Responding to Hurricane Katrina

Last fall was no time for business as usual. Like the rest of the world, we at Williams were encouraged by the initial reports of Hurricane Katrina’s indirect hit of New Orleans. Little did we realize how far-reaching its effects would be.

As the scale of the disaster became clearer, our thoughts turned first to alumni and student families who might have been in harm’s way. As with 9/11, we established a Web site on which Williams people could report their situations for their classmates and friends to read.

Some of our students from the Gulf Coast were already on campus; some still had to make their way. We were able to arrange and pay for the travel of two students who’d been cut off from their family resources. The mother of one of them came to Williamstown, staying for a time in the home of history professor Charles Dew ’58 before moving to a vacant home in town and eventually joining family in the Midwest. We made sure that both students had all they needed to begin the school year as prepared as possible.

Offers of support poured in from all parts of the College community. So did a uniquely compelling idea. Bill Spriggs ’77, a senior fellow at the Economic Policy Institute, wrote us eloquently about the benefits to both institutions if Williams could help keep on track the legendary pre-medical program at Xavier University of Louisiana. This historically black campus each year produces twice as many African-American medical school students as any other college or university. Bill rightly worried about the cost to these students and to the country of a disruption in this valuable pipeline and pointed out how much we at Williams might have to learn from such a successful program.

It wasn’t time to count the many hurdles involved. We quickly set out to see how many Xavier pre-med students and faculty we could incorporate until the university could reopen. Once again, all segments of the College community rallied, including computer science professor Bill Lenhart, who gave up a significant part of his leave to oversee the operation.

When it seemed like the numbers might be too large for us to handle on our own, we contacted Amherst, which quickly became a full partner with Williams—another sign, if we needed it, that this wasn’t business as usual.

Communication with Xavier officials was logistically difficult. Their faculty and students had scattered and had already begun accepting placements elsewhere. In the end, we managed to accommodate eight Xavier pre-meds and one faculty member. The students took Williams courses and dove into campus life. The faculty member helped support them while pursuing her research.

Amherst had a similar number of students. We also arranged to accommodate for the fall semester one local student who’d just begun at Tulane.

We have been in the very fortunate position of being able to do this at no cost to the students or their institutions.

Meanwhile, the campus quickly coalesced around relief efforts. In its first week alone, an organizing group raised $16,000 toward its $50,000 goal.

Katrina Relief expanded to Hurricane Relief after the devastation of Rita, and then to Disaster Relief after the shocking earthquake in Pakistan.

Some two-dozen students are devoting their Winter Study to hands-on relief work in the Gulf. This being Williams, the students read theoretical works ahead of time and will write about it afterward. Yet again, alumni have played an important role. Jim Samenfeld-Specht ’74 put us in touch with Pete Kirkwood ’93, a board member at Hands On USA, one of the disaster-response groups with which our students will work.

I’ve written often in this space about the College’s strategic plan. Planning is important, and I’m proud of what Williams has accomplished along this line. But the health of an institution also depends on how it reacts to the unexpected, and in this regard I can say that I’ve never been prouder than I was this fall of our far-flung College community.

—Morty Schapiro
'62 Center Reviews Are In!

Here's what the press is saying about the new '62 Center for Theatre and Dance, which celebrated its inaugural season with a gala last fall.

“This grand auditorium with its circular orchestra and two-tiered balcony seating has the grandeur of an opera house but is nevertheless quite intimate.”

curtainup.com

“Audience-friendly.”

The New York Times

“The center’s 550-seat MainStage is state of the art and snazzy, with three levels and tiered seating. ... The building was designed by William Rawn Associates, the Boston firm responsible for Tanglewood’s Ozawa Hall. Indeed, it feels, inside and out, like the offspring of that hall and Frank Gehry’s Fisher Center at Bard College. It promises to be a fine home.”

Michael Eck, Albany Times Union

“A class act. The MainStage lobby is a glass cube with a prominent overhang and wood shutters that provide a sense of warmth and ample natural light deep into the interior spaces. The curved limestone façade acts as a foil to the contemporary lobby and provides context to the lobby and surrounding structures.”

AI Architect

For more on the '62 Center, visit www.williams.edu/go/62center.
The College bids adieu to Nancy McIntire, who will retire at the end of the school year as assistant to the president for affirmative action and government relations. She began her tenure 35 years ago in the dean’s office, where she was centrally involved in implementing coeducation. Since being named assistant to the president in 1983, McIntire has helped guide College policy on issues such as the hiring of women and minority faculty. At the annual alumni meeting during reunion last June, she received the Ephraim Williams Medal, given on rare occasions to a non-alumnus who has demonstrated exceptional service and loyalty to the College. “She is just beloved by alums,” Dean Nancy Roseman told the Record, adding, “Nancy was so clearly a pillar of support” for the first women at Williams and so many others. □

Seven graduating seniors will be studying everything from public health to polymer brushes with prestigious fellowships for post-graduate study in England. Recipients of Herchel Smith fellowships for study at Emmanuel College, Cambridge University, are: Oliver Burton, a specialist in immunology; Marcus Duyzend, who will pursue a bachelor’s in geography; Francesca Marzullo, who will continue her 18th century and romantic studies; Julianne Shelby, pursuing a master’s in experimental psychology; and Ashleigh Theberge, a chemist developing polymer brushes. Donovan-Moody recipient Jessica Lovaas will pursue master’s degrees in medical anthropology and global health sciences at Oxford University, and Martin-Wilson recipient Alissa Caron will study public health there. □

For more information on any of these stories, visit www.williams.edu and enter the topic into the search field.

Theatre Productions at Williams “Gaslights to Footlights: Stage and Theatre Productions at Williams” is on display there. □

Meanwhile, chemistry professor Amy Gehring received a $41,219 Research Corporation Cottrell College Science Award to study soil bacteria that produce a number of compounds used in pharmaceuticals. More than half the antibiotics in use today come from the spores of these common bacteria, called Streptomyces. □

Economics professor Lucie Schmidt is analyzing the effects of mandates requiring insurance companies to cover infertility treatments. Fifteen states have passed such legislation, which is now being considered on the federal level. Schmidt’s research, funded in part by a $152,251 grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, studies the impact of such mandates on costs and types of treatment as well as the demographics of those seeking treatment. □

An energy-saving competition dubbed “Do It in the Dark,” organized by the Campus Environmental Advisory Committee, helped decrease total student energy consumption on campus by more than 3 percent in October. Morgan led all dorms with a 41.2 percent reduction compared with its average consumption the two previous years, while Lambert led the co-ops with a 12.2 percent reduction. The winning residences were treated to a private screening at Images Cinema on Sprint Street. □

The president’s office has said farewell to JoAnn Muir and welcome to Keli Kaegi, who has taken Muir’s place as senior executive assistant to the president and secretary of the College. Muir, who retired in mid-January, spent a decade at Williams working with the president and board of trustees. Kaegi, meanwhile, has overseen reunions and other class-based activities as associate director of alumni relations since 1994. □

Also saying goodbye to Williams is Ginny Skorupski, who retired as College nutritionist in December after 27 years of service. She was a counselor.
NEWS BITS continued...

to students with food allergies and eating disorders and worked tirelessly behind the scenes designing menus, managing staff and launching "locally grown" initiatives. She has relocated to Pine Island, Fla., where her husband owns and manages a marina. • A new "Natural History of the Berkshires" Web site created by biology professor Hank Art and students offers an environmentalist’s view of the biological, botanical and geological processes underlying the local environment. Check out descriptions of various habitats, photographs, videos, maps and other resources at cdm.williams.edu/nhb. • Alan Rodrigues ’07 has developed a health-education program called LiveFit that brings Williams students into third-grade classrooms to teach pupils about healthy lifestyles. Successful pilot health fairs led to a grant from MTV Think Venture, allowing for expansion and refinement of the program. About 30 Williams students taught kids skills from making healthy snacks to checking one’s pulse. Rodrigues hopes to develop a kit that other college students can use to implement LiveFit in their communities.

Williams-Exeter Expands, Thanks to Alumni Gift

Two new scholars will soon join the faculty at Exeter College to bring enhanced teaching to Williams students enrolled in the Williams-Exeter Programme at Oxford University.

A search is under way to fill a junior research fellowship in politics, which involves tutorial teaching responsibilities for Williams and Exeter students. Such fellowships are highly competitive and are typically awarded to newly graduated doctoral fellows at the very forefront of their fields.

Another search is taking place for a doctoral assistantship in economics, with tutorial responsibilities focused on Williams-Exeter students.

Both positions, which are expected to enhance the quality and consistency of teaching for Williams-Exeter students, were endowed with a $1 million gift from Bennett Boskey ’35, a longtime benefactor of the College. Boskey previously endowed a visiting professorship at Williams with a preference for the fields of history, economics or political science. That position is now held by Stewart Burns, a civil rights historian who is teaching courses in conjunction with the leadership studies program.

Boskey’s association with Exeter grew out of the close working relationship between his late wife, Shirley, the first woman to lead a department at the World Bank, and the late Sir Alec Cairncross, father of Exeter’s current rector, Frances Cairncross. The two couples often spent time with each other in Oxford and in Washington, D.C.
Students shared the honor of breaking ground at the construction site of Williams-Mystic’s $6 million James T. Carlton Marine Science Center in Mystic Seaport, Conn. The ceremony took place during Alumni Weekend on Sept. 17. The new center is named for Carlton (third from right), who’s been director of Williams-Mystic since 1989.

Farther Afield

Mathematics professor and department chair Ed Burger removed his pants at the Boston Public Library in the name of making math fun, according to the Oct. 6 Boston Sunday Globe. Of his unusual topology lesson, Burger asked: “Is it possible to take a cord of rope 6 feet long and tie it snugly around your right ankle and your left ankle, take off your pants, turn them inside out, and put your pants back on without ever cutting the rope? … The moment you start to try it, you come up with new insights about whether this is possible.”

In the Nov. 6 Los Angeles Times, Gene Bell-Villada, professor of Romance languages, reviewed Gabriel García Márquez’s first novel in 10 years, Memories of My Melancholy Whores. “Luminous and brief, it wondrously fuses an everyday plot with the high points of a long life span,” Bell-Villada wrote. “This is an exquisitely wrought tale, and Edith Grossman’s translation ably captures its autumnal beauty.”

Several media outlets mentioned Williams in articles about the movement to increase the use of locally grown food on college campuses. Time reported on Nov. 14 that the College “will pay $85,000 more this year to double local products to 14 percent of its $2.7 million food budget.” The Chronicle of Higher Education named Williams among the “well-off liberal-arts colleges that operate their own food services,” and “have embraced local food.”

An Oct. 2 Boston Sunday Globe review of “Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film, 1880-1910” at the Williams College Museum of Art stated: “What curator Nancy Mowll Mathews wants to do is nothing less than enlarge and reconfigure our understanding of American art at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. … It’s one of those rare exhibitions that makes a museum-goer reconsider the past and see it afresh.” “Moving Pictures” closed Dec. 11.

Guest columnist and Washingtonian Kenny Yim ’09 penned the Nov. 29 Seattle Post-Intelligencer editorial “Washington at center of globalization.” According to Yim, Americans are becoming increasingly comfortable with globalization as it allows more cheap labor and goods to flow into the U.S. “We’re reducing global poverty—in China, the 9.9 percent GDP growth from 1992-98 has brought poverty down 8.4 percent—but it hasn’t happened out of some moral righteousness or direct inclination to. It happened because we’re too lazy to stop it and passed it off as U.S. good will,” he wrote.

The Christian Science Monitor of Nov. 9 reported on colleges, including Williams, that give students stipends for unpaid internships in government or nonprofit settings. “For students who need to make money, this provides an opportunity for them to intern without personal expense,” said Ron Gallagher, assistant director of the Office of Career Counseling.

A flurry of news media, including the Dec. 2 issues of The New York Times and Newsday, offered kudos for “Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama,” an exhibition at the Jewish Museum co-curated by art professor Carol Ockman. “This is a woman who had an amazing, prescient sense about popular entertainment,” Ockman stated of Bernhardt in Newsday. The Times called the show, which runs through April 2 in New York City, “fascinating.”

A theatrical staging of God’s Trombones and a performance by jazz great Stefon Harris are highlights of this year’s Williamstown Jazz Festival, taking place April 13-23. For a full schedule of events, contact concert manager Ernie Clark at eclark@williams.edu
How Do You Like Us Now?

A big thank you to our readers, who as of mid-December returned a combined 901 responses to our two surveys about changes to the Williams Alumni Review. Most of the feedback was positive, though many readers wondered why we would want to transform a magazine that, as one reader put it, “isn’t broken.”

One of the biggest factors in our decision to move alumni news into the new Williams People is that it allows for more information to be distributed at no additional cost to the College. Over the years, the number of alumni has grown, and e-mail has made it easier for them to share updates via the magazine. Adding pages to an already hefty Review wasn’t enough to accommodate the ever-increasing Class Notes, wedding announcements and photos, birth and adoption lists and obituaries. And trying to edit everything to fit was becoming increasingly frustrating for us and—more important—for class secretaries.

We realized it was possible to send less bulky, more frequent publications without increasing our printing and publication costs. Moreover, the size of People made it less expensive to add pages, allowing us to expand Class Notes and include a popular new photo scrapbook.

We decided to try out this new publication strategy with the promise that we’d keep a close eye on reader response. Though we plan to conduct a more comprehensive survey in the spring, here’s your feedback so far.

Fig. 1:
75.4% of survey respondents liked or really liked the Reunion Scrapbook in People

<table>
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<td>I strongly disliked it</td>
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Fig. 2:
78.2% liked or really liked People’s visual design

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<td>7.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I strongly disliked it</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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Alumni got their first look at People in August and responded favorably to the new scrapbook of reunion photos and to the visual design (see figs. 1 and 2).

“This format of a separate book led me to read not only about the classes and individuals I know but also…straight through most of the classes, especially the youngest ones,” said one reader.

“I love the idea of more frequent, shorter publications,” added another, proclaiming People “easier to flip through and stay up to date.”

Comments on the size of People ranged from the statement that it’s “an easy size for stuffing in my briefcase for reading on the train, plane, etc.” to concerns that it was hard to hold while reading.

Fig. 3:
58.2% liked or really liked splitting news between the Review and People

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<td>Other</td>
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Fig. 4:
75% liked or really liked the content of the re-tooled Review

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<td>I strongly disliked it</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
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In September readers received the revamped Review. Several thought that seven magazines per year seemed like overkill. “What I don’t need is more mail,” said one respondent to our survey. There was also concern about the Review becoming less substantial. (The Review actually contains the same content it always has.)

Most of the reaction to both publications was positive (see fig. 3). “You have divided the function of this publication in half, which matches how I read
They Said:

“I think we had three essential elements to our tailgate: the tall, loud roof apparatus with the inflatable cow and Matador table pointed out like a banner, the television playing Old School and the Lord Jeff under the wheels of the car, with the tombstone next to it.” —Ryan Dunfee ’09, who won the College Council prize for Most Eph Pride during the homecoming tailgate contest Nov. 12. Williams beat Amherst 34-23. Record, 11.16.05

“When you have a learning disability and are at a place like [Williams], it can be hard. Talking about it can feel overly medical, like, ‘I have this disorder’ or like social babble just to make you feel better about yourself.” —Scott Grinsell ’04, who shared with students and faculty his personal struggles with dyslexia and the need for more awareness of learning disabilities on campus. Record, 12.7.05

“There is a demand for this service. Students like to be able to order in from the Snack Bar.” —Morgan Goodwin ’08, on the success of College Council’s recent implementation of Snack Bar delivery service. Record, 12.7.05

“People living all over campus have the same right to a safe living space—whether they get drunk or not. That’s my biggest problem with the alcohol report—it conflates drinking with obnoxious behavior.” —Ananda V. Burra ’07, on student vandalism and Williams’ recent campus-wide alcohol survey. Blog excerpt, 11.17.05

“Williams is truly an experience that will never be forgotten, and those people who have touched our lives here will forever be etched in our memories.” —Xavier University junior Candice Fields, on spending the fall semester in the Purple Valley along with seven fellow students and a faculty member after Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath devastated the historically black campus. Record, 11.9.05

“We are continuing to extend the wireless network across campus. There should be wireless available in nearly all academic and residential buildings by the fall of ’06 [and] complete coverage in all campus buildings by fall of ’07.” —Mark Berman, on continuing work to give computer users wireless access to the Web. Daily Message, 12.13.05

“We were looking for something different and challenging, cutting edge. The times were all very alive, the late ’60s, a lot of revolution. … A lot of us were looking for adventure.” —Mary Lou DeWitt ’72, reflecting on her college experience on the 25th anniversary of the first co-ed class to graduate from Williams. Record, 11.9.05

You can still take the Review and People surveys. Visit www.williams.edu/alumni/alumnireview/survey_list. Or send us a letter any time at alumni.review@williams.edu. Please note if you wish your letter to be published.


The Grand Contraption: The World as Myth, Number and Chance. By David Park, Webster Atwell Class of 1921 Professor of Physics, Emeritus. Princeton University Press, 2005. 336 pp. $29.95. The story of humanity’s attempts over the course of 4,000 years to understand and identify with the universe.


ON COMPACT DISC


Bridging Culture and Language

To help students in his "Baghdad" class understand the city and its place in the American consciousness, comparative literature professor Armando Vargas insists on starting at the beginning. Not the origins of civilization, as one might expect, but the origins of students' conceptions of Arab cultures. For this generation, that means a screening of the 1992 Disney feature Aladdin.

Like many popular Western tales set in the Middle East, the animated love story includes genies, magic lamps, flying carpets and other distortions of the region's rich and complex history.

For his students, who were children when Aladdin came out, the movie was "a direct influence on how they think of a subject like Baghdad," Vargas says. "I thought it would be a good point of departure. It's their first time thinking of Aladdin in a very different way than they first experienced the movie. That's a symbol of what I would like the class as a whole to accomplish—retranslate something you're already familiar with and engage it in new ways."

Vargas came to Williams in 2004 as a Bolin Fellow at the urging of his friend Celia Quezada '95, who like Vargas is a Mexican-American from Central California. Vargas is the College's first full-time Arabic instructor and this spring will introduce a new class, "Migration and National Identity in Literature and Film: Europe and the Americas," exploring how the immigrant experience fits into a country's mass narrative.

"My big goal in life is to have people become more critical thinkers," Vargas says. "Going the comparative literature route certainly allows for that type of thinking."

Vargas took a circuitous route from the Salinas Valley to the Purple Valley. He holds degrees from Georgetown, Harvard and UC Berkeley, attended language institutes in Tunisia and Morocco and studied for extended periods in Brazil, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. In addition to his native English and Spanish, the 35-year-old is proficient in Portuguese, French, Turkish and multiple dialects of Arabic.

Vargas says he interviewed with several institutions looking to shore up their Arabic or Middle Eastern studies departments, but Williams offered the freedom to explore his transnational interests.

"I definitely want to be one of these people that bridges fields and cultures and languages," Vargas says. "It's very exciting that there's a lot of support here for interdisciplinary work and international studies. The course I taught last year was 'Latin American and Middle Eastern Literature and Film,' a comparative perspective from these two world regions. We talked about popular culture and modern society and issues of gender and identity. That course is quite new in the field of comparative literature."

Utilizing everything from early works by al-Ma'arri and Abu Nuwas in popular modern fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri to foreign films, Vargas trains students to approach portrayals of other cultures judiciously.

"It's my job to complicate these ideas that people have about Latinos and Middle Easterners," he says. "If people still hold on to their original views, I would hope that they base them on knowledge and experience—something concrete rather than the six o'clock news or the latest politician trying to gain votes."

—Jim Mulvihill

Spreading Sustainability Across Campus

Williams and its environs will become a laboratory of sustainability thanks to a $420,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.

The study of renewable energy—wind, solar, geothermal, biomass and hydropower—traditionally has been the purview of science classes. But the five-year Luce grant also will enable faculty to infuse elements of environmental sciences and policy across the curricula.

David Dethier, geology department chair and the project's director, will work with a team spanning biology, economics, studio art, physics, architecture and facilities planning. The team will create new modules for existing courses as well as an upper-level environmental course to foster collaboration between science majors and students and faculty in other fields who share an interest in the environment, energy policy and the economic viability of renewable resources. Projects could include analyzing the feasibility of retrofitting dams for hydropower along the Hoosic River and measuring the output and efficiency of photovoltaic panels installed throughout the region. The photovoltaic panels on Morley (Science Center) sit flat, so in the winter we get snow on top of them—which we thought
The Art of High Drama

She was one of the most photographed women of her time—a performer as comfortable on stage and screen as she was hawking face cream or Bronx real estate. Her long list of lovers, her fascination for the macabre (she is rumored to have slept in a coffin) and her taste for the exotic (furniture inscribed with her motto) only heightened the public’s fascination with her. Now Sarah Bernhardt is the subject of a major exhibition at The Jewish Museum, organized by Williams art history professor Carol Ockman and NYU chair of fine arts Kenneth E. Silver.

The Bernhardt Brand

In the 60 years after her debut with the Comédie Française in 1862, Bernhardt succumbed to an estimated 40,000 stage deaths in venues ranging from the Odeon to San Quentin Prison to the front lines of Verdun during World War I. She owned theaters, supervised productions and established the template for modern-day celebrity by cultivating her professional and public image like no one before her, Ockman says. She embraced early photography and recording as well as new forms of entertainment such as vaudeville and film, which had little artistic cachet but brought her international acclaim.

Exhibit of an Exhibitionist

To produce “Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama,” Ockman and Silver spent more than four years gathering 250 objects from around the world. Among them are Bernhardt’s own sculpture, costumes and stage designs, a human skull given to her by Victor Hugo, her nine-foot dressing mirror and a linen handkerchief embroidered with “Sarah.” The square of fabric has been passed down through a “luminous sorority of actresses,” Ockman says, including Helen Hayes, Julie Harris, Susan Sarandon and Cherry Jones, who won a 2005 Tony Award. In the eyes of an art historian, Ockman says, “this transmission story is amazing. It takes place in private. It takes place among women. I wanted to be able to save it, to tell it.”

Who Do You Think You Are …

With a Winter Study course at the Williams Club planned around the exhibition this month, Ockman hopes to remind Williams students that, before Britney, before Madonna, even before Marilyn, there was Sarah. Moreover, she says, her students will have “the unprecedented opportunity to learn about an exhibition from soup to nuts” and then compare and contrast “The Art of High Drama” with other shows and collections around New York City. Ockman says being able to walk her students through the show, from its “very inception to its actualization to its critical review,” makes it “all the more meaningful.”

—Amy Lovett

“Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama” runs through April 2 at The Jewish Museum in New York City. For information, visit www.thejewishmuseum.org.

was going to blow away,” Dethier says. “But now we’re not so sure. So what would have been the economic tradeoff if they were put up on an angle, as with the Williamstown Elementary School panels?”

Dethier, who is the Edward Blum Professor of Mineralogy and Geology, also would like to see greater emphasis on communicating environmental research to a broader audience. So the grant will support a faculty research seminar as well as a public lecture series that brings together scientists, architects and building planners from the area.

Dethier also envisions a greater Web presence to enhance the visibility of the College’s renewable energy programs and initiatives. A portion of the grant will go toward hiring someone skilled in technology, dataset ability, graphics and information visualization for analyzing and displaying data. This will enable the creation of a Web portal for data streams such as weather information from Hopkins Farm as well as wind and solar information from surrounding areas.

“We should be talking about what we do much more loudly,” says Dethier, adding that the Internet is an effective way to do so. “The Web would be both a value to the outside and to the inside. … Communicating about what we do will be very different in the next few years.”

—Kipp Lynch

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At the ’62 Center’s new Summer Theatre Lab, students hone their craft alongside talented alumni professionals who get to flex their own creative muscles.
Act I: Casting Call

“Don’t just play it angry,” Jay Tarses ‘61 tells Lauren Hester ’07, who is auditioning for the role of Amanda in Jay’s teleplay-turned-stage play, **Harry Cobb’s America**. Lauren is the fourth student this morning to interpret Amanda, and the furrows in Jay’s brow have deepened with each audition.

Jay leans forward and knits his fingers as Lauren trades dialogue with actor Kevin O’Rourke ’78, who is playing her fictional ex-husband Harry, a flaky, self-impressed TV journalist whose hit show is loosely based upon **On the Road with Charles Kuralt**.

It’s the first day of the first-ever Williams Summer Theatre Lab, where, for the next six weeks, 12 students and 18 professional actors, writers, directors, musicians, producers and a lighting designer—all of them Williams alumni—will gather in the CenterStage of the new ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance to develop and create experimental dramatic pieces as a working theater company.

The summer lab, based on the O’Neill Theater Playwrights Conference, is the brainchild of Jay and Rob Baker-White ’80, chair of the Williams theater department. In addition to giving students a chance to hone their craft alongside talented theater professionals, it provides a safe haven for alumni to flex their own creative muscles. With **Harry Cobb’s America**, Jay, a TV writer whose credits include **The Bob Newhart** and **Carol Burnett** shows and **The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd**, is experimenting with writing and directing for the stage. Later in the summer, filmmaker Stacy Cochran ’81 will try her hand at a one-act play.

This first morning of the lab, after six auditions, Jay joins Kevin and the students in the glass-walled seminar room outside the CenterStage. The students’ anxiety is almost palpable as they wait to learn who will play which role.

“Hey, listen,” Jay begins. “The audition process is one of the most difficult things there is for an actor. You come in, the director wants you to make small talk, and all of a sudden he’s ready to hear you read, and you’ve got to say, ‘Oh, OK,’ and get right into character. It’s very difficult, and I want to thank you all for what you did today.”

“We’re taking the long view on casting decisions,” Kevin says, trying to soothe the group’s collective nerves. “We’re working on a lot of shows, and we need to do a lot of different jobs, and most everyone is equally capable of doing all those jobs.”

Then, with a few instructions to the students about lunch, Kevin and Jay are gone, hurrying toward Kevin’s office as they debate casting decisions.

“I thought Katie did the best reading for Amanda,” Jay says.

“So did I,” says Kevin. “But Jess could do her, and so could Annie.”

“It can’t be equal,” Jay interrupts.

“Just like in real life. Like in show business. You have to break some hearts.”

Act II: Staging

Becky Phillips ’06 is the only student in the Summer Theatre Lab not working as an actor. She signed up, in part, for the chance to work with Julie Seitel ’94, her first Williams design professor and now a New York City lighting designer.

Today Becky faces a substantial challenge. Kevin has designated a corner of the CenterStage in front of a two-story brick wall as the playing space for every single presentation. His only direction is that the lighting plot be simple but elegant.

But this playing space was designed to be raw. Floor, walls, grid, I-beams, pipes, rails, stairs and ceiling are all a flat, industrial black—relieved only by the brick and some risers with dark chairs. There are hardly any sets or costumes to create much of an environment for the actors, so the lights will have to do almost everything. And Becky’s not exactly sure what Kevin means by “elegant.”

The first presentation is **Heightened Senses of the Blind**, by actor and writer Adam LeFever ’72. The short play involves two actors who mostly sit on a wooden pallet and talk, which is a snap to light. But Becky also has to plan for **Harry Cobb’s America**, to be performed next week, with eight actors in different locations moving around a lot. She has only today and tomorrow to hang all the lights for both productions, focus them at the right angles, get dimmer numbers assigned to the correct channels in the computer, train everyone and do the first lighting rehearsal.

Katie Edgerton ’08, Edgardo “Eggie” Costas ’07, Zoe Fonseca ’08 and LaVonna Bowen ’06 are already setting pipes. None of them has done much tech crew, and a couple of them aren’t too crazy about heights. But the close-knit mesh of the Eisenhower grid, which is like a trampoline about 20 feet above the stage, makes everyone feel a little safer. There’s no way a person or even a light can fall through.

Becky has given the crew the basics: Empty your pockets, unless they’re...
zippered; hook your tools, which are attached to a phone cord, through your belt loop; make sure every single light is secured with a safety chain. Suddenly, just as Ilya Khodosh '08 and Matt Wilks '08 walk in down below, there’s a bang, and Mary Pfister, the program manager and resident mom to the company, yells “Heads up!”

That’s what you shout if anything falls through the grid, and Becky can see now that somebody let slip an unsecured safety chain that slammed into one of the chairs underneath. Good thing there wasn’t an audience member sitting down there. “That’s why it’s heads up,” Mary scolds the crew, and lighting day suddenly feels even longer.

**Act III: Presentation**

Darkness. Two lights. Then two men sitting on a pallet. Eggie Costas blows a duck call. Dav Wright ’08 says he’s wasting his breath, all the ducks are still dreaming.

Dav plays Cal, a bitter man about 40, and Eggie plays his brother, Billy, who’s younger. Cal and Billy sit together in a duck blind by a little lake near a small New England town. It’s just before dawn on a chilly autumn morning.

Dr. William Beasley, Cal and Billy’s father, was buried yesterday. Suicide. Terminal cancer. Now these two brothers sit and talk and wait for the dawn to arrive on the morning after their abusive father’s funeral.

But Cal has brought along his dead father’s shotgun, the one he used to shoot himself, and Billy’s upset—“It seems real inappropriate.” And Cal tells Billy that his little eulogy, yesterday, “That was inappropriate,” as if the old bastard wasn’t a cold, unfeeling alcoholic who beat his wife and his kids.

Then, the reversal. We thought Cal was the one who helped Dad die. He’s the angry, estranged son, after all, the son the father begged for help over the phone.

“Sorry, Pop, Gotta go,” Cal said.

It was Billy, the son who had stayed home, who saw his dad’s tumor move from spine to neck so, by the end, he could hardly make a fist anymore, it was Billy who steadied the gun.

In the talk-back after the presentation of Adam LeFevre’s Heightened Senses of the Blind, the actors and small audience discuss where they feel the play’s power resides. Then Professor Bernie Bucky, former chair of the Williams theater department, asks about its implied homosexuality, sparking a lively conversation.

“The sense that we got reading [the play],” Eggie says, “was that this was probably the biggest confrontation that the brothers were ever going to have, and then, for Billy, it was kind of like, ‘If I’m ever going to bring this up, it might as well be now.’

An audience member in the front row jumps in. “I wonder, though, if it doesn’t have something to do with why Billy’s the favorite son. I also wondered if it wasn’t the first time you mentioned it to Cal, and I thought that made the scene a lot more interesting.”

“I think a few of the lines at the end are like that, statements that will test how the relationship stands,” Eggie replies. “If Cal can take this, well, then everything else is going to be fine. I actually saw it as one of the moments when the two characters are closest and most honest with each other.”

“You don’t think it was too much, in 15 minutes, to try and get all that stuff in there?” a man in the back row asks.

“I really don’t think so,” Eggie says. “It’s difficult to have so many emotional fluctuations as there are in those 15 minutes, but I actually think the writer creates an interesting challenge. And I don’t think it’s impossible, or even unrealistic. I’m going to assume most people have been in a situation where sometimes you just kind of start an avalanche and things snowball. You open yourself up to saying one thing ... and then other words just keep tumbling out.”
Act IV: First Draft

It’s the fourth day of rehearsals for Prostitutes, a new stage play by Stacy Cochran ’81, and her actors simply aren’t “getting it.”

Actor John Felch ’80 (who plays Tom, a suicidal john), Caroline Taylor ’04 (who portrays Lisa, a remorseless broker), and Eggie Costas (who’s Lisa’s 14-year-old son, Ray, or a club kid, or both)—are having trouble understanding their characters’ motivations. Without specific motivation, it’s hard for an actor to “physicalize” a role—to know how to tell the story with his or her body.

Admittedly, Prostitutes isn’t too easy to get. It’s an intentionally dreamlike one-act play in 11 scenes—most of them shorter than a page and three of them just a series of stage directions that read like shot descriptions for a movie. That’s to be expected, though, because Stacy—who wrote and directed Boys, the 1996 coming-of-age movie starring Winona Ryder, Lukas Haas and John C. Reilly—has spent most of her career writing and directing films.

After the first cold reading of the play, a student asks Stacy what Prostitutes is about and what she wants the audience to get out of it.

“That’s the sort of question that someone else should answer,” Stacy says. “No matter what I say, I’m going to regret it. This was something where three distinct characters were created and, by their very nature as being characters in a play, are fictitious characters. So all these characters are not people, but they’re about people, and they’re creations that came from my imagination. And yet they came from my imagination via real people, and, in the end, is this someone’s dream? Is it Tom’s dream? Is it his creative process in his moment of dying that built this structure? Or not? It isn’t that it is reality; it’s that it’s about reality.”

Rehearsing a scene set on the edges of a makeshift coffee shop near Penn Station, John, all 6 feet 4 inches of him, wearing a hat that says TOM in block letters on the front, shoves his frame menacingly against Caroline’s Lisa. He locks his gaze on some middle distance, grabs a good handful of her hair and yanks her head back.

“Try to remember. What was I wearing?” Tom demands.

“Let go of my mom!” Ray pleads.

Lisa finally gives in: “An orange sweater.”


“OK, OK, that’s good,” Stacy interrupts. “It’s absurd to say, but no matter how tragic the scene is, when you guys make me laugh, I feel like there’s some blood coursing through it.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” John agrees.

“But somehow that’s not happening here. I wasn’t laughing at that. You just seemed angry, John. That one note all the way through, that anger, and I think before, in the other rehearsals, it wasn’t, to me, so literal.”

At that, John nods, takes his TOM hat off, rubs his right palm across his forehead and starts pacing slowly. “I know,” he repeats, “I know what you mean.”

Act V: Rewrite

So if you’re the writer and director, and your actors think your play isn’t working, what do you do? If you’re Stacy Cochran, you re-write the play.

“Listen, in terms of what worked and didn’t work, the first one didn’t work particularly, so that’s the end of story,” she says three days after the ill-fated rehearsal, a new text in hand.

“If there’s an opportunity to do something that tries to work with the minimum number of words, this is a venue to try it in, right? It’s a workshop, so I thought, why write something that’s like a calling card? Why not try something completely new? It’s not like I didn’t want the first draft to work. But each little nugget of that version, because it was so minimal, had to be so precise in its smallness. It had to work perfectly or it maybe wouldn’t work at all.”

The second draft of Prostitutes includes a series of long monologues that guide the actors toward motivations for their characters. These new, quirky solo speeches illuminate their inner desires and moments in unexpected ways, so viewers can almost empathize with the characters.

“I’m excited now,” Stacy says. “This is also a whole lot easier to talk about in
He edited the interviews into "a collage or a 're-membrance' of my journey," he says. "I become 22 different people in the play, and I use ... their actual interview words, though I shaped them for performance into monologues."

With only a table, a chair, a coffee mug and a box of Kleenex on stage with him, Marc recreates each character "physically but minimally, with a gesture or accent or some small identifying mark. ... So I'll cross my legs and sit straight for one character, or jump up and pace around for another, use a Southern drawl, stand in front of the table, sneeze and blow my nose a lot, shout, swear, sit still. It depends who I am."

As the students watch, Marc transforms himself into a woman he portrays near the beginning of his play:

I feel like I've gone down Alice's rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland. Yeah, yeah. The final descent. I think so. It's building up to this, but nothing appears to be what it seems to be. I don't believe anything the newspapers say. Oh, oh, I, I read The New York Times, and I believe it, but I think the truth is just buried under fluff and propaganda, and you have to know what you're looking for, and you have to carefully read it, and that's new.

He plays her with an almost brusque Brooklyn accent, even though, he tells the students, the woman lived off the coast of Washington State.

"I love the documentary form," Marc says, "because the audience becomes me, in a way, and gets to interview the people I met. It's an intimate experience. ... All they see is this white guy on stage, playing different people—men and women, old and young, blacks, whites, Native Americans, Malaysians,
a German tourist—so they have to listen carefully to how these people talk and not just label them, and I like that."

**Act VII: Finale**

Haloed by a single light, in a door-shaped opening that suddenly morphs into a balcony, LaVonna Bowen speaks the last three lines of a Wordsworth sonnet:

*in his hand,*

_The thing became a trumpet; whence he blew_

_Soul-animating strains alas, too few!_

Composer/musician David Barnes '81, hidden downstage right, blows a long, soulful riff on his blues harp. The lights come up full on the stage. Ebbie Costas strides in from downstage left in army fatigues and a dark gray T-shirt, wearing a backpack and carrying a worn portfolio under his left arm. He crosses in front of the audience, saying:

_We do not speak like Petrarch_

_Now Zoe Fonseca, back on the balcony, hollers down:_

_Or wear a hat like Spenser_

_Katie Edgerton sashays along the walkway above, saying:_

_and it is not fourteen lines like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field_

_Dav Wright, Lauren Hester, Ilya Khodosh, Matt Wilka and the others deliver their lines from “American Sonnet” by poet Billy Collins. And The Sonnet Project, the final presentation of the Summer Theatre Lab, is under way._

_The Sonnet Project is actor and director Alexandra Neil’s brainchild. Alex Neil was Dianne Thompson when she graduated from Williams in 1977, and her career has included a generous balance of TV and theater, most recently in the three-character play Match, with Frank Langella and Ray Liotta, on Broadway in 2004._

_But Alex has always loved poetry, and she felt poetry was something unique she could offer the students. “Nobody had really talked about language, and nobody had talked about speaking in verse, which is a huge thing for an actor when you get out in the real world,” she says._

_So she showed up for her two-week stint at the summer lab with 30 sonnets she loved and asked the students to help her whittle them down to 22 that appear in the play._

_“The hard part about turning a group of sonnets into a play is that you don’t want to be up there reciting poetry,” Alex says. “It could be really dead and boring, so the hard part is getting the actors to live through it and make it very personal. That’s where the work is for any actor: To say, ‘This isn’t a poem; this is a piece of text that I’m going to use as an actor to create a world and to find a life and to use as my words about this moment.’”_

_Alex says Williams theater made her into an actor and that the ’62 Center “has that same feeling, like it’s my home.”_

_Her classmate Martha Williamson ’77, one of The Sonnet Project’s actors, feels the same way. “Truly, everything I learned about how to run a show and how to make creative decisions started right here at Williams, because they give you the opportunity to make the mistakes you need to make before you can get it right,” says Williamson, who spent nine years as head writer and executive producer of Touched by an Angel. “Williams is famous for letting you fail successfully.”_

William B. Patrick's published work includes screenplays, a radio play, two books of poetry, a memoir and an award-winning novel. His latest book is Saving Troy, a creative nonfiction account of his time working with firefighters in Troy, N.Y.

**Photos by Kevin Bubriski were taken during the summer lab. Photos by Ben Rudick ’08 were taken during dress rehearsals for “Emerging and Returning Voices: A Celebration of Williams’ Past and Future,” presenting summer lab productions during the kickoff of the ’62 Center's inaugural season in October.**
As students at Williams, Mitch Besser ’76 and Gene Falk ’75 never could have envisioned the predicament in which they found themselves last May. Sitting in a dingy diner on Manhattan’s West Side, the two friends—Besser, an OB/GYN with a Harvard medical degree, and Falk, an entertainment executive with a Wharton MBA—needed to perform surgery on a lanyard, stat.

The men laughed heartily as they fiddled with a glue-filled syringe and razor blade. But they continued in earnest, knowing the impact that their seemingly silly assignment would have on a group of women and children nearly 8,000 miles away. As it turns out, Besser and Falk were in the United States hawking beaded craft items made by South African mothers living with HIV/AIDS. In a few hours they were scheduled to meet with representatives of Bono, the lead singer of the rock group U2, who wanted to see sample bracelets for possible use in his anti-AIDS, anti-poverty “ONE” campaign. Since Besser and Falk hadn’t brought any bracelets along, they decided to forge one from a beaded lanyard.

Strangely, all of their experiences and achievements in their respective fields, and all the decades of their friendship (which blossomed during their years living in Mission Park’s Armstrong House) had led them to that moment. They made the sale.

Their effort to economically empower HIV-infected South African women is only one small part of their organization, The Mothers Programmes, which Besser founded in Cape Town in 2001. His initial idea was to launch a program that would prevent mother-to-child transmission of the virus by encouraging HIV-positive mothers to counsel pregnant women affected by the disease. It was a modest attempt to get a handle on a problem that is overwhelming in its scope: More than a quarter of the 1 million children born in South Africa each year are born to infected mothers. Without treatment, more than 25 percent of those mothers—nearly 70,000—transmit the virus to their babies.

In just a few years, Besser’s simple idea—to give HIV-positive women the information they need to make the best possible choices for themselves and their children—has taken on a life of its own. The Mothers Programmes has grabbed the attention of celebrities such as Bono and fashion designer Kenneth Cole, who is selling the beaded lanyards through his stores. First Lady Laura Bush touted items produced by The Mothers Programmes’ offshoot, Mothers Creations, on NBC’s Today show during a July 2005 visit to South Africa.
Perhaps more striking is that Besser’s mission has captured the imagination of regular folks like Robin Smalley, who is now the organization’s international director. She was a Los Angeles TV producer who became reacquainted with Besser early in 2005 when her best friend Karen, Besser’s sister, lapsed into a coma after minor surgery and died. After spending two weeks with him at Karen’s bedside, Smalley was so inspired by talk of Besser’s work that she visited him in Cape Town. She returned home and asked her husband and children to move there with her for a year so she could volunteer administrative help.

Then there’s Nora Kenworthy ’04, who changed her post-graduation plans after spending a summer working alongside Besser. Now she travels into remote, rural areas of South Africa, encouraging women to get tested and treated.

And, of course, there’s Falk, who left behind a glamorous job developing business ventures for Showtime Networks Inc. to join The Mothers Programmes full-time. For a few years, he supported Besser’s efforts from the United States, serving as the founding chairman of the Board of Directors. But once he visited South Africa and met the women in the program, he says, he knew he had to stay.

“We laugh that no one who comes down here ever leaves when they are supposed to,” Besser says. “South Africa is a special place. It really gets under your skin.”

Just five years before that day in the diner, life was quite different for Besser and Falk. Besser, a former faculty member at Harvard Medical School, was living in San Diego, where he oversaw a group of community clinics that served pregnant Mexican women who couldn’t afford prenatal care.

Falk, an English major who became interested in business after a post-graduation stint managing The Log at Williams, was a senior vice president at Showtime who helped introduce Showtime on Demand and Viacom’s new gay and lesbian channel, Logo.

The two had remained good friends throughout the years (Falk stood as best man at Besser’s wedding and became godfather to Besser’s two children), but they couldn’t have been on more divergent paths. Looking back, though, Falk says, “On some level there are things—intangible things—that create friendships that probably aren’t coincidental at all.”

One thing they did have in common was their increasing involvement with people afflicted with HIV/AIDS. While working
at the San Diego clinics, Besser was the director of obstetrics for the Maternal HIV Clinic at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Medical Center and saw firsthand the devastation that the disease caused among mothers and their children who didn’t have access to proper care.

Falk also found himself fighting AIDS from the trenches. As a gay man living in New York City at the dawn of the AIDS crisis, he watched too many good friends die while waiting for the therapies that could have prolonged their lives. His outrage led him to become active in the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and Treatment Action Group. He also was a founding member of the national Board of Directors and later the chairman of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

What both men experienced—long before antiretroviral drugs that made AIDS a more manageable, chronic illness were developed and in widespread use in the United States—is very much like what is happening in South Africa today. Without access to proper medical care, treatment and information, and because of the stigma associated with the disease, people are dying.

About 5.3 million South Africans are HIV-positive, more than in any other country in the world. According to the World Health Organization, adult deaths in South Africa from HIV/AIDS increased more than 40 percent from 1998 to 2004.

In 2003 alone, an estimated 370,000 adults and children died from AIDS, which has become the country’s leading killer. More troublesome, perhaps, is the prognosis for the future: Life expectancy in South Africa is projected to drop to 37 years for women and 38 years for men by 2010. That would be a decline of more than 50 percent in just a decade.

Besser visited South Africa for the first time in 1971 as a high school exchange student. It was an enthralling adventure for a 16-year-old, and he says he instantly was “seduced” by the landscape and by the people. Two years into a biology degree at Williams, he no longer could resist the call to return. He took a leave of absence from school to drive a makeshift ambulance—a mid-century Land Rover—through the isolated black provinces, where he witnessed firsthand the deprivation of the Zulu and Xhosa populations.

It was little surprise that Besser would make such a bold move as a young man. After all, he and his brothers accompanied their father, also an obstetrician, to Navajo reservations where the elder Dr. Besser treated indigent populations.

Besser almost certainly would have stayed on even longer in South Africa, except that his good nature led him to make an unforgivable mistake in the eyes of a country that practiced apartheid—sharing his meals with his black co-workers at the hospital where he was based. He was asked to leave his post and was informed that it would be in his best interest if he left the country altogether.

“I was in a part of black South Africa that no one gets to see even now,” he says. “There was a part of me that always wanted to go back.”

He finally got his chance in 1997—six years after the legal end of apartheid—when he took his wife and children for a visit. While he was there, he gave a lecture at a hospital where he told fellow doctors about his success in San Diego. Among the scores of mothers-to-be who pass through the maternal HIV clinic at UCSD, not one has given birth to an HIV-positive baby since 1994. Besser was asked if he would consider joining the OB-GYN faculty at the University of Cape Town to do similar work.

“I had an exciting opportunity to do something that I had become more and more interested in doing in San Diego,” he says. “It was an opportunity for me to give something back to a place that had changed me in very important ways.”

One of the greatest obstacles in treating South African women with HIV/AIDS is the stigma of the disease. Many women are fearful of even taking an HIV test, because a positive result means they might be ostracized by family and friends. Some are even beaten or murdered by husbands or boyfriends when they disclose their status.

When Besser opened his first clinic at the University of Cape Town’s Groote Schuur Hospital, he realized that in order to give these women the care they needed, he was going to have to help them overcome both the psychosocial barriers and the economic ones. The key, he felt, was to have new mothers living with HIV/AIDS...
AIDS talk to pregnant women about testing, medications, nutrition and formula feeding—things that will prevent transmission of the virus to their babies both before and after birth. He started with a program called Mothers 2 Mothers 2 Be. A sister program, Mothers 2 Mothers, supports women in the postpartum period. Once the women deliver, they can become mentors to the next group of diagnosed women.

“They learn that they can live a long life and raise their children,” Falk says. “This is not a death sentence. It’s anything but.”

Peer education seems to be improving their survival prospects. In South Africa, mother-to-child transmission rates average about 25 percent, while the rate among women enrolled in The Mothers Programmes is down to 5 percent. In one rural hospital where a new program recently opened, only two of the first 60 patients had ever been tested for HIV/AIDS. After the clinic opened, nearly 75 percent of the women coming in agreed to be tested. Of those, more than 70 percent were HIV-positive, but by knowing their status they were able to access appropriate medical care. Nationally, only 10 percent of women are even tested for HIV.

“It’s the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever been a part of,” Besser says. “I’ve been in public health all of my career. You dream of being a part of a program like this.”

By all accounts, Besser is not just a tireless advocate for his cause but also, simply, tireless. A rugby player at Williams, he ran the Boston Marathon last year, training in Cape Town’s scenic hills. His slim build, bronze skin and energetic personality belie his 51 years.

Eva Grudin, a senior lecturer in art history at Williams, who taught both Besser and Falk and has remained good friends with them, remembers when Besser first launched The Mothers Programmes. She says he would return to the United States several times a year to work as a filler in emergency rooms in order to support his family.

“Mitch didn’t make a living doing what he was doing,” she says.

Grudin also recalls how Besser would lug trunks of beaded items, including cell phone cases and yarmulkes, back home on the plane to sell in the U.S. It wasn’t the most efficient way to run a nonprofit.

Grudin says she and Falk used to joke about Besser’s “beaded yarmulke business.” Still, they knew it was distracting him from his medical work.

Falk had lent his assistance to The Mothers Programmes from the start, opening his celebrity-filled Rolodex to the group and working his contacts as a board member of the Michael Palm Foundation, an AIDS-related charitable organization. But it wasn’t until 2003, when a six-week trip to South Africa with his partner, Tim Savin, extended into a six-month stay, that Falk decided to join Besser permanently. He returned home, sold his Greenwich Village apartment and Fire Island beach house and moved to South Africa in 2005.

“What I’ve always enjoyed most,” Falk says, “is developing new businesses. This is a new institution that needs to be nurtured and grown.”

With Falk fully on board, the organization has grown exponentially. In the 18 months from early 2004 to mid-2005, The Mothers Programmes expanded from 10 locations to 65 across South Africa, Botswana and Ethiopia. In 2004, the organization had a budget of $400,000 with only $200,000 secured. In 2005, The Mothers Programmes was fully funded for its budget of $2 million. This year there are plans to open many more locations in all three countries, as well as new locations in Mexico, Southern Africa and Asia.

“We have the operational capacity to do it,” Falk says, “but it’s contingent on the funding.” At press time, The Mothers Programmes had about 50 percent of the money it needed to roll out these additional programs in 2006.

And Williams students soon might have the opportunity to join Besser and Falk. College administrators are contemplating a possible winter or summer study program with The Mothers Programmes or a yearlong, post-graduation experience.

“It’s really still evolving, but we’re hoping to come up with some way our students can be involved and support the work they’re doing in South Africa,” says College Provost Catharine “Cappy” Hill ’76, a classmate of Besser’s.

In the meantime, the program has been bolstered by a flurry of press, including mentions in People magazine, the Los Angeles Times and The Wall Street Journal, though Besser is quick to point out that his is just one of many programs in South Africa working to combat HIV/AIDS.

For now, he and Falk plan to continue living and working full-time in South Africa. “I’m down here while the program needs me,” Besser says. “There may come a time when the program runs itself, or when it becomes part of normal care. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Denise DiFulco is a freelance writer and editor in Cranford, N.J.
Going Home to the Hills

BY ERNEST F. IMHOFF '59

Growing up in Williamstown in the 1940s, we found our playgrounds as often in the purple mountains as we did on the ball fields.

We camped out among the summit rocks of Pine Cobble and watched the lights go out one by one in town below. Some folks stayed up all night down there.

On Stone Hill, we climbed young trees, bent with them and parachuted to earth on top-heavy masts of our meadow vessels. I broke an arm doing that.

In summer, our Cub Scout den sallied forth from Petersburg Pass, hiked north and found Snow Hole. It was a deep crevasse where we threw ice balls at each other.

To the east beyond North Adams, we swam in cold North Pond in the Hoosac Mountains to see who could stay in the longest.

Hiking to the ledges of the Dome past White Oaks took us into a new world, at least on the map—Vermont’s Green Mountains. You could also hit Vermont by walking past the Cobble on the Appalachian Trail merging with the Long Trail, taking you clear to Canada or Maine, too far for a day hike but enough to plant seeds of dreams.

On Northwest Hill, eyes were shut tight as ears heard ghost stories the older devils told at the Boys Club’s summer encampment. “The Bloody Headless Berkshire Beast” comes to mind.

The woods beckoned, with some help. Brother Bill and I—and often our friends and fellow Cub Scouts—were enticed up one mountain and down another hill by our aggressively
Our mountains weren’t just purple and pretty as in the song “The Mountains.” Some days they were the dark, cold, ugly Andes when expeditions got too long, as in “Let’s quit this stupid hike.” Yet the hills were for hiking, not for singing.

There were two kinds of elevations circling Williamstown like two rings of wagon trains. There were hills—junior mountains near downtown for little kids—like Northwest, Birch, Buxton and Bee. One on Main Street, where a Civil War soldier stands sentinel, was mysteriously called Consumption Hill.

Sheep Hill, on Route 7 just before the 1896 House, was for everyone. People who wanted to ski in town went there and used a rope tow that pulled them all the way up the sloping field and made one’s arm muscles burn.

Big people climbed to higher elevations in three states. Pine Cobble (1,893 feet), The Dome (2,748) and Berlin Mountain (2,818), barely in New York, were considered outlying Himalayas. Then came the day we were ready for Mount Everest—Mount Greylock (3,491 feet), the highest peak from there to Cape Cod. We scrambled up the Roaring Brook Trail to the War Memorial and down again. Dead-tired climbers often despise the mountain at the bottom—we did that day—but after just one night of sleep think about the next adventure up high. We were soon up another Greylock route.

We learned these were the Taconic Mountains and the Green Mountains and the Hoosac Mountains, not the “Berkshire Mountains.” Berkshire was just the name of our county.

Hiking was passé to me when I was at Williams, except as an escape. In later years, I took up frequent scrambling in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and Maine and in thinner air out West.

Whenever in Williamstown I wondered if the mountains had changed, as had the jammed-up campus, which increasingly looked like the Last Anxious Stand of the Village Green. I returned periodically, re-entered the hills and recognized old friends in the landscapes. A camera was in the backpack.

The hills of home are not quite eternally unchanging as the Bible says. Most of Williamstown’s woods were once cleared by farmers and loggers, but the vegetation returned in the same 19th century. Trails were re-routed to avoid erosion. Small rock slides developed. New paths sprouted, one honoring the College’s Robert R.R. Brooks, who loved and cared for the hills as few others. Large meadows were overgrown. Encroachment of houses, development schemes for Greylock, ski area clearances, acid rain and bark beetles keep threatening deep woods. The Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation and other forces help save the land.

Interesting items are there for the looking. On Mount Williams, a black bear wandered around. College athletes ran up Pine Cobble. Bits of old airplane wreckage on Greylock lay under leaves. A bird man flew off the Taconic Crest on his hang glider.

The hills of home showed their old, beautiful stuff. The purple hills were also leafy green, autumn brown, storm gray, maple red and snow white. Howard Simpson ’50, comfortably at home in the outdoors, his wife Kitty and my colleague Fred Rasmussen joined me for Baltimoreans’ stroll on Pine Cobble. The blueberries were ripe.

There was ice in summer again at Snow Hole. Although new housing was at the foot, Pine Cobble’s ridge on East Mountain was intact and free of trash and development despite actual dreams fearing these things.

From the wide open summit of Berlin Mountain—rare in the Berkshires—Greylock remained only a bump on the Range among siblings Prospect, Williams, Fitch and Saddle Ball. Its watershed ran full with spring waters, and the woods were thick. On the opposite side were the Helderbergs near Albany and the foothills of the Adirondacks.

Mountains teach. One winter day low clouds, snow on the quartzite and flurries in the air turned Eph’s Lookout on Pine Cobble into a gloomy outlier. These elements made the hiker feel properly insignificant just two-and-a-half miles from town. The hiker sensed in clearer perspective his place in the world, a good reason for keeping mountains safe from people.

Ernest F. Imhoff ’59 spent most of his career writing for The Baltimore Sun Papers. He went on to hike higher in New England and out West and now is also an ordinary seaman on a revived World War II Liberty ship in Baltimore.
I nnocence and Experience

Let me relive an innocent moment from the freshman year, when my strategy was to keep quiet and not make a fool of myself. The class was Philosophy 101, the professor Larry Schmucker (his real name). On the final day, after not saying a thing the whole semester, overwrought by the thought of taking finals in a course I knew nothing about, I walked up to him—for some reason the class had quieted down—and said a little too loudly, “Mr. Fountain, can you tell me where the water Schmucker is?” The only thing I said all semester. C-plus.

Clay Hunt was possessed and writing as he explicated word by word and phrase by phrase T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland: the tics, the growls, the maniacal breathing, the lidded eyes, his wiping himself with his handkerchief. It was as close as I’ll ever see to someone having sex with text. Just before announcing what this great poem revealed—and it was a mystery to be uncovered slowly and inevitably—he took his handkerchief and tapped around his mouth like he had just eaten a sumptuous meal. Having explained what he needed to explain, he sat back in his chair exhausted, in another world gleaming.

I am moved as I think about Fred Rudolph ’42 teaching his two books for which I feel undiluted admiration. Fred’s doctoral dissertation, Mark Hopkins and the Log, should be read by every incoming freshman in order for them to understand the grand tradition of this wonderful school. The American College and University is a masterpiece that shows the commonality and many differences between the original colleges and universities. That course colored my relationship to Williams more than any other and made me feel part of a long, handsome tradition.

I got goose bumps watching Peter Grudin tell us why the ghosts in Wuthering Heights are real (and if that is not exactly what Peter said, I still got goose bumps). The class was mesmerizing. Don Gifford, also mesmerizing, had this rarely found affable rigor for the transcendental poets. His was a congenial intellectuality.

I always loved Larry Graver’s novel classes. After reading half of Jane Austen’s Emma—and coming to class despising Emma’s interest and interference in everyone’s life—I left loving her. I learned in an hour how to create a not-immediately-likeable character (but a fascinating one) whose defects become assets as the work progresses. Every critic who wrote that Marvin in my plays March of the Falsettos and Falsettoland was “wretchedly unlikable” should know as I was writing him—and I am not comparing myself with the exquisite Jane Austen—that I felt she and Mr. Graver were looking over my shoulder saying: “Make Marvin worse. Just keep him interesting.”

John von Szeliski generously gave Charlie Rubin ’72 and me his directing slot in the old AMT so we could put our first musical on the main stage, a kindness I will never forget.

John Calhoun ’62 wonderfully directed the show I wrote as a senior as one of the four main shows of the year. It was the first time I hadn’t directed one of my shows; I was merciless and thought he was inept. I was wrong.

Jack Savacool ’39, a French professor and a man of the theater, tutored me in playwriting. He tried to be gentle—he was a real gentleman—but one day he said, “You are not a really good playwright in prose are you? When your characters talk, very, very bad. But when they sing … ah.” I said, “Do you think I have to try harder at being a better playwright?” He said, “No, forget the talking and concentrate instead on the songs. Your lyrics are so much more alive than your prose.”

The extraordinary students in Jonathan Aaron’s poetry class: Jamie James ’73, Mark Livingston ’72, Adam LeFevre ’72, Nancy Doyne ’74, Craig Walker ’73 and others. It was where I realized I was a lyricist, not a poet. But possibly a poetical lyricist.

The sunniness of Bob Bell’s disposition and Lynda Bundtzen’s cranky enthusiasm always amused me. Eva Grudin I never had in class, but no one at Williams ever made me laugh harder.

Lee Hirsche, chairman of the art department, designed the sets for my first show on the main stage. A perfect demonstration of how to do a lot with very little. And I loved talking to Mary Lamb (now Mary Winston) in the office of the old AMT.

And Joy Dewey—the first dance teacher at the College. She was how I finished fulfilling my gym requirement. With her long raven hair and her leotarded body, I remember her always in furs. She brought all of these great dance companies to the College: Twyla Tharp at the beginning; the nude Ann Halprin company; the elegance of Bella Lewisky; Alvin Ailey’s astounding Revelations; eight dancers from the New York City Ballet, dancing only Balanchine. And the joy she felt choreographing a piece with her student Marta Renzi. Marta choreographed the first part and Joy the second. And her acknowledgement to everyone afterward that Marta, not she, was the real choreographer. She had a great heart and a wild, feral appreciation for the arts. She had an eye. And whenever I moved on the dance floor she would laugh out loud and cry, “My God, you move like a cow,” and I would say, “Perfect for Williams.”

All of these professors were teaching me not only how to learn, but also how to teach. There is a forest of logs in Williams town, and the legacy of these professors is the great achievement of this amazing place.

William Finn ’74 is a Tony Award-winning lyricist and composer. This essay is excerpted from his Songs of Innocence and Experience, which premiered during the fall celebration of the ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance’s inaugural season.