New Campaign Website Offers Journalists a Mirror and Voters a Backstage Pass

BY ELLEN S. SMITH

New York Yankee superstar Derek Jeter teamed up with Fleet Bank to play one of Santa’s elves on Dec. 18, when he distributed gifts to patients at the Children’s Hospital of New York-Prebyterian. Among the kids who received toys during the surprise holiday visit were Zonique Michael, left, and Gabrielle Avedero.

The Lifelong Learner Program Stresses Hungry Minds

BY CAROLINE LAHDIANI

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irement, for some, is a chance to escape the rat race and slow down. But for others, like 84-year-old G. Patricia Abramson, it’s time to “keep the brain cells moving and keep learning.”

Abramson is a “Lifelong Learner” in the School of Continuing and University Education. “At the same time, it’s all because of reading.” Abramson added that for retired reporters, anyone can access the site and track the Web staff’s daily criticism or praise of favorite news sources.

For the media, self-examination of election coverage may come after the election is over, “and then we resolve to do a better job for next time,” said Journalism School Dean Nicholas Lemann in a message on The Campaign Desk Web site. “But now we have a new tool,” he writes. “In 2004, the race makes everyone possible—lyze and criticize press coverage in real time, so that suggestions for improvement can actually be heeded, and incorporated into campaign coverage, while the journalists campaign is still under way.”

The Campaign Desk’s managing editor, Steve Lovelady, a former managing editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, is pleased with initial responses from voters to the site. “We’re getting dozens of e-mails, ranging from ‘At last!’ to ‘Hallelujah!’ to ‘I love it!’ to ‘Thank you so much!’”

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The Governor again staked a claim to environmental leadership, calling for a Hudson River so clean that the boilers could swim and ended a new urban forestry initiative and five new state parks. At the federal level, President Bush gave his State of the Union address on Jan. 20. Considering the look of a re-election year, these include an omnibus appropriations bill and a number of major new packages to be worked on such as the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Given the budget deficit, the outlook for discretionary spending—including for many of the programs important to research universities—will also be uncertain at best. Still left to be considered for a final vote are a number of annual funding bills that include funds for NIH, CDC, student aid and NASA. Even though the fiscal year started Oct. 1, few of these agencies continued functioning with a continuing resolution.

The Governor also announced that he intends to expand investments in the state’s high-technology Centers of Excellence Program, to provide funds for biotechnology facilities construction as well as the high-technology council of academic and business leaders. The council is to be chaired by Trustee Harold Varmus, president of Memorial Sloan-Kettering.

Citing a dire need for change, the Governor is planning on augmenting K-12 education. Revisions to Medicaid will also be among his major initiatives for the year. Patasi also plans to reintroduce a Power for Jobs program.

The Lifelong Learners program offers retirees a chance to take courses at Columbia at a discounted price, to attend special lectures, to visit renowned faculty, and to have full access to university facilities, from the library to the computer laboratories to the swimming pool.

“You’ve got to keep moving—not just your body but your mind,” said Abramson, who retired in 1989 as assistant managing editor of The New York Times. “I keep up with the news by phone Co. about two decades ago.”

Lifelong Learners may enroll in up to two Columbia courses as an auditor, a silent observer in the classroom. Auditors are not graded but are encouraged to attend class and keep up with reading assignments. Some instructors allow auditors to participate in class discussions.

Daphne Estwick, the assistant dean in charge of the program, explained that Lifelong Learners are eligible to attend special lectures and current courses at Columbia except for language, seminars, laboratory science classes, and those above the first-year graduate level.

“Most tailor their coursework according to their interests,” said Estwick. “Courses that relate to personal experience or current events are the most popular.”

Besides providing the chance to re-immerse in classwork, many degree candidates from Columbia and Barnard, the program offers a special series of weekly faculty lectures designated specifically for the Lifelong Learner community. The Faculty Lecture Series takes place on the Morningside Heights campus on Friday mornings from 10 a.m. to noon.

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—G. Patricia Abramson

Among this spring’s featured faculty is Joseph C. Hough Jr.; both Bruce Robbins and Frances Nezon-Muntaner of the department of English and comparative literature; and Brendan O’Flaherty of the department of economics, among many others.

Past lectures have included “Women and Islam in an Islamic Republic and Elsewhere, Too,” with Nezir Yavari of the department of religion; “German-Jewish Refugees at Columbia During the 1940s” with Professor Mark Anderson of the department of Germanic languages and literatures; “The Changing Nature of the American Metropolis” with Elliott Socol of the School of Architecture; and “The Evolution of U.S. Policy in the Persian Gulf” with Gary Sic of the School of International and Public Affairs.

“Lifelong Learners can provide a focus for intellectually oriented retirees,” said Frank Wolf, dean of the School of Continuing Education. “At the same time, the program is another way the University is opening its doors to its neighbors.”

Wolf added that for retired Columbia officers and their spouses, the program is fully covered by tuition exemption.

“I’m lucky,” said Abramson, as she continues her studies as a Lifelong Learner. She has lived in close proximity to Columbia, right across the street, for the past 50 years. She said she is thankful for life circumstances that allow her to take advantage of opportunities that come her way, such as continuing her education.

Her apartment is lined with bookshelves. And between the books are photo albums documenting her own book-inspired travels. In the late 1980s after reading The Silk Road, she learned that the ancient Karakoram Highway silk route had opened for travelers.

“I had to go,” she said. “I read a book, and I think—I could go there. It’s all because of reading.”

To learn more about the Lifelong Learners program, visit www.columbia.edu/auditng/lifelon glearners.cfm.