Summer Course Explores New York City through Walt Whitman's Eyes and Poems

By Jo Kaidelcek

To one can accuse poet and English instructor Karen Karbiener of lacking passion. While she was finishing her English degree in Manhattan College, Karbiener, GSAS ‘01, loved discussing the “great books” with her students of “Masterpieces of Western Literature and Philosophy,” part of Columbia’s core curriculum. That same enthusiasm earned her a teaching position at Colby College in Maine this past year, and there, Karbiener took her excitement to the airwaves in a weekly two-hour radio show called “The West End” on WMBR, central Maine’s only alternative radio station. The popular show included the “Sock Puppet Poetry Reading Series,” which encouraged students and staff to make public their love of poetry.

But it is the summer course she teaches at Columbia that has really captured Karbiener’s heart. Because she grew up in Brooklyn and Queens, she has always been fond of the city. She took her excitement for the city with her for many summers to come.

“Whitman was inspired by the city itself,” Karbiener says. “He rode the ferries and omnibuses and walked up Broadway,” Karbiener says. “He knew what the sounds and lights of New York City were like. He knew the sounds that still frighten or disgust tourists are still oddly cherished by New Yorkers like me. Walt was the first one of us to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge and stops half way for a poetry reading over the East river, paying tribute to the river Whitman ferried across every day to work in Manhattan. Next, they tour historic lower Manhattan and ride the Staten Island Ferry, all of effort, Karbiener says, “to capture the spirit of where Whitman was.”

“In the interview Insdorf said—”

“When we read a line by Whitman that detailed the feel of the water droplets on his face as he rode the Staten Island Ferry,” says Vicky Poumpouridis, CC ’03, “who took the class last summer, I was just filled with sensation, because we were reading the poem while riding the ferry ourselves. When we read extensively about the feel of the cobblestones embedded in the ground, we knew about that, too, because we had toured Brooklyn Heights and walked across a preserved street that was still lined with cobblestones.”

A third trip takes the class to the South Street Seaport and a visit to Bow and Company Print Shop where every member of the class works on the type of where “Whitman himself had as he wrote line after line,” says Poumpouridis. “His words simply came off the page. All this, thanks to Karen and her ability to breathe life into words on a page.”

“Frankenstein” will be published by Fine Creative Media. And a long-term project she is particularly enthusiastic about, “The Encyclopedia of American Counterculture,” will be published by Miramax/Hyperion. As the project’s general editor and creative visionary, she hopes that the two-volumes catalog of people, movements, and events will establish a “tradition” of American radicalism that runs more deeply and consistently through our culture than is conventionally supposed.

For the next few months, Karbiener is right where she wants to be doing what she loves. “Whitman captured a timeless ‘New York’ spirit in today’s city that I really feel, and that I hope to communicate to my students,” she says, thinking of the ferry trip. “A trip to Whitman’s Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” as a way to introduce new students to his talents and free spirit.”

Karen Karbiener, far left, with her class of Whitman students last summer.

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