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A PITCH-PERFECT CAREER
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CORNERSTONE

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Dear Alumni,

This March we celebrated the five-year anniversary of the founding of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. A party, held as a thank you to faculty, staff, and supporters, allowed reflection on the goals and hopes that happily have been realized. Teaching lies at the absolute core of the college’s mission, and we remain home not only to some one-third of the university’s students, but we also teach almost all the undergraduates as they pass through Mason. What an honor it is to play such a central role.

Research provides the other primary focus of the college. There we seek to contribute to the great body of knowledge that advances understanding and progress. In our research as well as our teaching, we aspire to contribute to theory and application. Head in the clouds and feet on the ground, we nurture the most sophisticated reflection as well as direct applications. As some colleagues win prizes for their scholarly work, others receive funding for theirs. And some do both. In fact, we have seen financial support for research rise 140 percent since the college’s first year. One way to evaluate the collective impact of this work, unfunded and funded, is the highly respected Shanghai rating, which places Mason’s social science units as 41st in the world.

This issue of Cornerstone itself reflects this diversity of activity. Martin Sherwin, Pulitzer Prize winner and member of the Department of History and Art History, provides a chilling segment from his next book on the Cuban Missile Crisis. Related to this, but in connection to course work, the college announces graduate work in a new master’s program concerning war and the military in society.

Always mindful, not only of what we do, but of our students, Cornerstone features an article about two students’ research abroad. And of course, students turn into alumni. A piece in this issue provides an interview with two graduates from the Department of Economics. Both women have pursued successful careers, one in politics and the other in business. And, last to mention here, but certainly not least, is an interview with Alan and Sally Merten on the value of the liberal arts. I hope that you enjoy this edition of Cornerstone and can share in the pride that your institution feels about what it does in the classroom and well beyond.

Yours in Patriot Pride!

Jack R. Censer

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In Search of Foreign Language Fluency: Two Students Cross the Globe

By Rashad Mulla, ’11

In spring 2011, Harleen Jassal was searching for a challenge.

A sophomore psychology major, Jassal was looking to turn her college experience on its head and applied to the U.S. Department of State’s Critical Language Scholarship Program to study the Punjabi language in Chandigarh, India, a city and union territory straddling the provincial border between the Punjab and Haryana states.

Evan Novalis, a senior double majoring in global affairs and Russian and Eurasian studies, wanted to further his knowledge of the Russian language and region. Having already studied in Russia once, he was vying for the National Security Education Program’s prestigious Boren Scholarship to pursue his academic goals in Kyrgyzstan.

Fast forward to spring 2012. Both Jassal and Novalis retain fresh and vivid memories from their time overseas. The trip to Chandigarh meshed well with Jassal’s ambitions. She plans to obtain a doctoral degree in clinical psychology, and then use her education and experience to serve female trauma victims from international populations, especially those from south Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

While in Chandigarh, Jassal studied the Punjabi language intensively. Having never studied abroad before, the hustle and bustle of India was challenging at first for Jassal, but she came to embrace the situation and learn from it. By the end of her stay, the trip overseas turned into one very precious component of her educational career.

“Even though I’ve been to the Punjab region before, I was with family and in a very sheltered environment, so naturally it was a completely different experience,” Jassal says. “This time, it was absolutely exhilarating to see things on my own and with those I studied with. Also, being in a new environment and being completely on my own taught me so much about myself and helped me envision what I want out of my life.”

Looking to narrow his educational and career goals as well, Novalis first became interested in the Russian language and central Asian politics while a student at Mason. Exploring and discussing the region throughout his classes, he decided he wanted to learn more about it.

“I learned about the region, and I instantly got attached,” Novalis says. “I felt like it would be a great personal and career endeavor to try and dedicate myself to understanding this region.”

Having carved out an academic niche of expertise for himself, Novalis traveled to the region to gain firsthand language experience and hear directly from the people about the culture and history of Kyrgyzstan and its surrounding states. By talking to citizens of the country, he was able to learn, not only about the culture, but more about the antigovernment riots that engulfed the region in 2010 and the violent interethnic conflict between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks later on that year.
“Being in a new environment and being completely on my own taught me so much about myself and helped me envision what I want out of my life.” — Harleen Jassal

“I wanted to see more than just the capital, Bishkek, where I was staying,” Novalis says. “I wanted to explore the country and get to know all of its intricacies. So, I did. I studied the border situation and the history between the people of Kyrgyzstan and the Soviets. I even traveled to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and all throughout Kyrgyzstan.”

The full-on immersion of studying abroad was challenging, but nothing Jassal or Novalis couldn’t handle.

Jassal actually came to welcome the challenges, naming them specifically as the highlights of her trip. Before traveling to Chandigarh, her language skills were barely enough to communicate with others, and she could only express complex thoughts by using English. In addition, she was in an unfamiliar environment, with only her new language skills to guide her.

Not a problem. Jassal began to learn and understand the Punjabi language and being in India helped her learn to speak more fluently.

“Without cultural immersion, it is difficult to learn a language,” Jassal says. “Previously, I could not express myself or read literature in Punjabi, and my writing was very poor. I still don’t have flawless speaking or writing skills, but my comprehension has improved tremendously.”

Novalis says regular trips to the store were a challenge. But he says any opportunity to overcome educational obstacles is a good thing, and study-abroad trips are full of them.

“The context of studying abroad is very challenging and time consuming,” Novalis says. “But studying abroad gives you practice and makes the language a part of you.”

For now, Jassal plans to pursue her academic goals and will welcome another study-abroad opportunity if it comes her way. Eventually, she would like to work with a nonprofit organization, such as Doctors Without Borders. Novalis would like to pursue a career in international relations with a government department. He plans to apply to graduate school to study international relations.

LaNitra Berger, fellowships director for the Honors College, believes that Jassal and Novalis have set themselves apart when it comes to finding opportunities. The combination of their academic prowess with their gutsy decision making and experience overseas will help employers and graduate schools gain more insight about them.

“Because the vast majority of students do not study abroad during their academic careers, one such experience instantly makes you stand out from other students,” Berger says. “In addition to teaching foreign language skills, studying abroad shows that you are able to take calculated risks, think creatively, and thrive outside your comfort zone.”

Jassal and Novalis have proven they can thrive. And they would gladly tell you that in their newest languages.
The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited: Nuclear Deterrence? Good Luck!

By Martin J. Sherwin, University Professor of History

At 9 a.m. on an October morning almost 50 years ago, national security advisor McGeorge Bundy entered President John F. Kennedy’s White House bedroom to deliver some bad news. Photographs taken two days earlier by a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft had revealed unmistakable evidence that the Soviet Union had secretly placed medium- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba. During the following 13 days, October 16–28, 1962, Cold War diplomacy heated to the combustion point as the president and Premier Khrushchev initiated actions that edged the world toward nuclear Armageddon.

At the time, I was a junior officer in the U.S. Navy attached to Patrol Squadron 31, an antisubmarine warfare training squadron based at North Island Naval Air Station near San Diego, California. Despite my modest rank, my job—the squadron’s air intelligence officer—made me custodian of our top secret documents, including our deployment orders in the event of war.

Sometime following mid-October, I received an unexpected new set of orders, after I learned that the round-the-world flight I was scheduled to conavigate for an admiral had been scrapped. Within days, all leave was canceled. According to rumors, the cause was rising tensions in Berlin.

On Monday, October 22, 1962, just hours before Kennedy’s televised speech announcing a naval “quarantine” of Cuba and the demand that Khrushchev withdraw the offending missiles forthwith, I was ordered to remove the war plans from my safe and deliver them to our squadron’s senior staff. My recollection is that in the event of war, we were to deploy to Baja, California. Junior officers having more bravado than sense, we joked that the beaches of Baja would be a delightful place to die.

I did not know until I learned about the events I describe below how close to death we all were.

There are hundreds of studies of those terrifying 13 October days during which the pressure of domestic and international politics on both sides of the iron curtain and the personal interests of the principal decision makers nearly ignited a global conflagration. In the end, nuclear war was averted by the rising panic that engulfed both leaders but that Khrushchev acted on first. In a surprise announcement over radio Moscow, on Sunday morning, October 28, the Soviet premier accepted Kennedy’s earlier pledge not to invade Cuba (and his secret commitment to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey) as a quid pro quo for the removal of the Soviet missiles. But it had been a close call.

“We had to act very quickly,” Khrushchev told a visiting Eastern Bloc diplomat soon after. “That is also why we even used radio to contact the president….This time we really were on the verge of war.”

In fact, World War III was even closer than either Khrushchev or Kennedy ever realized, and it was not going to be started by either of them or Cuba’s leader, Fidel Castro. The instigator was an obscure 30-something Soviet submarine captain who gave the order on Saturday, October 27, at 5 p.m. eastern daylight savings time (EDST) to load and prepare to fire a nuclear armed torpedo at a fleet of U.S. Navy vessels.

This story, first revealed in English in the Journal of Strategic Studies in April 2005, of how Captain V. G. Savitskii was goaded into giving that order and how his gamble with Armageddon was prevented, alters the accepted explanation of how the Cuban Missile Crisis was peacefully resolved. Kennedy’s and Khrushchev’s shared
aversion to armed conflict was essential, but the indispensable ingredient was luck, very good luck, the all too often ignored hidden historical variable.

On October 27, 1962, almost six days (five days and 22 hours to be exact) have passed since Kennedy announced his decision to “quarantine” Cuba. This was only the initial step, he said, to force the Soviet Union to remove the nuclear missiles it had secretly shipped to the island over the past several months. “These actions may only be the beginning….We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth, but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced.”

It has been three days and several hours since the U.S. Navy deployed an armada of nearly 200 ships stretching on an arc 500 miles north of Havana. It has become increasingly apparent to Khrushchev, Kennedy, and Castro that the military activities of each passing day has exponentially increased the danger of a hostile incident escalating out of control. Along with potential clashes on the quarantine line, tension has been increased by the well-publicized buildup of U.S. forces in the United States and Europe. The three contending leaders are acutely aware and worried (at least Khrushchev and Kennedy are) that at any moment events could slip from their control.

Castro is enraged beyond worry. He is well informed of the U.S. military’s preparations, and he is certain that an attack is “almost imminent within the next 24 to 72 hours.” In response to Kennedy’s address, he has ordered general mobilization, and commanded his anti-aircraft batteries to shoot down U.S. aircraft that overfly the island; several low flying USAF reconnaissance jets have had close calls.

Earlier on that Saturday, a Soviet commander, who Castro badgered into action, fired a surface-to-air missile (SAM/SA-2) at a USAF U2. It found its target, and its pilot, Maj. Rudolph Anderson, was killed. The missile had been fired without Moscow’s authorization, but neither Kennedy nor any of his advisors know that. The Joint Chiefs of Staff are united in urging the president to bomb the offending SAM site; an act he fears could escalate into a global war.

Certain now that he can do little to prevent an assault, Castro has become grimly fatalistic. Determined to confront the inevitable head on regardless of the consequences, he has dictated a letter to Khrushchev urging him to launch Soviet intercontinental missiles against the United States should an assault occur. If “the imperialists invade Cuba with the goal of occupying it… the Soviet Union must never allow the circumstances in which the imperialists could launch the first nuclear strike against it…[so] that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there is no other.”

Living so intensely at the center of the crisis, Castro has abandoned any hope of a peaceful resolution. He has embraced Armageddon as an act of retributive justice.

Khrushchev, who will remain in his Kremlin office throughout the night, is desperate to avoid Armageddon, or anything approaching it. He has recklessly gambled that nuclear missiles could be installed undetected in Cuba. But he has lost that bet and is now frantically seeking to escape the consequences of the dangerous standoff he created. He wants the crisis resolved peacefully, but he has no intention of giving up the missiles without getting something in return. Yet, Castro’s call for a first strike is a warning, a realization that he might not be able to control Cuban actions.

Khrushchev is close to exhaustion, nearly overcome by the contradictory emotions that have roiled him for days. He is 9,000 miles from Havana, but only 32 minutes from an intercontinental minuteman missile launched from Wyoming. He is terrified of skidding sideways into a nuclear war. Yet he remains furious about the blockade of Cuba, which he considers an illegal, outrageous act of war. Kennedy calls it a “quarantine,” but Khrushchev is not appeased by the euphemism. It is “outright banditry…. The folly of degenerate imperialism….[and an] act of aggression that pushes mankind toward the abyss of a world nuclear-missile war,” he angrily writes to Kennedy on October 24. Khrushchev appears determined then to dare the Americans to sink a Soviet vessel.

But now, three days later, both the mounting tension and the circumstances have changed his tone. As U.S. anti-submarine warfare (ASW) forces are closing in on Soviet submarines that have reached the blockade line, he writes a personal, beseeching letter: “Mr. President, we and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot. And what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose.”

Kennedy, too, is dealing with powerful conflicting emotions. Pacing the floor of the Oval Office, he is talking to his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, wondering if he is being too cautious, too aggressive, too flexible, too rigid, or simply too worried. “Pierre,” he said to his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, “Do you realize that if I make a mistake in this crisis 200 million people are going to get killed?” He is infuriated with his military chiefs for their cavalier attitude toward war and is losing patience with his advisors, who are still offering contradictory recommendations. As does Khrushchev, Kennedy wants a peaceful resolution of the crisis.
resolution, but he too has a bottom line: the Soviet missiles must be removed from Cuba.

Kennedy and Khrushchev are enemies, ideological and military adversaries, who have blundered into a dangerous confrontation that neither wanted nor anticipated. Each is aware that an accident or even a misinterpretation can instantly set off a nuclear exchange. Yet the circumstances of their political and international obligations, as well as their personal interests, compel them to continue to press their goals against each other despite their recognition that nothing they can achieve is worth the consequences of a nuclear war. What they believed they shared during the crisis—and what histories of the Cuban Missile Crisis have generally agreed they shared—is the conviction that the fate of the world is in their hands.

They are mistaken.

On this Saturday evening, the fate of the world is not in the hands of any head of state. It has slipped from their grasp, inadvertently and furtively, into the hands of two young Soviet navy officers—Captain 2nd Rank V. G. Savitskii, and Brigade Chief of Staff Captain V. A. Arkhipov—who are aboard a floundering Project 641 Soviet submarine. Savitskii’s boat, B-59, is one of a quartet of Foxtrot class (their NATO designation) submarines sent “to strengthen the defense of the island of Cuba.” Their arrival two days earlier at the quarantine line launched the U.S. Navy’s ASW forces into action and turned the area into a veritable war zone.

The Foxtrots have a conventional propulsion system. When submerged, all power generation must be transferred from their three diesel engines to batteries that require periodic recharging. Yet, for days, it has been impossible for B-59 to rise to recharging depth. U.S. ASW ships and aircraft discovered its location and are harassing it with relatively low explosive practice depth charges and the unauthorized use of hand grenades. The intention is to signal the submarine to surface. “It felt like you were sitting in a metal barrel which somebody is constantly blasting with a sledgehammer,” Senior Lieutenant Vadim Orlov, the communications officer on B-59, recalled. “The situation was quite... shocking for the crew.” But B-59’s crew is dealing with more than terrifying external explosions. Internally conditions are horrific, almost unimaginable. The warm Caribbean waters have turned its interior into a sauna. The coolest section of the boat is a stifling 113 degrees Fahrenheit, and the temperature in the engine room is an unbearable 140 degrees. Designed to operate in the North Atlantic, Foxtrot submarines have no air conditioning, and the engine heat and body odor have turned the air rancid. The carbon dioxide level is dangerous, and the desalinization equipment has malfunctioned leaving fresh water in short supply. Most of the crew are covered with rashes and ulcers. The dreadful conditions have left many looking “like they had just been freed from Auschwitz or Buchenwald.”

As the cacophony of the depth charges and hand grenades continue, Captain Savitskii begins to suspect that he is not merely being harassed but is actually under attack. “Of course, once one had... experienced firsthand what it was like on the receiving end of the depth charges, it was possible to somehow go about one’s business with a good understanding of the situation,” R. A. Ketov, one of the other submarine captains, later wrote about B-59’s experience. “However, when this... [i]s imposed for the first time on someone with no practical knowledge of it, it is a different matter altogether.”

It was indeed “a different matter altogether” for Savitskii. He and the other submarine captains had recently received orders “to open a continuous communication channel with Moscow” that “could only be understood at the time as pre-saging a fundamental change in mission[ven the beginning of combat operations] against the U.S. Navy.”

Was war beginning? Had it begun? It was difficult to confirm anything. “Moscow was totally jammed. There was nothing... emptiness. It was like Moscow doesn’t exist,” another of the captains recalled. “[All] we knew [was that] things were coming to a head, that trouble was brewing.”

What no one in the U.S. government knows—not the Joint Chiefs, the CIA, Navy Intelligence, or the skippers of...
the U.S. Navy ASW forces chasing the Soviet submarines—is that one of the 22 torpedoes aboard B-59 (and each of the other three submarines) is armed with a 15-kiloton nuclear warhead. The range of the torpedo is 19 kilometers (about 12 miles) and carries an explosive force equivalent to that of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. If fired, it could easily sink several ships, an act guaranteed to trigger a nuclear response.

At this point the nightmarish conditions within B-59 and the terrifying explosions around it, are driving Savitskii to the breaking point. “Maybe the war has already started up there, while we are doing somersaults here,” he literally screams. In a rising fury he orders his special weapons officer to arm and load the nuclear torpedo. “We’re gonna blast them now! We will die, but we will sink them all—we will not become the shame of the fleet.”

I want to pause here to dwell on the role that chance plays in history, as in each of our lives. Little in our existence is foreordained, and history is not a story composed of inevitable events. The destinies of nations, just as the lives of individuals, are moved inexorably forward through crossroad after crossroad by decisions and chance, with the influence of each in constant flux. In 1969, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, made this point explicit when he compared Robert Kennedy’s memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Thirteen Days) with his own experience of that affair. The subtitle of his review was “Homage to Plain Dumb Luck.”

Luck, extraordinary good luck or plain dumb luck, took command of events aboard B-59 in the minutes that followed Savitskii’s order. When I first read about these events, a childhood image sprung to mind: As the torpedo was about to be fired, Superman miraculously appears and saves the day.

My fantasy was not entirely fantastic. At the last moment, the torpedo was prevented from being fired by the unlikely intervention of a very level-headed naval officer who, merely by chance, had been assigned to travel to Cuba on B-59.

Several versions describing how Brigade Chief of Staff Vasilii Arkhipov prevented World War III have come to light. All of them, while different in some respects, make the same basic point: were it not for his intervention, a torpedo with a 15-kiloton nuclear warhead would have been fired at a fleet of U.S. Navy ships.

According to Ketov, who wrote the most complete account, Savitskii “had spent all day trying to escape the ASW forces but, having run down the battery, was forced to surface to recharge…. While surfacing, his boat “came under machine-gun fire from [U.S. ASW S-2] Tracker air-craft. The fire rounds landed either to the sides of the submarine’s hull or near the bow. All these provocative actions carried out by surface ships in immediate proximity, and ASW aircraft flying some 10 to 15 meters [less than 30 to 50 feet] above the boat had a detrimental impact on the commander, prompting him to take extreme measures…..the use of special weapons.”

Although firing live ammunition at a submarine was strictly prohibited, having been a member of an ASW squadron flight crew, I have no trouble believing Ketov’s account. It is possible that the crew of the Tracker had not gotten the word banning the initiation of hostile fire. Or, perhaps, the combustive mix of adrenalin, testosterone, and frustration from having chased that submarine around the Caribbean for two days, led the Tracker crew to demonstrate clearly to that sub crew just who had won. Whatever the reason for firing live ammunition in the vicinity of the submarine and provocatively “buzzing” it, those young U.S. Navy aviators came close to precipitating a nuclear war.

“Mere chance,” Ketov narrates, “prevented Savitskii from resorting to the use of ‘special weapons’ at this time. A delay in diving time and the prudence of the brigade’s Chief of Staff Vasilii Arkhipov—who happened to be on board—prevented the combat operations which the B-59 could have initiated.”

The plight of B-59, the contrasting reactions of Savitskii and Arkhipov, the unauthorized use of grenades, machine gun fire by U.S. Navy aircraft, the Soviet and the American communications failures are together an astonishing tale with an obvious moral: crisis managers cannot manage everything. Even when they do their rational best, they are not likely to succeed if they run out of luck. The disconcerting conclusion about the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis is that on October 27, 1962, a global nuclear war was averted because a random selection process had deployed Captain Vasilii Arkhipov aboard a particular Soviet submarine.

As long as nuclear weapons arsenals exist, human survival appears to be resting on a foundation no more solid than luck.

Nuclear deterrence? Good luck!

Martin J. Sherwin, University Professor of History, is writing a book, Gambling with Armageddon, about the nuclear arms race and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The author wishes to acknowledge his intellectual debt to Dr. Svetlana V. Savranskaya, senior researcher at the National Security Archive at George Washington University, for bringing to his attention numerous articles about the Soviet submarines during the Cuban Missile Crisis that she had translated from Russian to English. See S.V. Savranskaya, “New Sources on the Role of Soviet Submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” The Journal of Strategic Studies, April 2005.
Defining Success

Nicole Geller, BS Economics ’86, Nancy Pfotenhauer, MA ’87

By Maria Seniw, ’07

In 1983, the Center for Study of Public Choice, a research institution that produces economic and political science theories, shifted its operations and faculty to George Mason University, bringing with it James Buchanan, who received the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1986 for his groundbreaking work on public choice to Mason’s Economics Department. These events, along with the arrival of Vernon Smith, a second Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics winner in 2002, helped define the Economics Department.

Nicole Geller, BS Economics ’86, and Nancy Pfotenhauer, MA ’87, are successful products of this vibrant program.

While the center was moving to Mason, Pfotenhauer was a junior at the University of Georgia majoring in English when a scheduling error placed her in a 400-level economics course. Her questions impressed the professor so much that he told her to skip law school and study economics at Mason. Pfotenhauer did not make an immediate decision, but she did change her major to economics and took 28 credits a quarter in order to graduate on time. Two years later, she was sharing an apartment with three of her classmates and a dog. Mason economist Walter Williams selected her as his graduate research assistant, and economics at Mason became the center for her social and intellectual life.

Meanwhile, Nicole Geller was enrolled at Mason and knew she wanted to study economics or business because consumer purchasing decisions and motivators greatly interested her. Throughout her studies, she noticed the courses she enjoyed most combined creative and analytical thinking. Her favorite class, Math Logic, involved studying classic word problems, such as the four- or five-color theorem. The class challenged her to think differently because students had to think outside conventional methods to arrive at their conclusions.

While she was a student, Geller worked part time at a firm that obtained export licenses for control technology. She moved from an administrative role to a consultant’s position and here she was introduced to government contracting, which she describes as a complex sector with its own set of rules. Learning these guidelines and maneuvering throughout the industry greatly appealed to her. As she moved to the larger firms of PRC and Booz Allen Hamilton (BAH), her projects became more complex and she was often tasked to fix processes that were flawed. Her employers recognized her strategic planning skills and ability to see the steps beyond the immediate issues. She traces this knowledge back to her economic studies and sees these strengths in the current humanities and social sciences students that she mentors.

Since childhood, Geller’s ambition was to be an entrepreneur. After accumulating an arsenal of knowledge and experience, Geller opened her own firm, Government Contract Solutions (GCS), specializing in professional services and solutions for the federal government and industry clients. Her first clients were PRC and BAH. Geller admitted to having some fears about her decision, but they were not nearly as great as her desire to create and run her own business. She felt energized leaping into the unknown.

While Geller was first consulting, Pfotenhauer began her career working in public policy as a senior economist for the Republican National Congress. She then became economic council for Senator William Armstrong and held a term as lead economist for a cabinet-level review body within the White House. Following her consecutive years in the policy sector, she transitioned between nonprofit and advocacy work and the corporate sector. Pfotenhauer later served as the economic policy advisor and spokesperson for John McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign. Currently, Pfotenhauer is president of MediaSpeak Strategies, a communication firm that focuses on public policy and political persuasion. As she describes it, much of this work involves calming people down and figuring out how to be heard in loud, chaotic scenes.

As Pfotenhauer moved through her career, she shifted from policy-focused positions and used other elements of her humanities and social sciences education. She recognized the need for economists who could simply and efficiently communicate any issue. Because of her Mason education, she was prepared to meet that need. Mason professors had challenged her to think clearly and be intellectually brave, and emphasized that thoughtful people...
can disagree. When examining her career path, she commented, “It is interesting and somewhat humbling to be paid for what you learned along the way versus what you set out to do.”

As Geller and Pfotenhauer came through the Economics Department within a year of each other, they also entered a similar workforce. As is the case today, the late 1980s saw a sluggish economy with high unemployment, yet, both found jobs and recalled that initially almost all their co-workers were men. Now just more than 20 years later, women make up 40 percent of the workforce and within some fields, the number of new female graduates exceeds males.

Though the increase in the number of women is significant, the greatest changes in the workforce have occurred in attitudes. Geller noted that when she began working, women had to play by existing rules set by men, whereas now women can design their own rules. There is an understanding that women do not think like men and that positively affects the work place. She emphasized, whatever path a person selects, it is not forever. “It is much more flexible than that, you follow a path for as long as you want to.”

Both women have observed unique qualities in their fellow alumni, particularly those with degrees in the humanities and social sciences. Mason attracts uncommon thinkers; people who are hungry and intent on changing the way things are done. As employers and economists, Pfotenhauer and Geller recognize the real value of these skills.

And just how does one get that first, or any, job? Pfotenhauer advises aggressive goal setting, belief in yourself, and once you have that job, do it better than anyone else, and quantum leaps will happen in your career. She echoed Geller’s sentiments with “remain open to the fact that life is not linear.”

This story began nearly 30 years ago with the arrival of the Center for the Study of Public Choice and two Nobel laureates, and since then, economics at Mason has flourished far beyond its initial accomplishments. Pfotenhauer and Geller were both very influenced by these occurrences and later achieved great success—by their own definitions. Their evolution from students to professionals to community leaders demonstrates what is possible with a humanities and social sciences education at Mason. And as the college continues its upward progress, the success of its alumni will be as influential in the creation of its identity.

Q&A WITH NANCY PFOTENHAUER AND NICOLE GELLER

What do you enjoy most about the work you do?

Geller: The variety of projects I work on and the teams I work with. I’m very proud to manage an organization that is learning focused and constantly looking for ways to improve. I’m attracted to the possibilities that come with new projects.

Pfotenhauer: The unpredictability of day-to-day work. It is very rewarding work for people who would rather be busy than bored. And it is cool to be in the middle of the national news cycle and know what is happening.

Where do you do your best thinking?

Geller: Typically, within team brainstorming sessions. The energy and different views help me get to the most creative solutions. When I need to get away, I have a beach house that is great for a change of surroundings to clear my mind.

Pfotenhauer: In my home office, it is a wonderful refuge where I am highly productive.

What are your favorite books?

Geller: The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century by George Friedman, Daniel Pink books such as Drive, and The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho.

Pfotenhauer: The Screwtape Letters and The Great Divorce by C. S. Lewis. I like to read them once a year and in sequence. It makes you look in the mirror and examine yourself. It is a good wake-up call.

What are some of the recent books you have read?

Geller: I’m currently reading Garden of the Beasts by Erik Larson, and I enjoyed Cutting for Stone by Abraham Verghese.

Pfotenhauer: I really enjoy mysteries. I’m currently reading the Inspector Gamache series by Louise Penny.

Kindle? iPad? Nook? Old-fashioned books?

Geller: I alternate between hardcovers, Kindle, and a new iPad.

Pfotenhauer: Kindle.
Notes from the Field: WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

As part of an ongoing national discussion of women working in higher education, we asked female faculty members, how has the university experience evolved for women during your time at Mason?

Marion Deshmukh, Robert T. Hawkes Professor of History
I have been at the university as an instructor since 1969 and then as a full-time faculty member since 1975. Thus, it goes without saying that many changes have taken place in university life. I was and have been struck over the years by the fact that women were continually encouraged to serve in positions of leadership, particularly at a time when feminism was just emerging on the national stage. For example, there were female department chairs from the 1970s onward. When I served as chair of the History Department in the 1980s and 1990s, more than half the chairs in the then-College of Arts and Sciences were women. And as has been observed, there is currently a higher percentage of female students than male students at the university, part of a national trend. I can state unequivocally that in my experience here, women have been treated very fairly. The atmosphere of the college and university has been consistently welcoming.

Jessica Matthews, Faculty, English
When I began work as a full-time nontenure track faculty member in the English Department 10 years ago, women had already fought many of the equity battles in academic fields such as literature and composition. I benefited from their hard work. Thus, in my years at Mason, women held every major position in my department. All of these women served as role models for me, and they continue to be my mentors. At present, the challenges many faculty such as myself face at Mason have more to do with the contingency of our appointments rather than our gender. For instance, full-time nontenure track adjunct faculty are not eligible for the same state employment benefits as other full-time faculty. I look forward to the next evolution in the university experience when there will be equal benefits for all faculty, regardless of the contingency of their positions.

Sumaiya Hamdani, Faculty, History and Art History
I have been teaching at Mason for 15 years, and in that time the experience for me personally as a woman has been incredibly rewarding. When I first arrived at Mason far fewer of my colleagues in the History and Art History Department were women, far fewer high-ranking members of the administration were women, and the Women Studies Program was newly established with a small number of affiliated faculty members and cross-listed courses across the college. Now, we have a unique student body in that so many of our students originally hail from areas of the world that are Muslim majority societies. That so many of them are also women and that their interest in their own past includes a critical examination of that heritage has been very inspiring. Women in areas of the world such as the Middle East have shown great courage in the events unfolding in that region of late, and I am proud to help frame their experience for my students as a norm rather than an exception.
according to official George Mason University data, the following denotes the number of all faculty (full-time, part-time, and graduate assistants).

1980–81
- 30.0% female
- 69.1% male

1990–91
- 36.3% female
- 63.7% male

2000–01
- 42.6% female
- 57.4% male

2010–11
- 47.1% female
- 52.9% male

“We still must continue to challenge ourselves to remain conscious and intentional about asking, where are the women among those in the highest positions of power?”

—SUZANNE SCOTT, DIRECTOR, WOMEN AND GENDER STUDIES
Alan and Sally Merten Look Back: 16 Years at Mason

By Amy Noecker

From an observer’s point of view, and their own, the Mertens have been both influenced by and influencers of the liberal arts. A recent interview with Sally and Alan Merten explores this aspect of their lives. Alan Merten is preparing to leave his role as president of George Mason University after 16 years. Sally Merten has played a significant role in the growth and development of the university during their tenure at Mason.

To speak with Alan and Sally Merten is to understand the value of a liberal arts education. It is to understand the importance of books. It is to gain insight into the effect that the liberal arts can have on leaders and educators. The Mertens, who have lived, breathed, and worked at George Mason University for 16 years, have had an undeniable influence on the growth of the humanities and social sciences—both in the academic arena and with their support of the arts in the community.

As a leader, Alan Merten has the ability to hear other people's perspectives. With a career in university administration, Merten encounters situations time and again that present either problems or opportunities. It is his objective to ask questions that might cause the interested parties, himself included, to consider multiple solutions or multiple opportunities.

“When you have a humanities and social sciences background, you intrinsically know there are multiple ways of looking at things,” he says. “I have learned that in this job, or I should say, people have learned over the years not to present me with a problem but present me with a problem and multiple solutions. Then I’m listening to you.”

Although he is a computer scientist by discipline, Merten will tell you that his understanding of the liberal arts is what has made him a good communicator. He feels strongly about presenting students with multiple options and multiple perspectives. The couple agrees that the university is a place just for that.

“One of the strong parts of George Mason University is the faculty and administrators’ understanding of the importance of multiple views and not telling the students how or what to think but providing opportunities to hear how others think, so that they might decide on their own,” he says.

Merten has served as president in a similar fashion. Known to consider alternatives, he has, in fact, encouraged different views when it comes to his own ideas and proposals.

“I view it as a compliment,” he says, “that someone would counter me, that someone would propose an alternative.”

Sally Merten received a nursing degree with a minor in psychology from Avila University. One of the biggest influences she cites was her university’s requirement of four semesters of humanities courses, examining art, literature, music, religion, and philosophy. Out of these courses grew her appreciation of classical music and literature. She will also tell you that her mother always had a book in her hand and from her she inherited her love of books. An appreciation for the arts turned into an understanding of what the arts can do in everyday life.

As an undergraduate mathematics major at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Alan Merten worked as a nighttime operator on a huge computer that he thinks now could be configured to fit in your wristwatch.

He was also a research assistant to a psychology professor. The first in his family to go to college, he says he viewed the liberal arts as the reason he went to college. The Mertens’ children—Eric and Melissa—were liberal arts majors, Eric studying political science and Melissa choosing French and economics. It was important to the Mertens that their children gained width and breadth to their knowledge.
“I think it is very important to have a good foundation in your education,” Sally Merten says. “You have to have a frame of reference from which to discuss many things.”

Alan Merten, previously the dean of two business schools, has always felt strongly about the influence of the humanities. For instance, he believes that there is good reason to take a psychology course before a marketing course even if business is your major. Your foundation for understanding marketing improves once you understand psychology.

“I learned early on in my professional career the concept of referent disciplines,” he says. “I was very applied, became very applied, but when someone would talk about what they were doing, I would always ask, what is the referent humanities or social sciences discipline involved? In other words, what is behind the concept?”

In line with the Mertens’ respect for the humanities and social sciences is their enthusiasm for Fall for the Book. The literary festival, approaching its 14th year, has grown from a two-day occasion to a weeklong, multVENUE event. With their friends, Mason benefactors Ranny and Lucy Church, the Mertens have supported and nurtured the festival. As a member of the board of directors, Sally Merten is known for her passion and tenacity when it comes to this festival. Her pride is obvious when discussing it, from the range of authors who have attended to the personal nature of the festival where one can interact directly with the authors. She speaks with an honest thrill and a deep knowledge of the structure and the impact of the festival.

Alan Merten remarks, “The key to Fall for the Book, from my perspective, is the reminder that there is no wall between the community and the university.” He points out that without the partnership with the surrounding communities, the university would not have had the success it has had, and Fall for the Book exemplifies that once a year.

Sally Merten talks about her involvement in the nonprofit world. As a member of several nonprofit boards, she sees her role as bringing together community and university. This is an area in which she believes she has helped. Sally recollects last fall’s festival and reminds her husband

“When you have a humanities and social sciences background, you intrinsically know there are multiple ways of looking at things.”

— Alan Merten
of what happened at the reception for Stephen King. For someone who prides himself on knowing people, it is with pleasure that Alan Merten recollects attending the reception. Within the crowd of 100, Merten knew only a handful of people—an unusual occurrence for this university president. Clearly, what pleased him was this ostensibly new group of people brought to campus by the festival and the indication of the impact that it has on the community. The Mertens recognize the impact of the arts and engage, in part because they enjoy the symphony, dance, and other performances, but also for more altruistic reasoning.

While he is aware of how the Mason student body has evolved over the past 16 years, what Alan Merten points to as a benchmark is the intellectual curiosity of Mason students. And, though he knows that some might argue with him, he says that, “We are in the learning business, not the teaching business.” He feels strongly that creating a culture where students can learn about the world they live in is the right path for universities to take, and that plays out not just in the classroom, but in the social, athletic, and artistic areas of the university. Sally recalls the on-campus reaction to September 11, 2001, and the impact of events on students living in a diverse campus community. She notes that what happened on campus that day was support for others based on a shared understanding of the world in which we live.

Intellectual curiosity and a supportive community are two themes evident when the Mertens talk about their tenure at the university. “Mason’s story is one of culture,” says Alan Merten, and to maintain a culture where good things happen has been one of his objectives.

The growth of the university to fill a need for higher education in Virginia, the growth of the global perspective that the university espouses, and the continued rich intellectual community surrounding the university are all hopes that the Mertens have for Mason. When asked what it was like being a university president after being at Mason for several years, Alan Merten responded, “I don’t really know what it’s like being a university president. But I know what Mason is like. And I like being the George Mason University president.” He maintains that statement to date. There was no doubt in their minds that this university would be a good match for them. And, it has proven so beyond their expectations.

If you ask Alan Merten of which accolades he is most proud, he immediately responds by noting their joint accomplishments and those that belong solely to Sally. In regard to the university and how it has advanced in the past 16 years, Alan Merten says and Sally agrees, “The pride that people have in this institution is one of the things that makes me the proudest. And, that can be students, alumni, friends, staff, faculty, everyone.”

— Alan Merten

“The pride that people have in this institution is one of the things that makes me the proudest. And, that can be students, alumni, friends, staff, faculty, everyone.”
Smithsonian–Mason Partnership Offers Master’s Program in the History of Decorative Arts

Year one of the newest George Mason University–Smithsonian partnership is now etched in history.

In October 2011, Mason President Alan Merten and Smithsonian Institution Secretary Wayne Clough signed the master of arts degree in the history of decorative arts into existence.

The Smithsonian has offered a degree in the history of decorative arts since 1996, but this new partnership links one of the world’s most prestigious institutions with the university and all that it has to offer.

“The collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and George Mason University brings together the unparalleled resources and collections of the world’s largest museum complex with the experience and expertise of the Mason administration and faculty and the resources of one of the nation’s fastest-growing research universities,” says Cynthia Williams, director of the program.

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia approved the master’s degree in March 2011, and the program began at Mason that fall.

Currently, more than 90 students are enrolled in the 48-credit, 16-course program, and Mason plans to admit 30 to 35 new students per year. Most students arrive with a background in art history study, although others have studied history, anthropology, law, government, and business. Students explore the decorative arts to pursue careers in museums, commercial art, curation, education, art galleries, interior design, and other widely varying fields. The program’s expert faculty and two required internships support the students’ preparation for future experiences and careers.

Jack Censer, dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Mason, observes that the partnership benefits both organizations.

“It is always a great honor to team with the Smithsonian, and now we are part of one of the leading programs in decorative arts in the world,” says Censer. “This program strengthens and enhances what we already do in this field, and broadens it by including art such as painting, sculpture, furniture, silverware, and the buildings that hold them.”

The program covers decorative art from the United States, Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, among other places, and offers courses in professional training and historical studies. It is the only program of its kind in Virginia. The program accepts students for fall and spring, and students can enroll full or part time. Courses are held at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and on Mason’s Fairfax Campus.

“I really love the program, and I’ve been extremely impressed with the caliber of academic work and the scholarship,” says Rebecca Petillo, an MA candidate in the program, set to earn her degree in 2013. “Hearing our faculty members’ perspectives, knowledge, and scholarship in this area is a benefit that I really value and appreciate.”

Petillo enjoys the work she does in the program, from the heavy research to the variety of interesting course work. She has taken classes focusing on her different interests, which include glass, ceramics, studio furniture, contemporary craft, and historical survey. She has had several top-flight workplace appointments, including an internship with senior Smithsonian official Jane Milosch, during Milosch’s time as a curator at the Renwick Gallery, and another with Richard Kurin, undersecretary for history, art, and culture at the Smithsonian.

Petillo and the others in the program love the curriculum for one reason alone.

“This is my passion,” she says.
CAN YOU MATCH THE PROFESSORS TO THEIR OFFICES?

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De Nys and Zagarri Receive 2011 Award for Scholarship

The College of Humanities and Social Sciences honored two faculty members with its 2011 Award for Scholarship. Martin De Nys, a professor in the Department of Philosophy, and Rosemarie Zagarri, a professor in the Department of History and Art History, received the award, which is presented annually to faculty members who make sustained, consistent contributions to their fields of study.

De Nys, in his 30th year at Mason, spent the first half of his academic career studying historical figures and texts in the field of philosophy, writing commentaries and analyses on some of the most intriguing and difficult works he came across. He then spent time writing about philosophical issues, using his previous historical analyses to inform his work. His areas of expertise include the works of philosophers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx, philosophical theology, and political philosophy.

He published two books in 2009: Hegel and Theology, which is an analysis of Hegel’s understanding of Christianity, and Considering Transcendence, a work that explores different approaches to real life. A sequel to Considering Transcendence, in which De Nys explores philosophical issues surrounding the idea of God, is in the works. Another philosophical heavyweight, Martin Heidegger, will be under the De Nys microscope soon; the professor plans to release a book that will take a critical and appreciative look at Heidegger’s ideas.

Zagarri, in her 17th year at Mason, studies colonial American history, women’s history, and 18th-century transatlantic history. She published her first academic book in 1987, The Politics of Size: Representation in the United States, 1776-1850, and has since published two others, A Woman’s Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution, and Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic. She has also edited a book on George Washington. Zagarri has won numerous awards and grants for her work and has appeared on such networks as C-SPAN and PBS. After publishing Revolutionary Backlash in 2007, Zagarri began work on a biography of Thomas Law, an important reformer in the early days of the United States.

For more information on the award and the recipients’ biographies, visit chss.gmu.edu/articles/3356.

PAST WINNERS

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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Alan Cheuse</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Tyler Cowen, ’83, and Jagadish Shukla</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>June Tangney and Shobita Satyapal</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>Michael Summers and James Maddux</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>Susanne Denham and Lance Liotta</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>Linda Seligmann</td>
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<td>Debra Bergoffen</td>
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<td>Barbara Melosh and Vernon Smith</td>
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<td>Carol Mattusch</td>
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New Concentration Focuses on War and Diplomacy

The source of inspiration for some, polarization for others, and relevance for all, the military is one of the most important institutions in the world. Today’s military systems play an essential role in shaping global politics through war and diplomacy, and even by their mere existence. Starting in fall 2012, George Mason University graduate students have an opportunity to explore the complex nature of the military and its role in society through a new concentration in war and the military in society.

The concentration is part of the Interdisciplinary Studies program. It is designed for students interested in the intellectual concepts of the military and the hard facts stemming from the results of its decision making.

The concentration is headed by Christopher Hamner and Meredith Lair, experts in military history and faculty members in the Department of History and Art History.

“These issues related to security, war, and peace have significant historical importance,” Hamner says. “They also have a lot of contemporary implications. The decisions that the military makes affect some really critical issues.”

“What we recognize is that students in the Washington, D.C., area are looking for different types of skill sets, so we wanted to create something that would be appealing to people from a variety of perspectives,” Lair says. “Because Dr. Hamner and I are both military historians, we already have this unique core strength. We really do think Mason has the potential to become a landmark institution in this field.”

Hamner believes the concentration’s most attractive feature is its interdisciplinary focus. Other degree programs in the college focus on specific aspects of military studies such as history or policy. A number of students are interested in combining historical studies with practical experience.

“We answer questions related to war, peace, strategy, diplomacy, and American society,” he says. “This program is designed to appeal to those students who are interested in the really important cluster of questions having to do with how the U.S. prepares for war, strategizes, fights its battles, creates peace, finances warfare, utilizes technology, and maintains its security.”

The 36-credit degree allows students to take courses in anthropology, biodefense, geography and geoinformation science, government, history, public administration, and religion. The master’s program is capped by a project or thesis. Affiliated faculty for this program includes professors from many departments in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and other Mason schools and colleges, as well.
The End of an Era. It is a dramatic statement, almost always uttered hyperbolically. But this very assertion has been heard more than once in the halls of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, in the face of the resignation of its senior associate dean, Dee Holisky.

Holisky has long been a familiar face throughout the departments and units of the college. She served as associate dean for academic programs and became senior associate dean in 2002. In those roles, her duties have included supervision of the college curriculum, keeping track of the enrollment, and generally ensuring the orderly operation of college activities. However, the fulfillment of those tasks barely outlines the impact she has made.

Holisky did not start out in an administrative role. Her 32-year sojourn at Mason began in the English Department, working as a part-time adjunct professor. After one year, she joined the faculty full time, teaching courses in her specialty, linguistics. She eventually went on to serve as director of the Linguistics program.

Holisky and linguistics found each other as her academic career began at the University of Chicago. “I happened to major in linguistics through an odd fluke,” she acknowledges. “I had no idea what I was going to major in, and I was coming up on the end of my second year. One day, I was sitting around flipping through the catalog. Literally, the catalog flipped open to linguistics, and there was so little I had to do to major in linguistics so I chose linguistics.” This happy accident resulted in Holisky earning a bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, and PhD in the field, all from the University of Chicago.

“I never saw myself as an administrator,” Holisky admits. “My chair at the time asked me to run for college council. [I] ran for the position in English and served for one year. Daniele Struppa [now the chancellor at Chapman University] was also on the council. We worked on the first ever Celebration of Scholarship together. He later encouraged me to apply for the position in the dean’s office.”

Though the field of administration might have come unexpectedly to Holisky, by all accounts she has handled its challenges with exemplary diplomacy and skill. The college’s current associate dean, Deborah Boehm-Davis, explains the position is, at its essence, bureaucratic. “It’s a lot of dotting I’s and crossing T’s.” Much of the role has to do with developing curriculum and making sure that enrollment levels sustain the continuation of course offerings. Boehm-Davis also stresses that the person in this position must be concerned with keeping things running for the departments and ensuring that their needs are met, such as with space allocation and supporting the departments’ web presence via a content management system constructed jointly by Holisky and the college’s director of information technology and web development, Daniel Collier.

These roles could be contentious at times, but Holisky seemed to rise above the friction that could have resulted in making difficult decisions. “It’s challenging, just in that we have to calibrate what we do to accord with reality,” notes Theodore Kinnaman, Philosophy Department chair. “We might offer courses and students don’t show up for them, and we need to make tough moves to close a course students aren’t signing up for. Dee is always very personable, and even when things were very difficult, she didn’t take them personally.”

Indeed, Holisky has shown a real gift for building respect among those with whom she has worked. Mentioning her name among her colleagues unavoidably results in a similar theme. “She’s very smart, she’s very fair, has a lot of integrity. She cuts through to the core issues on any matter,” says Deborah Kaplan, professor of English, who worked with Holisky in the English Department and in Holisky’s capacity as associate dean. “It’s one of the things I really love about her and about having worked with her. You weren’t always on the edges of the problem, you got right to it. She’s a very quick study and has a directness.”

Holisky’s work ethic is also a fundamental part of any conversation about her contributions to the college. Jack Censer, dean of the college, commends her hard work and conscientiousness. Censer relates that when he became dean in 2006, Holisky was the senior associate dean. She had set a date for leaving the dean’s office for one year in the future, but Censer dedicated himself to keeping her on board because of the “unbelievable amount of responsibility” she handled. “She did more to help us just by doing her job than most anybody else could do by actually trying
directly to help,” he observes. “In doing her job so incredibly well, everyone else could do theirs.”

Other colleagues note Holisky’s overall command of her role. Provost Peter Stearns sums it up: “I think she’s a consummate professional, she has tremendous mastery over detail, she is deeply concerned about advancing student welfare, and protecting the rights of the institution, she’s been the major force for a long time in helping to extend and define basic aspects of how we deal with students at all levels.”

Boehm-Davis is looking forward to continuing the college’s coordination of the work within the various departments and programs within the college, and she appreciates the goodwill that has been established, largely by Holisky’s contributions. As she began as associate dean in January, Boehm-Davis began visiting the departments, and she observed that “by and large, people are very happy with the college, which speaks to Dee’s work.” They are happy with how things are run, she notes, but they seem glad that “we haven’t over-bureaucratized things.”

Fortunately for the college, Holisky is not planning to go far. After some travel (at the time this article was being written, she was touring Japan), she will return to Mason teaching and researching as a faculty member in the English Department; her main focus will be research in linguistics. With her administrative duties accomplished, she looks forward to furthering this research: “I have one major project,” she explains. “When I was in Georgia last, I collected original texts from speakers of a dying language. My last major research project is to make those texts available on a website as original texts in Georgian, Batsbi, or English. It will hopefully be [done in] a lively and interactive way.”

Holisky interprets her field thusly: “Linguistics is a complicated discipline, but there are two basic things about it—lots of details and generalizing this detail. Sounds, words, phrases. You always have to see the big picture, and you always have to have a handle on the detail.” She herself observes, “that skill translates very well from linguistics to administration. How does it fit together to achieve your goals and accomplishments? Everything has to work together at all times.”
Creating Cultural Memories across the Americas

By Rashad Mulla, ’11

Tragic events have shaped the histories and cultures of many nations. Recently, interest has been growing to document, commemorate, and re-analyze those moments through some form of media or memorialization, bringing these events into the present for sobering discussion.

Two College of Humanities and Social Sciences students, Eleana Velasco and Katherine Pereira, spent a semester researching separate cultural memories in their native countries, Ecuador and Colombia, respectively. Both students partnered with faculty scholars as part of Mason’s Undergraduate Research Scholars Program.

Velasco, a senior majoring in Spanish and interested in Latin American studies, partnered with Lisa Rabin, a faculty member in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and a cultural studies expert, on the project, Ecuador’s Documentary Films: Uncovering the Past and Finding Identity in the Era of Globalization.

Pereira, a senior majoring in government and international politics with minors in Spanish and Latin American studies, collaborated with Ricardo Vivancos Perez, also a faculty member in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and an expert in Spanish and Latino studies, for the project, Creativity and Human Rights: The Parque Monumento Trujillo as a Site of Consciousness.

Although both projects focused on South American countries and forms of cultural memory, they were decidedly distinct. Velasco’s project dealt with the sudden increase in documentary film popularity in Ecuador, while Pereira analyzed a memorial site in Colombia.

In the 1990s, Ecuador’s documentary film industry produced a single digit total of works. But since 1997, that number has ballooned to 187. A self-proclaimed movie buff, Velasco sought the cause of the jolt.

“There is now a massive interest in Ecuadorian film in the country,” says Velasco. “So much so, the government has been supporting it since 2006. And we need our films to create a cinematic cultural memory of our country. We are writing our history through film.”

The current boom in the film industry is due in large part to the younger generation of Ecuadorians, says Velasco. Ever since the country’s political situation stabilized, younger artists have banded together to create documentaries to compete with Hollywood. The younger artists, many of whom Velasco knows personally, triggered some sort of cinematic Renaissance. Ecuador now boasts a thriving documentary film industry.

One film Velasco focused on was Ratas, Ratones, Rateros (Rats, Mice, Thieves), a critically acclaimed gritty portrayal of Ecuador’s criminal underbelly. Velasco discovered through interviews and articles that audiences appreciated the cold, hard reality depicted in the movie. With this in mind, she decided to document the reaction to With My Heart in Yambo, a story about a Colombian immigrant family whose two children, ages 14 and 17, were tortured and killed by Ecuadorian police. The victims’ sister produced the documentary. Velasco surveyed Ecuadorian residents to gauge their reaction of the film.

Parque Monumento Trujillo mural of Father Tibeiro Fernandez Maflan, the local Colombian priest and community leader who was a victim.
“These films are part of our history and a part of our mistakes, and relate to some things that have not been solved,” Velasco says. “With this research, I hope to get across the message that things have to change.”

This desire to highlight history and affect change is what connects Velasco and Pereira.

Tragedy struck Colombia, as well. Between 1988 and 1994, the Cali Cartel, Colombian paramilitaries, and active members of the country’s military and police murdered more than 300 people near the Cauca River, including a well-known priest and many innocent farmers.

Years later, a truth and reconciliation commission suggested that a monument be built to honor the victims of those horrible murders. The Parque Monumento Trujillo, which is near completion, will consist of a mausoleum where some of the victims’ remains are buried, a garden, a mural, and a special exhibit for the murdered priest.

“I’m trying to understand the concept of this memorial,” Pereira says. “I’m trying to figure out what makes this a site of consciousness. I want to narrow down how exactly this is a reparation for the victims’ families.”

Pereira used books, government and nonprofit reports, other memorial sites in neighboring countries, and a host of other materials to analyze the Trujillo monument. She capped off her research endeavor by traveling to Colombia during spring break, which ran from March 12 to 18, 2012. While there, she visited the monument and met with its creators. She presented her research in Bogota and Cali for Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, a local university.

“This is an amazing opportunity for her to do research on the site,” says Vivancos Perez. “This probably makes the difference in writing a great paper on the topic.”

Vivancos Perez says Pereira possesses uncanny research ability, drive, initiative, and a willingness to serve the public. He says that this project produced invaluable research for Mason and Latin America.

“For us at Mason, it is important because we are promoting critical thinking in an ethical way,” Vivancos Perez says. “We are privileged citizens of the world living here in the United States, so it is our responsibility to be committed to helping those less fortunate. Everyone has to help the way they can, and as educators, we can disseminate information about grave human rights conditions in Latin America.”

Rabin, Velasco’s mentor, believes the research into Ecuador’s film industry has shed some new light on the country’s ability to preserve its own history.

“Eleana has very fruitfully situated her work at the intersection of several prominent strands of inquiry in the humanities, including Latin American film production and the study of film reception,” Rabin says. “It is a fairly new impulse to see how films were and are received by fans and filmgoers, as opposed to a more common approach, which is movie analysis.”

Both Velasco and Pereira plan to pursue their passions into the future. Velasco would like to continue updating her study of Ecuadorian film, while Pereira is interested in a career in human rights advocacy.

“My background is what made me have a passion for stopping injustice. Why is it that we live here so comfortably while people in other countries suffer?”
ALUMNI RETURN TO CAMPUS

The College of Humanities and Social Sciences hosted two major alumni events this year.

On October 1, 2011, CHSS sponsored a beer-tasting event for more than 100 alumni and guests as part of Mason’s annual Alumni Weekend celebration. The event provided a casual venue to reconnect with friends and former classmates and network with other alumni. A variety of Dogfish Head beers were served alongside a tasting menu, and Dogfish Head representatives talked to the crowd about the brews. Jack Censer, dean of the college, was on hand to greet alumni and guests, and welcomed the audience with an update on the state of the college.

On January 21, 2012, the college hosted the sixth annual Dean’s Tailgate in the Mason Hall Atrium. More than 100 alumni and friends attended this family event with food, drinks, and entertainment from our very own cheerleaders, the Green Machine pep band, and GMMUnit, an a capella group. There was a variety of activities for children and adults, such as cornhole, darts, a kid’s coloring station, and a raffle drawing. Following the tailgate, the Patriots faced off against the Towson Tigers in a glorious 72-60 victory.

STUDENT EVENTS

THE 2012 UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM, MAY 1

Each spring, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences hosts the Undergraduate Research Symposium. This event, funded by the generous contributions of our donors, is a forum for undergraduate students to showcase their scholarship and creative activity. Following poster and oral presentations, faculty members select award winners in a number of categories.

THE 2012 FRESHMAN ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

For the third year in a row, the college is pleased to award scholarships to selected freshmen who excelled academically in their first semester at Mason. This special recognition program has become an important part of attracting and retaining the best and brightest students at Mason. We are grateful to the many donors to the Dean’s Scholarship Fund who make these awards possible each year. If you are interested in learning more about the Freshmen Achievement Awards, please visit chssundergrad.gmu.edu/freshman-academic-achievement/about.
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Submit your class notes to Mason Spirit, the university’s magazine, at spirit@gmu.edu. Please be sure to include your graduation year and degree.

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For more information, please visit chss.gmu.edu/alumni.

Save the Date for Alumni Weekend!
October 5-7 with a special event for CHSS alumni on October 6

Please visit chss.gmu.edu for updates on all our events.

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Looking for Class Notes?

Sadly, they will not appear in this issue of Cornerstone.
After much discussion, the editors of Cornerstone are asking alumni to direct their news to Mason Spirit. The university-wide magazine is published twice a year and received by all Mason alumni (140,000 and counting!).

We still want to know where you are now! Have you moved? Gotten married? Had a baby? Landed a new job? Connected with classmates? Please submit your latest news to spirit@gmu.edu and chsalumni@gmu.edu.

We want Cornerstone to inform our readers and feature the content you find most valuable. If that includes Class Notes, we would be thrilled to print them again. Our alumni are a diverse, fresh, and vibrant group who communicates with the college in a variety of ways. Follow Dean Censer on Twitter @jackatchss, become a fan of the college on Facebook, e-mail us at chsalumni@gmu.edu, or stop by an event.

Think of this as a way for us to get to know each other better and establish a richer relationship. We want to know what you have been up to, and we are opening the conversation with how we have been keeping busy.

The College of Humanities and Social Sciences is made up of 11 departments, 10 programs, two colleges, 18 research centers, and more than 8,000 students.

In fall 2011, the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities placed social sciences research at George Mason University 41st on the list. This prestigious and unbiased ranking demonstrates how faculty at Mason are addressing some of society’s most relevant needs. This ranking placed Mason ahead of Georgetown University, George Washington University, and exactly one notch above the university of Virginia.

Since the college’s establishment in 2007
• Four alumni of the year: Deborah Willis, PhD ’03; Robert Traynham, MAIS ’02; David Robarge, BA History ’77, MA ’82; and Tyler Cowen, BS Economics ’83
• 11 Fulbright Scholars
• 655 private support scholarships and fellowships awarded to students
• A 56 percent increase in gifts to the college and a 20 percent increase in alumni participation
• 77 faculty members awarded tenure
• In the 2010–11 fiscal year, the college received $24 million in federally funded research grants, which represents a 25 percent increase over the previous year.
• In the 2010–11 academic year, the college conferred more degrees than ever in its history: 1,890 bachelor’s, 467 master’s, and 67 doctorates for a total of 2,424 new alumni!

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Laura Ellen Scott, MFA ’93, is a writer and teacher who divides her time between Fairfax, Virginia, and Great Cacapon, West Virginia. Her collection of very short, creepy fiction, Curio, is available from Uncanny Valley Press. This excerpt comes from Scott’s debut novel, Death Wishing, a comic fantasy set in New Orleans, published by Ig Publishing in October 2011.

AN EXCERPT FROM LAURA ELLEN SCOTT’S DEBUT NOVEL
DEATH WISHING

The night that cats were wished away was a hard one full of wine, tears, and spectacle. Even those of us who were indifferent to feline companionship felt heartbroken for those who weren’t, and together our humid, grieving silence was more tangible than the awe-filled silence that followed the disappearance of cancer. We were united by this particular loss. Despite the media promise that scientists were hard at work trying to re-engineer the common house cat, my beautiful neighbor Pebbles had lost her faith, burning all of her leopard spotted, tiger striped panties and bras in a small, neat fire out on the banquette in front of our building on Esplanade.

The flame-crumpled rayon impressed me enough that I drained a bottle of cabernet in tribute. We lived in a community on the fringe of the French Quarter called Faubourg Marigny where I worked in my son’s vintage clothing shop as a cape and corset cleaner. Thus, my interest in Pebbles’ underthings was mostly professional.

She stood over the ashes of her underwear and cried, and my respect for the phenomenon of Death Wishing deepened. They say wishing started when some Army PR flak declared on his deathbed that there were alien bodies at Roswell back in ’47. “Hunners of them,” he swore. There weren’t any aliens, of course, but the man said his piece and expired, and then all of a sudden there were. Rows and rows of dusty bodies, stacked up on shelves in a shed in the desert. This occurred a couple of years ago.

Pebbles’ fire had melted already. She deserved better—antique lace, satin, velvet trim. Especially if she was going to burn the stuff. She made me crazy with her red hair and baby fat, and they way she smelled like Lisa, the hand soap they put in Quarter hotels. But I was far too old and fat for her. Hell, my son was too old for her, too, but I held the minority opinion on that.

She sniffled in my direction. I maintained a respectful distance.

She asked, “Is Val coming out?”

It’s two for flinching, so I didn’t. “I think he has a date.”

It no longer burned me that she had a thing for my son Val. I was quite comfortable dividing my fantasy from reality, and to a certain degree I preferred my love life to be all my own, compartmentalized, unrequited, and unspoiled. I had been married long enough, then divorced long enough, to appreciate the benefits of a purely invented reality.

But human invention has its limits.

Upon dissection we learned that every detail of alien physiognomy had already been imagined by scientists, artists, writers, etc. It was all very exciting, but ultimately there was nothing to be learned from hundreds of copies of an all too generalized ideal. The aliens didn’t come from anywhere, and they couldn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know. They were the perfect ambassadors of our limits.

“There he is,” said Pebbles, sounding brighter, breaking my heart again. My son had rounded the corner, deepening his lazy stride once he spotted us. All Pebbles could see was the swinging black hair, scuffed boots, stained T-shirt and jeans—he went for that semi-retired rock star look. All I could see was how much he looked like his mother, Brenda. She and I lived a thousand miles away from each other, but Val was her easy surrogate.

He smiled, approached slow, then gathered Pebbles into his arms and encouraged her to “Let it all out, sugar.” No respectful distance there. I despaired and left them to it.

More wine was needed. I threaded my way toward Chartres, stayed off Decatur where most folks were milling about, zombied by sadness. It was a sharp night made acrid from little saucers of untouched meat and milk left on stoops. Hopeful. Desperate. Maybe they’d come back.

Little bowls of ground fish. Water pans with specks floating on top. I’d taken the route to avoid humanity, but this was worse. The echo and rattle of the night. Doors and trash bins slamming, high heeled clatter on the bricks, and then the two note cry of a woman as she called out: “Loooo-Laahh.”

I did not know Lola, but I worried for her all the same.