Profiles of the Graduates

Socially Conscious Mailman Graduate Will Continue Health Outreach

Rosario Arreola’s commitment to improving the lives of others began long before she entered the Mailman School of Public Health, from which she will receive an MPH degree in the Department of Sociomedical Sciences this May. If anything, her zeal and enthusiasm have only grown stronger during her studies there.

Before coming to the Mailman School, Arreola helped bring services to poor Latino communities in California. She worked with a number of groups, including Vida Con Esperanza Latina, a breast cancer support group, the only one of its kind in Southern Alameda county, and an immunization outreach and education program that helped to increase immunizations among Chicano communities. Arreola, who obtained a bachelor’s degree in cell biology at the University of California at Berkeley, also helped to establish the first Promotoras de Salud program, whose goal is to educate Latinos in family health.

While at Mailman, Arreola’s sense of commitment to helping impoverished communities took on international proportions. She traveled to Brazil to perform with the Zalcoatl Ixachitlan Aztec Dance Group, a dance troupe that seeks to preserve the culture and identity of New York’s fast-growing Mexican immigrant population.

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Columbia's President Embraces Public Service

P ublic service defines Miklos Vasarhelyi's undergraduate career. He is graduating from Columbia College with a major in East Asian Languages and Culture and a concentration in economics. He is the current president of the Columbia College Student Council and was vice president of the class of 2004. Vasarhelyi also taught nonviolent conflict resolution to fifth-graders and has been a campus tour guide and hosted prospective students for three years.

Vasarhelyi grew up in Manhattan and attended Collegiate High School before coming to Columbia. His interest in East Asia stems in part from his family—his mother is Chinese and his father Hungarian—as well as from a year of studying and living with a family in Beijing. He founded the Hapa Club (hapa is a Hawaiian word meaning a person of partial or mixed Asian ethnicity). The club has two goals: to build a Hapa community that could address its unique issues, and to educate the larger community.

In the student council, Vasarhelyi worked to uncover student needs and negotiate changes with administrators. He’s addressed such issues as housing, dining, health services, financial aid and academics. Vasarhelyi has seen firsthand the impact of the annual Senior Fund. He expects to reach the goal of 75 percent participation.

"I’m really sad about graduating. I’ve loved the people, the academics, the way the city is very open and accepting. I wish I could have another year," said Vasarhelyi. "Columbia’s given so much to me, I wanted to give something back."

He will start work as a business analyst and strategic consultant with Deloitte Consulting in the fall.

Surviving to Write, Writing to Survive

W hen Karen Smith Vastola finished her undergraduate thesis, Homebrew, a play about a dysfunctional alcoholic family, at the ripe age of 27, she was convinced that she had written a great play and that it wouldn’t be long before she was discovered. But the agents didn’t pounce, and the directors didn’t bite. A bit deterred but still determined, Vastola continued writing and working on Homebrew, while trying to start a family. Several years later, in 1993, Vastola finally landed a reading at the NY MCC Theatre. But in the play’s postmortem, a director questioned her commitment to theater. "I felt crushed and turned off to the whole idea of playwriting," she said. "I remember thinking to myself that this was what I really wanted, but life doesn’t always work out as you want it to."

Indeed, for a while, Vastola’s life took a turn for the worse. Shortly after adopting her son James, Vastola was diagnosed with colon cancer. Her family had a history of cancer, but for years Vastola had avoided being tested. But then in the spirit of denial, Vastola landed the right to control her life. After defeating cancer and living for four years from test to test expecting a recurrence, Vastola decided that her life would be dedicated to caring for her family and writing. In 2000, Vastola decided to do an old copy of Homebrew and sent it with her application to Columbia’s School of the Arts. Vastola has polished her writing skills and will graduate with her MFA this May. Utilizing her wealth of life experience, Vastola’s work has matured, enabling her to write and produce a number of new plays, one of which was recently selected for a reading at the Rattlestick Theater Festival.

Writing teachers often tell their students to write about what they know, and Vastola has done that in her thesis play, Eggs and Apples. It’s about the intricacies of truth and denial.

Model Turns to Literature, Economics

B een in Bratislava, Slovakia, Katarina Maxianova’s first extended piece of writing in English was for her application to Columbia. She is in a five-year program, combining comparative literature, in which she has a bachelor’s degree from the School of General Studies, and international affairs, in which she will receive an M.A. from SIPA next year. She is General Studies’ valedictorian. In literature, Maxianova concentrated on post-colonial literature. At SIPA, she has specialized in economic policy, Maxianova spent recent summers in internships with the Slovakian government and the World Bank.

Maxianova, 26, left home at 16 to become a fashion model with the Elite and IMG agencies after a friend encouraged her to enter a modeling competition. Two years later, she moved permanently to the United States and modeled for another four years before returning to school.

“I had always wanted to go to Columbia,” said Maxianova. “I didn’t want to leave New York. When you are a model, you travel so much. I was kind of scared to settle down. I couldn’t think of any other place I could stay and not feel trapped. In New York, you can be in one place and feel like you’re everywhere.”

Growing up in Slovakia when it was still a communist state, Maxianova used to look out her window to see an Austrian village on the other side of a fence. “We used to say, ‘Oh, that’s in Austria—over there,’” she recalls. Maxianova is committed to going back to Slovakia in a time of rapid change.

GSAS Grad Sees Literature as Political

R oosevelt Montas, a native of the Dominican Republic, moved to the United States as a teenager, but it wasn’t until he entered Columbia College in 1991 that his plunge into the English language began to shape the way he sees the world. Now, more than a dozen years later, he will receive his doctoral degree in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and is already several steps into a distinguished career as a teacher and scholar.

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