An Interview with Jocelyn Wilk, A Keeper of Columbia's Culture

By Jo Kaaljev

Jocelyn Wilk, 28, has worked at the University Archives and Columbia Bibliana (UAC) since May 1999 and two months later was promoted to assistant director of the UAC. That move came with a challenge: archiving director Marilyn H. Petitti and two other staff members regularly roamed the site of the original architecture library in 210 Low Library when UAC was housed. She also helps maintain and provide access to records and memorabilia relevant to the history of Columbia. The Columbia Record caught up with Wilk on the balcony bookshelf to talk with her about the work she and her colleagues do.

CR: As an archivist, you walk into history everyday. But it seems like most people in their twenties have chosen high-tech, dot-com-type careers of the future. What made you decide to immerse yourself in a vocation that people learning in the state of New York Urban League Volunteer Honored in Low Library Rotunda

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Archivist Jocelyn Wilk at her office in 210 Low Library.

CR: Columbia was founded in 1754 as King’s College and is the oldest institution of higher learning in the state of New York and the fifth oldest in the U.S. That must make your job at the Archives and Columbia Bibliana rather unique.

JWT: It does, especially because we document, preserve and provide access to records, photographs and other historic materials relating to the entire history of the university. Columbia has several special collections and archives around campus; this specific collection at the UAC only contains materials pertaining to the history of the university. Additionally, we maintain the King’s College Library in Music Room with items—paintings, furniture, printed works dating back to the first two days of the college in 1754. We encourage people to come and visit us on the days we are open to the public. We also have everything from old college bulletins, printed matter, directories, correspondence files from the president’s office—minutes going all the way back to the 1700s. For various Columbia publications, clippings, you name it. Because we have the longest of our staff, I guess I’m considered the reference expert, so I tend to answer lots of reference requests.

CR: With so many works, files, documents, photographs, and resources spanning so many years, you probably get a lot of questions from a lot of people, even if non-Columbians?

JWT: Right. I wouldn’t be surprised if I’ve answered nearly a thousand questions alone since I’ve been here. Some take a few seconds to answer, others a week or two. We average 120 requests a month in the form of e-mails, letters placed on the walk in visitors and they come from as far away as China, Australi, Europe as close as the office door next. And all types of people contact us both from the university, looking for anything from information about the buildings you attended in 1910 to specific photographs for a documentarian film. What kind of research Columbia conducted during World War II, or the history of a named professorship. Once we even had representatives from DreamWorks come research images of Columbia during a certain era to use for costume and set design for their upcoming movie, “The Time Machine.”

CR: It sounds like you’re a bit of a ‘history detective’ answering with a variety of questions. What else do you do with these materials when you don’t have a break from the questions?

JWT: It’s not just all reference work. I also go through unorganized boxes and files of documents, clippings, announcements, that sort of thing and process them, deciding what’s worthy of being kept, and how best to organize it for future researchers. As we organize the materials, we also use basic preservation techniques, placing items in acid free folders and boxes, copying fragile items onto acid free paper, placing others into similar sleeves, so they’ll be in a stable environment. Ultimately we create finding aids so researchers can find out where the staff can know where things are, basic information about a specific collection and how to get to them. For instance, a colleague recently revived and organized a huge, disparate collection of materials into what now comprises our 1960s and 1970s protest and activist collection. It is so much easier to use those resources now. The goal is make the information we have as accessible as possible and to make sure people know about at least some of the really cool and interesting stuff we have.

CR: Being surrounded by all of this “cool and interesting” old stuff, do you have a favorite part of the Bibliana collection?

JWT: (laughs) It’s a tough question because I deal with so much. But coming across the oldest materials is definitely the most interesting for me. It’s very exciting to touch these old elegant diners, to answer, for example, knowing that more likely than not people have not seen or touched these in a really long time. Another gratifying part of the job is helping people find out what they’re looking for. We want people to use these materials. And find answers to their questions. It’s like a big treasure hunt.

The UCAL is currently open to the public—anyone with a legitimate question— from 9:30am to 4:30pm, Monday to Friday. Although we’re open and touring the materials, some of the things we have here are very sensitive, so we have to be very careful about who we allow into the area and what they can do. Our policy is that if you are over 18 and have a photo ID, we can allow you in for a viewing. Also, if you plan to make any collections, you have to fill out a form and answer some questions. It’s like a big treasure hunt.

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A New York Times article on new security measures under discussion by the Times Square Business Improvement District, quoted UAC director Richard Breault, vice dean of the Law School, as saying, “They are obviously trying to have a more controlled environment, to bring the security you get in that setting into the community and get a public setting. There’s nothing wrong with beginning that process.” He said there was a danger that the district could go too far.

A recent Newsday article profiled the progressive and unconventional programming that George Steel, executive director of Miller Theatre, has brought to the University. The story says that Steel’s pursuits, which “fly in the face of convention,” have helped him transform a small uptown academic auditorium into a cutting-edge center of musical ferment.

Wallace Ford, professor in the School of International and Public Affairs was quoted in a recent New York Times article that about Phillips, AOL Time Warner’s new chief executive. Ford said that Parsons is the right man for the job during a crucial time: “He is like Kubla Khan coming in to run the empire after Alexander the Great has conquered all the territory.”

A New York Times article appearing next week will include photos and quotes from an interview with New York’s confident new mayor, Mike Bloomberg. Picks, professor of political science, who warns, “What’s going through, he’s never gone through before. He hasn’t been in the game.” The article does note that Bloomberg, who worked for Hugh Carey when he was Governor of New York State, is “both surprised and honored” by the selection to the fiscal problems he faces.

In a USA Today article focusing on a two-month study of the mid-Atlantic states, Lamont-Doherty said, “We found more hydrothermal activity on this cruise than in 20 years of exploration on the mid-Atlantic Ridge.”

Edmund Phelps, McCracken Professor of Economics, was quoted in a recent New York Times article on economic strategies in a new article. According to article, Phelps said, “It’s strange to be talking about the idea that because it’s so late, there are signs now that gross domestic product is about to turn around.”

Fewer companies are considering possible stimulus packages according to the New York Times, and many are turning to other business schools to recruit students, according to the New York Times, to “both surprised and honored” by the selection to the fiscal problems he faces.

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