Mars. Only when the data begin flowing back to earth for analysis will their amazing Martian weather quest resume. Then, if they find what they are looking for, who knows what adventures lie ahead? Perhaps a forecast of partly dusty skies and possible ice precipitation — mixed with early signs of life.
Last spring, mezzo-soprano Catherine Robbin celebrated a 30-year career with a farewell concert at CBC's Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto, bowed graciously to roars of “Brava, brava!”, vanished into the wings – and emerged into a new life teaching classical vocal performance at York.

The concert was sold out months in advance. Fans such as Tafelmusik flutist Elissa Poole publicly mourned the departure of the velvety-voiced diva, one of Canada’s best-known and internationally renowned mezzo sopranos. In a rhapsodic tribute in The Globe & Mail, Poole wrote that Robbin has the “ability to find the emotional centre of a piece of music.” Poole also beheld the singer’s last performance as mezzo solo in Handel’s Messiah – “tears streaming down her face in the final ‘Amen’ chorus” – with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. It was a telling detail: Handel’s oratorio had launched, and ... Handel,” says Robbin, sitting in her office in York’s Winters College. “It felt like coming home to sleep in my own bed.”

As a child growing up in Toronto, Robbin never imagined life as a professional singer. Like her Irish father, she sang around the house, in the car, whenever anyone asked. When her Brownie leader suggested the little soprano get training, her Newfoundland-born mother considered the idea novel. The musical household didn’t even own a piano, recalls Robbin. “No one in my family had formal musical training.”

During her teens, Robbin sang in choirs and played the leads in school musicals. “Singing was just something I did to entertain myself. I never knew anybody who made a living at it.” If she hadn’t auditioned for the Mendelssohn Choir during first-year university, she might have become a teacher of the deaf, capitalizing on her flair for languages and communication. But the choir’s conductor, the late Elmer Iseler, invited her to join his elite chamber choir ensemble, the Festival Singers of Canada, instead. “I couldn’t believe it,” she recalls. “This meant I was going to get to travel to Europe, across Canada. It lifted me right out of my life.” She quit her studies. “I thought I’d do it for a year, then return to university.” But one year turned into five as she leaptfrogged back and forth across the Atlantic, working in Toronto to pay for lessons in London. At 21, she made her professional debut singing the mezzo solo in the Messiah with the St. Catharine’s Symphony. It was 1972.

In the intervening years, she married, finished her BA, raised two daughters, hired an agent and seduced audiences with her interpretations of Baroque and Romantic lieder and oratorios. She won major international prizes, performed with every major Canadian orchestra and choir and appeared with leading conductors and pianists throughout Europe and North America. And many of her recordings – from Handel and Mozart to Berlioz and Mahler – bear the stamp of prestigious awards.

At 52, Robbin said goodbye to it all while still, by all accounts, at the top of her form. “I wouldn’t say I’m not going to miss that kind of life,” she admits. “I loved it. It was intense. There were great rewards, and there were great costs. I met wonderful people and I left a marriage behind. My children grew up knowing they had to make allowances for their mother.” More often than she would have liked, she said good night over the phone. Now remarried, with one daughter in university and the other in high school, Robbin aims to stay closer to home.

At York, where she taught part-time for three years before joining the full-time faculty in July, Robbin is creating opportunities for her students to perform, to see concerts, to think critically. In March 2002, she directed them in Henry Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas, the first opera ever produced by students at York. Last spring, she directed “Le Salon de Chant,” a concert featuring 15 young singers performing arias and art songs by Mozart, Fauré, Puccini and Satie. She still performs – but not for money. Now “my passion is teaching one on one.” This year, she is coaching 11 lucky students, preparing them for solo performances as songbirds, choristers, teachers and coaches on life’s musical stage. Hallelujah.
The Lakhani’s aim is evident in the centre’s name, Noor, which means “light of God”, and in a single Koranic verse inscribed, like a mantra, in 28 spots within the building: “Oh! Mankind, behold. We have created you all out of a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another.”

“The Noor is striving to achieve – bringing people together and talking,” says Karim Lakhani, who helped his parents, Hassanali, 82, and Noorbanu, 75, fulfill their vision. After a long search, they bought the former Japanese-Canadian Cultural Centre, built in 1963, and hired the original architect, Raymond Moriyama, to convert it into a Muslim cultural centre. The symbolism was not lost on Karim. “From our perspective, our use of the building is similar to that of the Japanese. The centre was their way of planting roots again,” he says, referring to the period after the Second World War. “Noor is a symbol that we’ve become part of the community, too.”

Though “9/11 hasn’t had any impact on our thinking,” says Karim, “I feel our contribution now, after 9/11, is probably more relevant.”

A centre found, the Lakhani turned to York University to kickstart the business of educating Muslims – and anyone else who is interested – about Islam and Islamic culture. To Karim, a member of the York University Foundation Board of Directors, York represented Canada’s dynamic multicultural mosaic and would make an ideal partner. With a $500,000 pledge from the Lakhani’s, York created the Noor Fellowship in Islamic Studies and appointed humanities Professor Amila Buturovic to hold it for the next three years. The fellowship will bolster Islamic studies at the University and allow Buturovic to develop programs, plan lecture series and organize events in collaboration with the centre. Within weeks of the centre’s opening, she had booked eminent Islamic and Judaic scholars to deliver lectures – about such topics as Jewish, Christian and Islamic mysticism, and the Sufi path – first at the Noor centre and then at York.

“Too many people are looking for a community,” says Karim. “We’re all striving for the same thing.”

The Noor centre is not just about the study of Islam,” Karim Lakhani says. “It is also about the study of Christianity and Judaism and other faiths.” Like his father, who is a devout Muslim and a self-educated scholar of the world’s religions, Karim advocates interfait acceptance. He is on the board of governors of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews. “We’re all striving for the same thing,” he says. “If you believe in God, the basics are the same and what you are looking to achieve is the same. It’s what’s in between that might be a little different. But somehow that little bit of difference seems to be a big bridge to cross.”

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If you’re an average law-abiding citizen, you may feel secure in the belief that the justice system is fair, rarely makes mistakes and, even if it did, would be sufficiently failsafe to prevent miscarriages of justice. If so, think again. Dianne Martin, an Osgoode Hall Law School professor and co-founder of Osgoode’s Innocence Project, would be the first to disabuse you of such notions. “We’re all rather smug about the legal system,” Martin says. “We believe we have a low crime rate, that whodunit homicides are rare in Canada and that much of our crime is understandable and solvable.” But according to Martin, who has spent many years as a criminal lawyer herself, wrongful convictions aren’t as rare as one might think. Enter the Innocence Project.

The second such project in the world was started at York in 1997 by Martin and her Osgoode colleague, Professor Alan Young. Barry Scheck, who founded the original Innocence Project at Yeshiva University’s Cardozo School of Law in New York, was looking for Canadian law schools that might be interested in starting similar initiatives. Osgoode responded. Martin and Young were, at the time, the only profs on staff who had criminal law practice experience. Together they met with Scheck and came up with a pilot program to investigate cases of wrongful conviction. The time was right. Canadians knew about David Milgaard, Donald Marshall and Guy Paul Morin. And those were only three of a then-estimated 200 viable claims of wrongful conviction in Canada.

Now, every week for three hours, a group of the best young legal minds in Canada gathers around a table in an Osgoode classroom. Up to 10 law students work for credit under professors’ supervision. Everyone wins – there’s legal aid for those who need it and real-world experience for Osgoode law students like Paul Jebely. He says the “number one” thing the project has given him is perspective – and a loss of his own innocence about the workings of the legal system. “You realize the truth can be bent, that cops will lie on the stand, and that you can be thought guilty by proxy.”

Select cases are reinvestigated and, where appropriate or possible, new scientific tests such as DNA analysis are conducted. When the team thinks a case for innocence has been made, they seek a pardon, a new trial, compensation or other remedy. It’s rarely easy. Says Martin, “There’s tremendous pressure to believe that we do policing and criminal prosecution well. It’s the ‘we’ve got the suspect and that should be the-end-of-it’ scenario. Reopening a court decision is tremendously difficult.”

One of the first cases for which York’s Innocence Project could claim victory was that of Gary Staples. He was convicted in 1973 of the murder of a taxicab driver in 1969. Staples served 22 months in prison before being acquitted in a second trial. He wanted an apology (he was free when the project took up his case). The Hamilton police refused. “They said we had to produce the real killer,” Martin says.

On the strength of a memo unearthed in 2001 by two Osgoode students at a Hamilton police station, Staples sued the city’s police for $6 million. The force, he said, had suppressed witness statements that would have eliminated him as a suspect in the murder 30 years earlier. For years he endured suspicion (he’d gotten off on a technicality). Finally, because of the new evidence, he had a chance to clear his name. In late 2002, Hamilton police issued an apology and settled with Staples for an undisclosed amount.

According to Martin, it has really been DNA testing that’s opened the floodgates for re-examining cases where the accused has claimed innocence. In the US, the Cardozo school has gained exoneration for more than 100 wrongly convicted people based on DNA evidence. Across the US, Canada and Britain, the tally now stands at 400 recognized cases of wrongful conviction thanks to DNA testing. Even so, the Osgoode team usually focuses on evidence rather than relying on DNA.

The experience second- and third-year law students get working with the Innocence Project might look good on a resume, but the program is really more about giving students a chance to act on their idealism, says Martin. “They see it as a chance to make a difference, to work on something important. It teaches them humility, too. They get to see first-hand the tears and the victim’s families. It’s a remarkable experience.”

For Jebely, involvement in the project is a way to give something back. “The law is not a perfect entity,” he says. “There always has to be someone to advocate for those people who can’t do it for themselves. We’re their last ‘faint hope’. That’s a pretty big responsibility for a second-year law student.”

Fellow second-year law student Kirsten Edwards can’t say enough about the experience she’s had. “To be part of the Innocence Project is the main reason I chose to come to York,” says Edwards, formerly an English major at Carleton University.

What happens to people jailed for crimes they didn’t commit? Ask the students in Osgoode Hall Law School’s Innocence Project – they’re devoted to freeing the wrongly convicted. BY MICHAEL TODD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFF GEORGE
ACADEMIC FASHIONS COME AND GO, and when Heather Campbell came to York a degree in sociology was definitely not a hot choice among her peers. “No one was taking sociology,” she says. “Everyone was into psych. It was, ‘what are you going to do with a degree in sociology?’”

Campbell has answered the question. What she did with her sociology major (BA ’92) was get herself a great job as campaign manager for the “We All Belong Campaign”, fighting the stigma of mental illness at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Northeast Mental Health Centre.

Campbell says changing how people view mental illness is “a tough sell,” but “what I learned at York about groups and group behaviour has been invaluable.”

Edwards, who admits to being a “crime TV addict”, said the thought of being involved with researching real crime cases appealed to her. The reality, though, is that it’s a lot of work – most of it not of the TV glam variety. “Right now I’ve got four boxes of court documents sitting on the floor of my office. It’s sometimes a lot of dog work, but the payoff is you know you’re working for justice. I have a genuine concern about rights – I feel that everyone should have a right to justice regardless of race. That isn’t always the case.”

Last summer Edwards worked on a particularly high-profile case – that of Romeo Phillion. Phillion served 31 years for the murder of an Ottawa firefighter. His long incarceration was in large part due to his refusal to admit guilt before a parole board. In this case, as in others, the project looked for help from an experienced lawyer as a mentor to the students, once the team felt certain of the prisoner’s innocence.

They got help from James Lockyer, a Toronto-based lawyer with the Association for the Defence of the Wrongfully Convicted, the group of volunteer lawyers who won freedom for Marshall, Milgaard and Morin. Together they prepared an application last May under section 690 of the Criminal Code, asking the justice minister to review Phillion’s conviction. Section 690 allows prisoners to apply for such a review if they can produce new evidence. The minister reviewed the case and appointed Nova Scotia lawyer John Briggs to recommend a response. Chris Sherin, the project’s current co-director, hopes a decision will come in early spring. But meanwhile, in a landmark decision that made national headlines, Justice David Watt of the Superior Court of Ontario released Phillion on bail on July 21. He is free for the first time in 31 years because of Lockyer and Osgoode’s Innocence Project.

People like Gary Staples and Romeo Phillion are – ultimately – more than just names in the media. They are lives lived behind bars. The cases Osgoode’s project deals with are about those lives, as well as those of the people outside who are attached to them – partners, children, families. At the end of the day, the real reward for students is witnessing the forgiveness of victims by a system whose quest for justice can sometimes be criminal.
Kilt Trip

Tony Szeto

Tony Szeto, whose ethnic Chinese heritage was a surprise to him, never dreamed he’d find himself donning a sporran and ghillies (soft leather shoes), or taking up Scottish country dancing. But now there isn’t much that would keep Szeto, a York professor of earth science, out of a kilt and off the dance floor. About the only thing he hasn’t mastered is a straigh line.

“I never felt out of place,” says Szeto, who was invited by a friend to come out and try it one night. “I loved it from the beginning even though, obviously, I’m not from a Scottish heritage.” Szeto, who favours a Mackenzie tartan kilt (unavailable locally) instead of the kilt he has for 15 years from his time working at a kilt maker, has been kicking up his heels for 15 years now. His feet never sleep. “I’m always working at perfecting it. I’m a scientist after all.”

Celebrating Mother Earth

Santee Smith

Mohawk, choreographer, National Ballet-trained dancer

IT HAS BEEN THREE YEARS in the making, and this summer it will finally reach fruition. In June, Santee Smith, a York MA student in dance, will present her tour de force dance/music piece, Kahaw:wi, at Toronto’s Harbourfront and at the Canada Dance Festival at Ottawa’s National Arts Centre. A Mohawk who grew up on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ont., Smith trained for six years with the National Ballet School, and is dedicated to advancing indigenous culture.

Kaha:wi means “She Carries” in Iroquois. Pronounced “Gah-hee-white,” it’s a work that explores Iroquoian culture and aesthetics expressed through contemporary music and dance. It follows the life cycle of three generations of women in her family, from the death of her grandmother Kahaw:wi, to the birth of her own daughter, Somiah Kahaw:wi. Music from more than 35 Iroquoian singers, songwriters and musicians has been commissioned for the one-hour work.

“As a Haudenosaunee [Iroquois] person,” says Smith, “I believe that song and dance were gifts given to us by the Creator, to celebrate our lives on Mother Earth.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFF GEORGE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HORST HERGET
The Virtual Mentor

Check out York’s high-tech Career CyberGuide online.

T HIS PAST FALL, York University’s Career Centre launched its ground-breaking Career CyberGuide, a unique form of mentoring for York graduates and students. Traditional mentorships establish a one-on-one relationship in which a senior, trusted adviser provides advice and coaching to a junior colleague. Volunteer alumni provide this type of mentoring for students or recent graduates of several York faculties (see next item). But the Career CyberGuide (at www.yorku.ca/careers) presents a remarkable opportunity to participate in an online mentoring program.


These are just the beginning. New topics will be added several times each year, on everything from successful interviewing skills to how to impress the boss at lunch.

The development of this pilot project was a true collaboration of the Career Centre team, who involved campus recruiters and career/skills advisers in these complex presentations. The project was produced and edited by Carolyn Steele, career development coordinator for the Career Centre. “The Career CyberGuide,” she says, “is an extraordinary multimedia resource to provide students with cutting-edge job search information when they need it, not when we are scheduling it. Finding a great job has never been easier.”

Mediastile Live, the technology behind the Career CyberGuide, captures a presentation and allows the user to navigate, print and interact with streaming media. Says Kelly Park, a multimedia designer at York’s Instructional Technology Centre, “York University was one of the first developers of this technology, and it is now the first institution in the world to use this technology.”

The Atkinson Connection

A HOME OFFICE runs face-to-face mentorship, a program of the Atkinson Faculty of Liberal & Professional Studies – and if you’re an Atkinson alum, they’d love to hear from you. Their Student Alumni Mentorship Program provides Atkinson grads with a meaningful way to reconnect with current students and share their experience and knowledge with the next generation. The pilot program, begun in the fall, generated so much interest that Atkinson plans to have a winter round of mentor-student matches, as well as expand the program in fall 2004. An Atkinson alumni who gets involved will be matched to a student who indicates similar professional and career interests or areas of development. The two choose the frequency, location and mode of communications based on their schedules and mutual goals. At the end of the mentorship period (usually September to April), alumni will have an opportunity to evaluate the mentorship experience and provide input to the program.

To make the connection, visit www.atkinson.yorku.ca/Alumnim/mentor, telephone 416-736-5220, or e-mail mentorship@atkinson.yorku.ca.

Coming Up

Y ORK IS U, the student alumni organization, will unveil two of its biggest events of the year in the coming weeks. The internationally acclaimed Multicultural Week, celebrating diversity at York, will be held Feb 2-5. All are welcome. Alumni are also encouraged to help mark York’s Birthday (March 26) by wearing red. It will be celebrated on campus on March 25 with a full day of activities, including give-aways and a cake-cutting. For details on all events, see www.yorku.ca.

On the Map

T HE YORK Geography Alumni Association (YGAA) newsletter, Contour Lines, goes out to geography graduates by mail and e-mail. If you would like to receive Contour Lines or participate in the YGAA, contact geogyalum@yorku.ca or 416-736-2100, ext. 77453.

McKee, Rodney (BA Glendon) is currently holding the Schieder Endowed Chair for Environmental Studies at Northwestern University, University, was recently selected by the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia as one of the top 100 most-cited researchers in ecology and the environment.

Stecky, Eugene (BA Winters) is a double-board instructor at the Childcare Community of Music in British Columbia.

Hopper, Kevin (BA Arts) is the senior business analyst for GM Canada Ltd. in Oshawa, ON.

Magliari, Maria (BA ’78, BA Hons. Vanier) lives in Ontario and is a stay-at-home mom with an 8-year-old and a 10-month-old.

Bengel, Diana (BA Spec. Hons. Stong) is an international teacher in Kuwait.

Chorkie, Yakov (BSc Spec. Hons. Bethune) works at The Weather Network developing interactive television programs and helping with the Web site.

Fizenzia, John (BA Stong) is the CEO at Coats by Mary Ellen in Toronto.

Robillard, Lucie (BAS Atkinson) is the collection manager with Royal LePage in Toronto.
didn’t expect at the end of exams to be in the embrace of a street person, but that’s how it worked out. Perhaps, despite all the spare change I’d dumped in his cardboard tray (with its neatly-printed sign, “Homeless, jobless, please help”), I felt I owed him something. Even a hug.

I was taking the Ontario Bar Admission Course last summer at Osgoode Hall downtown – a grueling exercise. I was miserable. But every day, on my way in, I would pass the ratman. In the old days he’d be called a vagrant: a man about 60, bearded, who set up a station at the southeast corner of Osgoode Hall. He hung from the wrought-iron fence a tinny-sounding portable radio and a couple of small canvas duffle bags. At his feet were the sign, and the tray.

He was also the patriarch of a family of a dozen domestic rats – piebald, grey, white, brown – each creatively christened with names like “Mickey” and “Fontino.” He would line them up like trained parrots on his extended arm, and set two others on his shoulders; they would lean over and lick his moustache on the command, “kiss kiss.” No doubt many would be horrified, but I’ve been fond of small animals since my hamster-owning girlhood. Soon I was talking to the ratman daily. The rats often weren’t awake at 8.30am – lazing about instead in the bag – but Manfred the ratman was always there, listening to the AM news. By lunch, he’d have roused his rats and lined them up on his arms. Tourists took his picture. He seemed perfectly happy.


But on the Friday before end of term, I arrived to discover him sagging with misery, clutching his arm to his chest, the rats dozing in their bag. He had dislocated his collarbone. He’d been to the hospital, but after a three-hour wait, he left. I resolved to take him there myself at lunch, but by then, things had gone from bad to worse. Someone had stolen his radio and the duffle bag – with all his rats. He couldn’t go to the hospital now, he said. He had to wait for the police whom, he said, were off on “rat patrol.” He was doing his damnedest to be upbeat, but was obviously distressed.

By Monday, he still hadn’t had the bone reset. The cops had found the duffle bag (ratless). I insisted on taking him to hospital after class, but when I returned, he was lying on the grass, refusing to go yet. He said he needed clean clothes first. He assured me he didn’t need help.

On the last day of class, I was dismayed to see that Manfred’s arm was still untended, and I was about to launch into a serious nag when he told me his news. One of the rats in the duffle bag had run up onto his chest as he lay on the grass. It was now asleep in the duffle bag. Somehow, in all that traffic and bustle, with a city block intervening, it made its way back to him.

But I had to leave. I made him promise to go to the hospital. “Yes, mother,” he said. I also offered my hand. He bowed and kissed it. But then he straightened, looked me in the eye, and said, “C’mere.”

I hesitated. He wasn’t exactly well-groomed, but I would have hugged anyone else with whom I’d been so friendly for weeks. So, cautious of his shoulder, I hugged him. It was a perfectly normal hug except, of course, for the dirt. We let each other go, and said goodbye.

The Queen streetcar passed him as I rode it home. There he was, with his one rat on his good shoulder, waving at the tour bus, chatting with another woman with whom he’d also made friends. I hoped he’d get to hospital. I hoped he’d be okay.

In a big city like this, what’s a little dirt between friends?

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