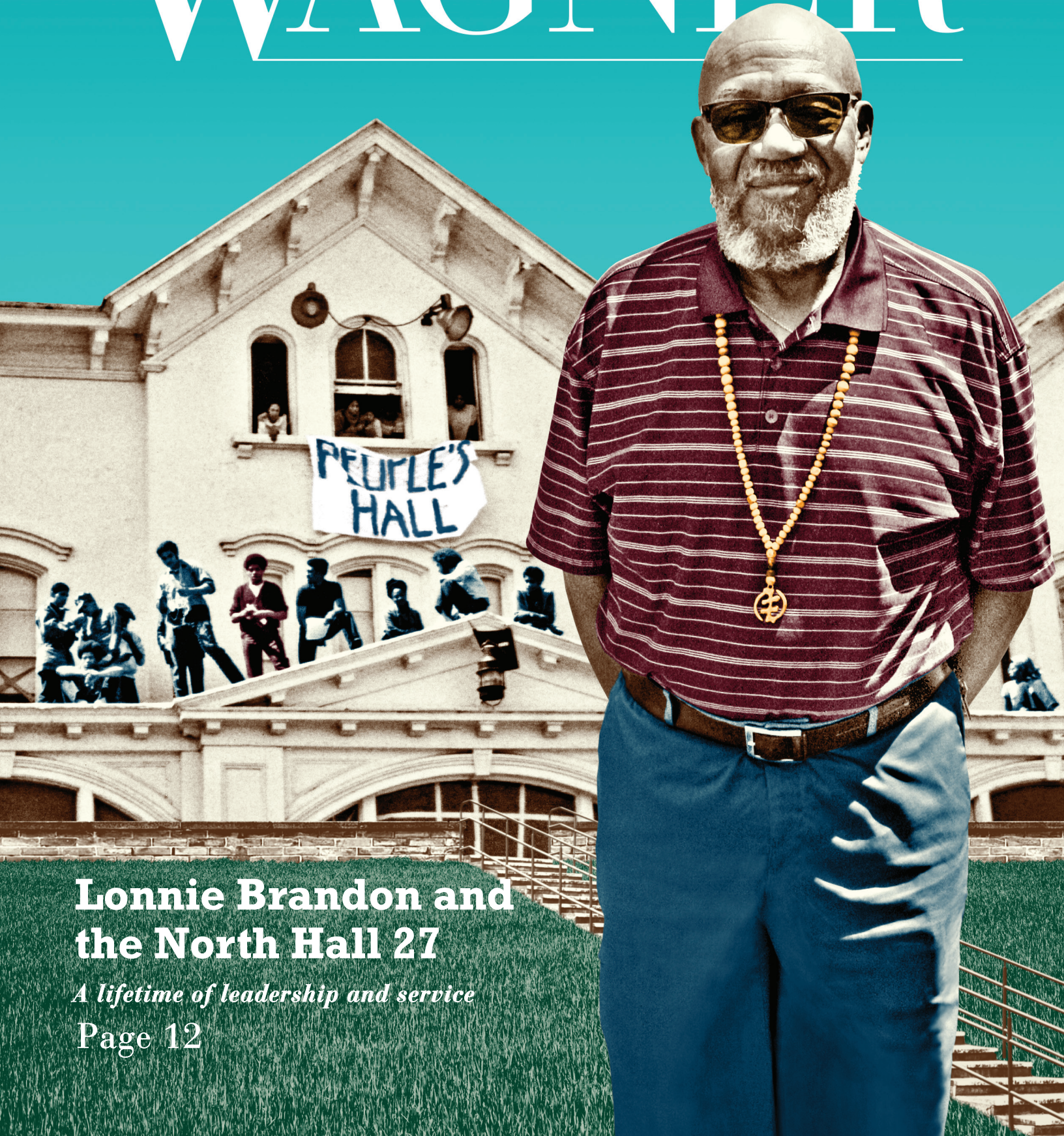


FALL 2021

THE LINK FOR ALUMNI AND FRIENDS

# WAGNER



## **Lonnie Brandon and the North Hall 27**

*A lifetime of leadership and service*

Page 12

# Contents

Wagner Magazine Fall 2021

VOL. 17, NO. 2

## DEPARTMENTS

- 2 **From the President**
- 3 **From the Editor**
- 4 **From our Readers**
- 5 **Upon the Hill**
- 29 **Alumni Link**
- 35 **Class Notes**
- 42 **In Memoriam**



Linpaul Rodney '21 plays trombone for the Wagner College Seahawk Marching Band in March during a home football game against Duquesne University. The football season was rescheduled for the spring due to the pandemic. Jose Luis Diaz Jr. M'20, director of bands, collaborated with Sacred Heart University's director of performing arts, Keith Johnston, to design the mask and bell cover used by the band during practices and performances.



## FEATURES

# 12

### **LONNIE BRANDON & THE NORTH HALL 27**

In 1970, a group of Black students risked their college careers to help Wagner become a more equitable place for all of us. Here's what happened.

# 22

### **BACK TO BUSINESS**

Three Seahawk business leaders in the banking, legal and shipping industries tell us about their Covid "new normal."

# 24

### **TRUE HERITAGE**

History professor Rita Reynolds' life's work documents the lives of wealthy, free Black families in the pre-Civil War South. One of them was her own.

# From the President

## Dear Friends,

ACROSS 138 YEARS, Wagner College has witnessed and participated in some of the most influential moments of American and global history. Through it all, no matter the challenges of the era, we have attracted talented youths and launched them into meaningful and successful lives. And now we are undertaking the earnest work of renewing our campus in deep ways to meet the challenges of today to better serve the students of tomorrow.

In this issue of Wagner Magazine, you will meet the descendants of a great Wagner president, Clarence Stoughton. He helped steer Wagner through the Depression and World War II while also transforming the college in 1943 from a purely liberal arts school into an institution of higher education that unites the liberal arts and strong professional programs. This combination remains a powerful differentiator of Wagner.

You'll meet some of the students who sought to transform Wagner College through their witness and activism. The story focuses on Lonnie Brandon '78, a leader of the 1970 Cunard Hall occupation, who reflected with us on those events from the vantage point of half a century later.

As this issue goes to press, the historic building at the center of the 1970 protest is being renovated. This is a harbinger of much more work we are planning to undertake in the next few years to renew our residence halls and academic facilities.

Simultaneously, new curricular offerings are being developed in the health sciences and business, with leadership from our faculty, spearheaded by Dean Pat Tooker of the Spiro School of Nursing, Physician Assistant Program



Director Tracy Jackson and Dean Aarti Ivanic of the Nicolais School of Business. A new provost to be hired this year will support all of these efforts and partner with the faculty to renew our undergraduate curriculum to ensure that our students are ready to compete and contribute to society after graduation.

Thanks to our outgoing provost, Dr. Jeffrey Kraus, who is returning to our Department of Government and Politics. After serving for many years as associate and vice provost, Jeffrey stepped up to lead the faculty in 2018 following the departure of Lily McNair. Jeffrey made many valuable contributions to our mission, culminating his tenure by presiding over five in-person commencement ceremonies on the Oval this past May.

In addition to the three graduation ceremonies we held for the Class of 2021, we held two for the Class of 2020, fulfilling a promise I made to the class whose graduation was disrupted by the pandemic. These ceremonies were cathartic and joyous for everyone involved. Those able to attend relished the sheer pleasure of being together in person on the Oval, which remains the timeless heart of our ever-changing campus.

We hope to see you there soon!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joel Martin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joel Martin  
President

## From the Editor

I've known Lonnie Brandon, the subject of our cover story, for quite a while — and if ever there was a born leader, it's him.

In 1970, Lonnie was the president of Black Concern, a group advocating for the interests of Black Wagner students at a time when they represented just 4 percent of the student body.

Overwhelmingly White institutions like Wagner College, no matter how much goodwill they brought to the table, had a very hard time thinking differently about their campus cultures after nearly a century of serving just one community — which made life for minority students just that much harder.

It shouldn't have been any surprise, then, when members of Black Concern occupied Cunard Hall in 1970, pressing Wagner College to become a more welcoming, open institution.

I first met Lonnie in 2010, when he was organizing a 40th anniversary seminar on the Cunard occupation.

As the college historian, I wanted to make sure he had access to everything we had — and I wanted to learn more from him about that crucial event in Wagner history. In the process, I discovered the importance of telling the story of what those students did, the consequences they faced, and the fruit their actions bore.

Those young men and women put their college careers and their futures on

the line to make Wagner a better, more accessible, more diverse place for all of us. Their story is an important alumni story — an important Wagner story. And when the 50th anniversary of the occupation arrived last year, I knew it was time to tell that story.

I have to thank Lonnie for his patience and generosity during the research and interview process for our cover story. We spent hours on the interview itself, and we exchanged innumerable emails and text messages afterward, making sure we'd gotten it right.

And then, when we'd finished the primary account, my publisher and I realized it would have to be edited way, way down — which is where Stephanie Siek came in.

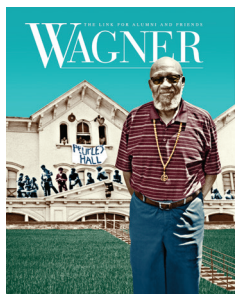
A member of the National Association of Black Journalists, Stephanie is a freelance writer and editor with an extraordinary résumé. Since graduating from Ohio University in 2003, she's worked on the editorial staff at the Boston Globe, Der Spiegel, Deutsche Welle, CNN, the Associated Press, the New York Times and MSNBC.

Stephanie's grasp of the story was incredible, and her talent at recrafting big chunks of background without losing their significance was invaluable.

Enjoy!

*Lee Manchester*

Editor, Wagner Magazine



### On the Cover

*Lonnie Brandon '78, at his Atlantic City home last year, with a photo of the occupation of Cunard Hall taken on April 17, 1970, by Christoph Lindner '73. Lonnie is one of the students standing on the Cunard porch roof, wearing a V-neck sweater with a white T-shirt.*

DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION: RYAN OLBRYSH

PUBLISHER  
*Jonathan Harkel*

EDITOR  
*Lee Manchester*

GRAPHIC DESIGN  
*Black Bear Design*

WRITERS  
*Jonathan Harkel*  
*Lee Manchester*  
*Stephanie Siek*

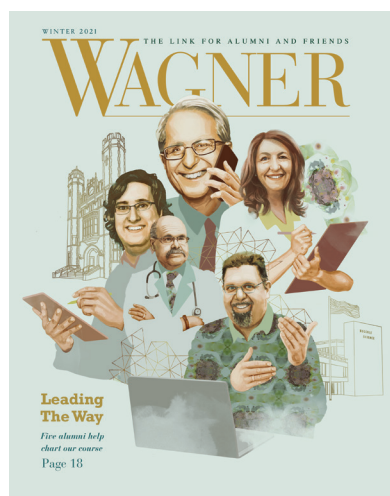
PHOTOGRAPHERS  
*Vinnie Amesse*  
*Nicolina Astorina*  
*Katrina S. Crawford*  
*Deborah Feingold*  
*Kellen Gaughan '19*  
*Jonah Hale '19*  
*Jonathan Harkel*  
*Seth Jolles '22*  
*Jason Jones*  
*Benjamin Koben*  
*Larry Levanti*  
*Christoph Lindner '73*  
*Lee Manchester*  
*Anna Mulé*  
*Frank Rogozienski*  
*Max Rottenecker M'18*

ILLUSTRATOR  
*Matthew Cook / Mendola Artists*  
*Ryan Olbrysh / Mendola Artists*

*Wagner Magazine:*  
*The Link for Alumni and Friends*  
*is published twice a year by Wagner's*  
*Office of Communications and Marketing*

Wagner Magazine  
Wagner College  
One Campus Road  
Staten Island, NY 10301  
718-420-4504  
lee.manchester@wagner.edu  
wagner.edu/wagnermagazine

# From Our Readers



**This issue's letters offered kind words for our new editor, and congratulations on the previous issue of Wagner Magazine.**

Today's mail brought the latest issue of Wagner Magazine, and I just had to reach out. Bravo for a wonderful issue! I couldn't stop myself from reading it. Keep up the good work and stay Wagner Strong!

*Dr. Aletta Kipp Diamond*  
*'65 H'15*

*Trustee*

Congratulations, Lee Manchester, on being appointed as editor of the magazine. That is a big job, but your experience and loyalty to the college are outstanding and will be a huge asset to your readers. I wish you much success.

*Margaret-Anne Milne*

*Margaret-Anne is the great-great-granddaughter of John George Wagner, the college's founding benefactor*

I wanted to let you know how impressed I was with the Winter 2021 edition of Wagner Magazine. It is a fabulous link for alumni and friends, and you are off to a terrific start as editor, Lee! Thanks so much for all you do for Wagner College.

*Anita Sabatino '69*

*Trustee*

Excellent issue, Lee. The magazine is obviously in good hands. I hope you had great fun making it happen.

I recently responded to a Wagner alumni survey by suggesting more issues of the

magazine. This implies more staff and more budget, of course, but I believe it's a crucial enterprise.

Staten Island alumni get to read about Wagner on a regular basis in the local paper — but for the rest of us, the magazine is the primary “reinforcement mechanism.” I continue to believe it's the #1 forum for keeping alumni connected.

*Russ Johnson '67 M'72*

*Russ was Wagner College's vice president for development in the late 1970s*

Just received our copy of Wagner Magazine. Boy, lots of good things happening. Enjoyed very much — but sad to see so many friends have passed on. One consolation: they would be proud of and delighted by Wagner 2021.

Thanks for all you do for Wagner.

*Frank Young*

*Frank was Wagner College's vice president for institutional advancement in the 2010s*

**WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU** We welcome letters from readers. Letters should refer to material published in the magazine and include the writer's full name, address and telephone number. The editor reserves the right to determine the suitability of letters for publication and to edit them for accuracy and length.

Lee Manchester, Editor  
Office of Communications, Wagner College  
One Campus Road, Staten Island, NY 10301  
lee.manchester@wagner.edu



# Upon the Hill

*Learning, teaching, giving and achieving on Grymes Hill and beyond*

## New Dean Named for Business School

**Wagner College welcomes Aarti Ivanic, Ph.D., the new dean of our Nicolais School of Business, to Grymes Hill**

IVANIC, THE FORMER ACADEMIC DIRECTOR of MBA programs at the University of San Diego School of Business, had been a professor at USD since 2020. She earned her doctorate in marketing from the University of Southern California and her master's and bachelor's degrees from Purdue University.

"Dr. Ivanic is a perfect fit for Wagner College and the Nicolais School of Business," said President Joel W. Martin. "She is a builder and a collaborator with great insight into the future of business education. As we develop high-impact programs that will attract

students from around the world, I can't imagine a better leader and community partner."

Joan Nicolais, chair of our board of trustees, said, "Her education in economics, business management and applied statistics at Purdue, along with her consulting experience at Booz Allen, have clearly trained her to be business-minded, execution-oriented and a strategic thinker. She has her pulse on the skills the marketplace is demanding today so that we can refresh our curriculum and internships to support our business students for the future." ■



*"Dr. Ivanic is a perfect fit for Wagner College and the Nicolais School of Business," said President Joel W. Martin.*



## Top Scholar — and Top Athlete

**Tiffany Hanna, an international student from the Bahamas, graduated summa cum laude this year with a very rare achievement**



FIRST, AT HER COMMENCEMENT PROGRAM, this economics major was given the school's top prize, the Dr. Donald W. Spiro Award for Outstanding Academic and Co-Curricular Achievements.

Then, a month later, the Northeast Conference named Tiffany this year's NEC Female-Team Student Athlete of the Year — making this the ninth year in a row that a Wagner College student athlete has earned the NEC's most prestigious individual honor. Congratulations, Tiffany! ■

## Religion Professor Walter Kaelber Retires After 50 Years at Wagner

**“I wasn’t a big fan of Dr. Kaelber on the first day. He acted like he knew everything,” said freshman Nick Boghos in 2007. “Later, I found out he did know everything!”**

THAT’S BEEN THE EXPERIENCE of multiple generations of Wagner College students with religion professor Walter Kaelber, who retired this summer after half a century on Grymes Hill.

Born in north Jersey in 1943, Walter Kaelber earned his bachelor’s degree in history and math at Bucknell University in rural central Pennsylvania.

“Thereafter, I attended the University of Chicago,” Kaelber told a Wagnerian reporter in 1985, “studying comparative religion with the world’s foremost authority in the field, Mircea Eliade.”

The son of German immigrants, Kaelber was raised in a Protestant Christian household. His studies of comparative religion at Chicago in the late 1960s did more than just prepare him for a scholarly career; they changed his personal perspective on faith.

“The transformation was a gradual one,” he told the Wagnerian. “It was Hermann Hesse’s novel, ‘Siddhartha,’ that began my inquiry into other religions. I began to suspect, not that the Christian religion was false, but that there simply had to be more.



“The academic study of religion sees in all religions an expression of man’s spiritual striving,” Kaelber said, explaining the core of his approach to the field. “I think that only the comparative approach can



really show how each religion is unique and special and, at the same time, clarify the elements that various religions share.”

Walter Kaelber is known as a tough but inspiring teacher who expects his students to really engage in their classroom discussions.

“Class was a thinking exercise. You’d go into class with one opinion on the book you were discussing,” Nick Boghos said, “and walk out with another.”

“Dr. Kaelber’s ‘tell it like it is’ approach to religion has always endeared him to students,” wrote senior Heather Weinman for this magazine in 2005. “That and his unfailing sense of humor.”

During his first meeting with a group of first-year students in 2007, Kaelber wanted to convey to the freshmen that he had prepared for his encounter with them.

“I went over your files, and almost everyone picked this [class] as their number-one choice,” he joked, “which says to me that you’re certifiably insane.”

All kidding aside, the stuff Walter Kaelber taught his students was strange and fascinating.

“It really does make you think,” as one of his students, Kyle Glover ’11, put it. “It messes with your head.” ■



# Five More Faculty Members Retire



**Susan Bernardo (1991)**  
*Professor, English Department*

IN ADDITION TO SERVING as English Department chair for a decade, Susan Bernardo worked on every faculty committee. “In all of those roles, she helped create systems that worked well and helped people thrive,” current English Department chair Ali Arant wrote. “When colleagues were new, she was their determined advocate.” Bernardo also earned a reputation as a demanding but nurturing teacher, sharing her scholarship in the classroom as well as in journals and books.



**Mark Wagner (1991)**  
*Professor, Psychology Department*

“MARK IS A PROLIFIC SCHOLAR in the field of psychophysics, particularly in the area of understanding how we perceive the space in which we live,” said Psychology Department chair Laurence Nolan. “He is currently writing a book on the philosophy of psychology.” Wagner served as

psychology chair for more than 15 years and was instrumental in re-establishing an independent psychology department and in the development of its curriculum.



**Ann Hurley (1996)**  
*Professor, English Department*

“DR. HURLEY HAS EARNED a reputation as a professor who inspires student devotion,” wrote Ali Arant. “She facilitates breakthroughs and epiphanies in student thinking and writing, both in-class and beyond.” Arant also called Hurley “a first-rate scholar of Early Modern studies” citing her many publications, including more than 15 articles and book chapters on Early Modern literature that often focused on archival studies and the so-called “nonexistent” women writers of the English renaissance.



**Andrew Needle (2001)**  
*Associate Professor, Department of Visual Arts*

ANDY NEEDLE EARNED an MFA in painting from the University of

Pennsylvania, studying computer graphics at the School of Visual Arts and freelancing extensively at advertising and design firms when the field was new. He has exhibited his paintings at numerous venues including the American embassies in Austria, Israel and Costa Rica, and the Arsenal in Manhattan’s Central Park.



**Todd Price (2006)**  
*Associate Professor, Department of Performing Arts*

TODD PRICE HAS TAUGHT in the theater and arts administration programs for 15 years as well as serving as director of the Stanley Drama Awards. As an attorney, he practiced entertainment law in New York City, with emphasis in theater, music, film, television and book publishing. Price’s extensive theatrical production experience includes his work as associate producer at the Coconut Grove Playhouse. He was the founding artistic and executive director of Florida’s Maltz Jupiter Theatre, a not-for-profit, professional regional theater. ■



# 2020 & 2021

*This year's commencement programs — all five of them! — were unlike anything Wagner College had ever experienced in all of its 138 years of existence*

THESE ON-CAMPUS CELEBRATIONS represented a huge step toward our return to something like normal after living and working for 14 months under the strictures of New York's Covid mitigation regime.

By the time this spring arrived, the state had relaxed its pandemic rules enough that we could plan individual graduation events for 150 students each and allow them to invite two guests apiece.

That meant we would have to stage three separate events for this year's graduating class — and two more for the Class of 2020, whose commencement exercise had been suspended entirely during the Covid lockdown.

In a normal year, commencement is the biggest event on the calendar — and this year, we had to do it five times!

But it was more than worth it to hear those student speakers, so hopeful for the future ... and to see all those hundreds of proud Wagner graduates marching across the stage ... and to watch as parents, siblings, spouses and friends cheered on their graduates, celebrating their achievements ... at last!

We will remember the classes of 2020 and 2021 forever. ■



.....  
▶ Watch all five student speakers, one from each ceremony, at [facebook.com/wagnercollege/videos/](https://facebook.com/wagnercollege/videos/)  
.....



*In a normal year, commencement is the biggest event on the calendar — and this year, we had to do it five times!*



CUNARD HALL

# WHAT'S INSIDE

## CUNARD HALL

A fresh face on our oldest building

THE OLDEST BUILDING ON OUR CAMPUS, Cunard Hall, has gotten a facelift this year!

Work began this spring, refreshing all of the woodwork in the eaves, making them look as good as new.

Then, early this summer, the biggest part of the project began: removing the aging porch enclosure, which had fallen into disrepair, and refreshing Cunard's facade.

The new look offers a clean, open patio "looking out to sea" in front of a brown, stucco-style first-floor exterior surface that blends well with the faux-brick sheathing that covers the rest of the building.

This was only the latest in a long series of refreshments and renewals to Cunard Hall.

Built in 1852 as the home of Mary and Edward Cunard, of shipping-line fame, their former estate became the new home of Wagner College when we moved to Staten Island from Rochester, N.Y. in 1918.

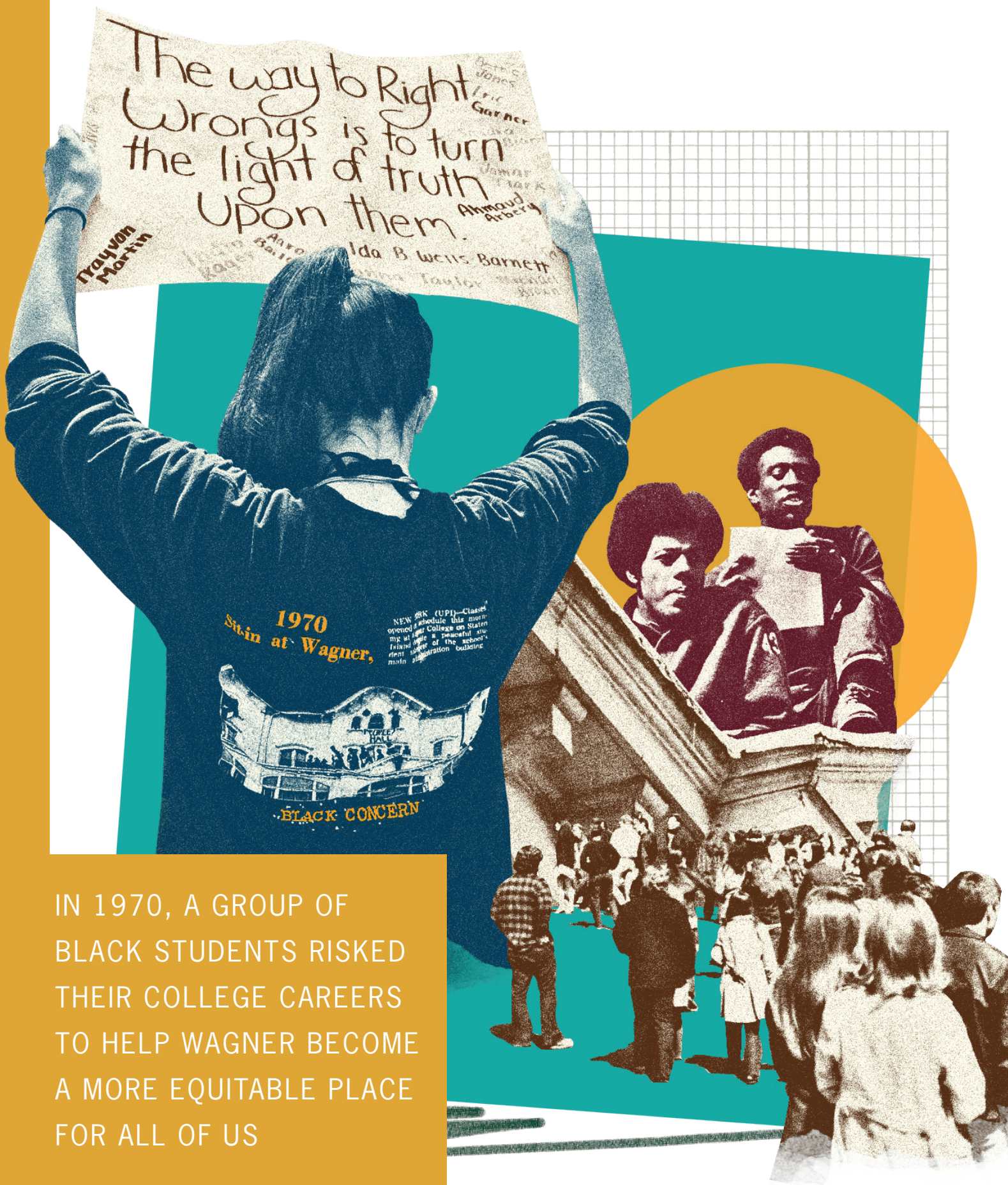
Our first addition to the Italianate villa was a dining and kitchen extension, completed before we moved into the new campus. Today, that extension houses our Registrar's Office.

After World War II, when the campus overflowed with G.I.s returning home, we enclosed the front porch to provide expanded dining space for our resident community. After Campus Hall opened in 1957, with its brand-new dining hall (now a performance center), Cunard's former dining space was converted for office use.

The last major renovation came in 1977 in the form of a complete facelift. Cunard's stucco surfacing was removed, exposing the original brick, which was then shielded with the durable faux-brick sheathing that protects most of the building's exterior. ■

Illustration: Matthew Cook





IN 1970, A GROUP OF  
 BLACK STUDENTS RISKED  
 THEIR COLLEGE CAREERS  
 TO HELP WAGNER BECOME  
 A MORE EQUITABLE PLACE  
 FOR ALL OF US

Left: Winona Scheff '20, wearing "the T-shirt," at a BLM demonstration (courtesy Winona Scheff.) Right: John Bailey '72 and Wayman Young '74, members of Black Concern, read the student group's demands from the roof of Cunard (Kallista photo). Bottom: The crowd of students gathered below Cunard Hall, April 1970 (photo by Christoph Lindner '73).

## Our story starts with a T-shirt.

**I**T WAS JANUARY 2019, and a Wagner College group had flown to Kenya for an Alternative Winter Break, a tradition involving community service activities in an interesting location.

The group was primarily made up of students, but a Wagner alumnus, Lonnie Brandon '78, had gone along. They had spent 17 hours together on the flight from Newark to Nairobi via Dubai, but it wasn't until they were checking in to their hotel that Lonnie noticed a photo printed on one student's T-shirt.

**Alonzo Brandon Jr. was born in early 1950 in Montclair, N.J.**

"My mom was born in the same hospital I was born in 22 years later," Lonnie said.

Both of Lonnie's parents came from Virginia families who had moved north as part of the Great Migration. Lonnie's mother's family had settled in Montclair. His father grew up in Philadelphia, and came to New Jersey after serving in World War II.

Lonnie, the eldest of the four children born to Alonzo and Naomi Brandon, went to the same public schools his mother had attended as a child. Early on, he idolized Chuck Berry — but he exchanged his guitar for a baseball bat when he

# LONNIE BRANDON & THE NORTH HALL 27

By **LEE MANCHESTER &  
STEPHANIE SIEK**

"Winona walks by, and she's got on this T-shirt," Lonnie recalled, "and I see the scene on the back, and I'm like, 'Whoa, come back here! Do you know anything about this picture on your back?'"

The photo showed a group standing on the front porch roof of Wagner College's Cunard Hall on April 17, 1970, during the building's occupation by Black Concern, a student group pushing the college to become a more welcoming and diverse institution.

The student wearing the T-shirt, Student Government Association President Winona Scheff, who is White, did know something about the photo — but only a little.

"I said, 'Well, that's me, right here,' and I pointed to myself in the photo," Lonnie said. "I was floored!"

Right there in the hotel lobby, the group settled down, and Lonnie told them his story.

joined Little League at 10.

Baseball — and later, football — gave Lonnie his entrée into the world of Montclair High School sports, which is a kind of secular religion in his home town.

While sports gave Lonnie a platform upon which he could excel in high school, it did not completely insulate him from Montclair's legacy of segregation.

"The schools were not segregated," Lonnie said, "but the neighborhoods were — and you had to go to your neighborhood school."

And those neighborhood elementary schools Black children attended weren't teaching the same curriculum as White schools. Black students who then went on to attend Montclair's high school found that their previous education hadn't prepared them.

A 1966 lawsuit filed with the help of the NAACP resulted in Montclair being put under

a desegregation order. But it would come too late to significantly improve Lonnie’s educational experience.

At one point, Lonnie discovered that he and other Black student-athletes were being subjected to the tracking that was common in Montclair public schools, where it was assumed that students of color were suited only for vocational training, not college careers.

### **The discovery was made only by accident.**

THE STRENGTH OF the Montclair High School football program drew lots of college football scouts — and, naturally, lots of scholarship offers for Montclair

“By 1967, the number of Black students attending Wagner College rose to about 20 — and a year after that, in 1968 (when Lonnie enrolled), the number nearly quadrupled.”

football players. Colleges often sent their recruiting letters directly to Montclair head football coach Clary Anderson, assuming that he would proudly pass them along — but, in the case of Black students, that was not the case. Lonnie found this out when he bumped into a student manager for the football team, who took the mail each day from the high school office to the coach.

“He asked me if I had seen this letter from Southern Illinois University,” Lonnie said. “I said, ‘No, what letter?’ He said, ‘Oh, Clary has it.’ So I got to Clary. He tells me, ‘Yeah, you got a letter, but you can’t get into that school, so you really don’t need a letter.’ He was making decisions like that for a lot of African American students.”

Lonnie mentioned all this to Jeanne Heningburg, one of the few African American teachers at Montclair.

“She went ballistic. She went and got hold of one of our history teachers who she knew she could confide in and told her, and they marched down to the boys’

gym and demanded that Clary give up every letter that he had.

“That was another catalyst for starting the Black Student Union at Montclair High School,” Lonnie said. He became a leader in that group his senior year, and was also elected captain of the football team.

“By the time I got to Wagner in September 1968, I was well on my way to becoming fairly radical,” he said.

Another football coach entered Lonnie’s life during his senior year at Montclair: Ralph Ferrara from Wagner College, who had been scouting Lonnie from nearby Staten Island.

“I had never even heard of Wagner, and it was only 20 miles away,” Lonnie said. “I had been recruited by Rutgers and the University of Dayton, but Wagner was offering a full ride. ... I went over for a visit, and when we got to the dining hall, they told me you could eat as much as you want — and that sealed the deal.”

Lonnie would not find out what being a Black student at Wagner College was really like, however, until classes began in the Fall 1968 semester.

As most Wagnerians know, Wagner was founded in 1883 in Rochester, N.Y. as a combination high school and junior college to prepare young German Lutheran men for the seminary.

In a 1929 study commissioned by the United Lutheran Church in America of the growth potential of Lutheran colleges, one of the key factors considered was the size of the White population living within a certain radius of a given school, because Lutheran churches and their colleges were ethnically based institutions.

But federal legislation passed in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society agenda started transforming the complexion of American higher education by providing money for disadvantaged young people to go to college.

By 1967, the number of Black students attending Wagner College rose to about 20 — and a year after that, in 1968 (when Lonnie enrolled), the number nearly quadrupled.

“All of the 20 or so African American upperclassmen at Wagner were dancing in the streets because there were 50, 55 African American students in my class,” Lonnie said. “For them, that was like heaven.” But most of Wagner’s 2,400 undergraduates were White.



Left: 1969 Homecoming Queen Sharon Richie and her escort, basketball star Ray Hodge, both members of Black Concern. Center: Sharon Richie with congratulatory notes taped to the door of her dorm room, 1969. Lower right: Members of Black Concern and Alma share a meal in the dining hall, 1971. (Kallista photos)



“There was quite a bit of backlash, socially,” Lonnie recalled. “A lot of the students that were here felt they were being invaded, and we never really felt a part of the campus.”

Lonnie remembers that Black students faced great challenges at Wagner, from fights on campus to low expectations from faculty. Those challenges led to the formation of Black Concern during the 1967-68 school year.

Early in the spring 1969 semester, two joint meetings of the (mostly White) Students for a Democratic Society with Black Concern served to emphasize the distinct goals of the two activist organizations.

“The problem [of racism] is purely a black problem which affects only blacks,” said Black Concern spokesman Bob Coles to the Wagnerian student newspaper. “We want to handle the situation ourselves, it’s something we have to do by ourselves. If we want support from any whites, we’ll ask for it.”

Shortly after these meetings, a spark touched off a political brush fire that roared across campus: The trustees voted for a 20 percent tuition increase, leading to a weeks-long student strike and the occupation of the Sutter Gymnasium, North Hall (including the office of Dean Harold Haas) and a portion of Cunard Hall. (The strike was directed by a group of mostly White students; Black Concern members, per se, were not a part of the strike’s leadership.) A list of 53 student demands was generated for presentation to the administration. And when it was all over, life at Wagner College returned to normal.

“That kind of set the stage for the following year,” Lonnie recalled.

Black Concern’s first step in the 1969-70 school year, with Lonnie as its chairman, was a test of its ability to organize and execute a plan. The goal: get a Black woman elected Homecoming queen that fall. It would be a first at the predominantly White college — and, strategically, very difficult to pull off.

“We couldn’t win with just the Black students’ votes,” Lonnie said. “We enlisted a group of White students who otherwise wouldn’t have voted for anyone. You’d probably call them ‘hippies.’”

Black Concern’s winning candidate was Sharon Richie, a junior nursing student from the projects of South Philly. Her Wagner education was being underwritten by the U.S. Army, which commissioned her as an officer upon graduation. She later became a White House Fellow, chief nurse for the Army Recruiting Command, the youngest full colonel in the Army (at age 36), and the director of the School of Nursing at Norwich University, a private military college in Vermont, before her death in 2018. (You can read more about the remarkable Sharon Richie in “Compassionate Command,” the cover story for Wagner Magazine’s Fall 2009 issue.)



The administration assumed we had instigated that demonstration,” Lonnie said. “On Monday morning, they informed us that they were reneging on all of the commitments they had made to get us out of [Cunard Hall].”

With that victory under their belt, the members of Black Concern began considering their next move.

“We started to look at our lives and the things that we felt would be more relevant for us and to make the campus more inclusive,” Lonnie said. “We developed a list of demands and presented them to the administration.”

The biggest ask, issued at the beginning of April, was to increase the number of Black students at Wagner from 83 to more than 500. Doing so would require raising additional scholarship money, adjusting of admissions requirements and recruiting staff familiar with Black communities. And to support Black students after enrollment, the college would need more Black faculty members, administrative staff dedicated to creating programming that was relevant to Black students and adaptations to the curriculum encompassing Black and African studies.

Less than a week later, the administration issued a generally positive response. The main problem the college had with the demands of Black Concern, it seemed, was financial.

“As has been stated before, there is no impediment to minority group students attending Wagner College, if they have the financial means,” the college said in its reply. “The crucial question is how many without adequate means can be accepted by the college.”

Black Concern found the college’s apparent unwillingness to fully fund financial aid for Black students unsatisfactory.

“That’s when we decided we were going to occupy Cunard Hall,” Lonnie said. “It was the heartbeat of the campus; all the academic records were there, the business office was there, so we felt that if we occupied that building, we could get their attention.”

### **Lonnie knew that timing was critical.**

COLLEGE DAY WAS SCHEDULED for Saturday, April 18. It was the biggest event of the year for Wagner’s Admissions Office, a day on which the college wooed accepted students to enroll for the coming year.

“We scheduled [the Cunard occupation] for the week before College Day,” Lonnie said, “and we knew they would want to resolve this before that.”

On the afternoon of Wednesday, April 15, a couple of Black Concern members went into a ground-floor men’s bathroom in Cunard Hall to unlock a window. That night they returned, ready to seal the building’s entrances and wait for the administration’s reaction. About 90 students were inside the building: a dozen or so from the Puerto Rican student group called Alma, the rest from Black Concern.

Young civil rights activist Julian Bond, an early leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and at that time a Georgia state legislator, was the only person from outside the group of occupiers allowed into Cunard Hall during the sit-in. Bond had been speaking at nearby Notre Dame College when he heard about the occupation and walked over to the Wagner College campus. His visit buoyed the spirits of the students in Cunard.

“It showed that we didn’t stand alone,” said Ray Hodge, one of the occupiers.

(Thirty-four years later, Julian Bond returned to the Wagner College campus as the featured speaker for our 2014 commencement program.)

Over the next day and a half, the students and the administration went through round after round of telephone negotiations.

“Finally, Thursday night, the administration made a commitment to meet with us the following week and to recognize our concerns and to address them,” Lonnie said. “We decided that was good enough — and so, in good faith, we left the building on Friday.”

Most of the Black and Latinx participants in the Cunard occupation went home or elsewhere off-campus for the weekend as soon as the matter was, as far as they knew, resolved.

What they did not know was that a group of about 200 White student activists (who considered themselves allies but did not coordinate their actions with Black Concern) had planned their own demonstration for Saturday, disrupting Wagner's College Day event and forcing the school to send its guests home.

"The administration assumed we had instigated that demonstration," Lonnie said. "On Monday morning, they informed us that they were renegeing on all of the commitments they had made to get us out of [Cunard Hall]."

The students tried several times to contact Wagner College President Arthur Ole Davidson to negotiate directly with him, but Davidson was unavailable — resting after a visit to Wagner's study-abroad center in Austria.

On Thursday, April 23, a group of about 30 members of Black Concern went to see Davidson's second in command, Dean Harold Haas, staying in his office for about eight hours.

### **The Black Concern members referred to the confrontation as "a meeting."**

DEAN OF STUDENTS BILL MAHER, however, interpreted it differently. When he came to Haas' North Hall office, located in what is now the library of Reynolds House, he saw a large group of Black students who he believed were holding Haas hostage.

"Dean Harold Haas was not permitted to leave his office," said a statement issued the next day by President Davidson's office. "He was permitted to use the telephone only at the direction of the students."

Black Concern, however, issued a counterstatement claiming that "at no time did anyone in the conference physically abuse and/or physically restrict Dean Haas from leaving if he wanted to."

At 12:50 p.m., Dean Maher gave the students 10 minutes to vacate Haas' office; two or three students complied. Maher then suspended the remaining 27 students for the rest of the academic year — and told them that "if Dean Haas is not freed ... in one hour, all students in the room will be expelled," according to a news report. By 2 p.m., nobody had budged, and Maher's expulsion order went into effect.

We don't know exactly what Dean Haas made of the situation. He died in 2016. But it's possible he sympathized with the Black students. He had marched in civil rights demonstrations in the South and spent over 20 years as chief of the United

Lutheran Church's Board of Social Missions before becoming dean.

Eric Devlin, a Wagner College senior working as a reporter for the weekly Staten Island Register, wrote in a May 6 recap of the situation:

.....

*Members of the College community have overwhelmingly voiced support for the demands of the Black students and have expressed doubt over the administration's official interpretation of the incident. ...*

*Many feel that Dean Haas' true stand is not being expressed, but that the incident, in the words of one faculty member, "is a convenient tool for some reactionary administrators who have trapped Haas, as a fellow administrator, into supporting their point of view. The students involved have never lied to me, and neither has Dean Haas, but some administrators have." ...*

*Only rarely was support for the expulsion order expressed. When it was, it was phrased in words similar to those of a freshman co-ed from Brooklyn: "If the College had started doing something to keep these n—s [spelled out] in their place four years ago, this never would have happened. They ought to kick every one of them out and never let another one into the College."*

.....

On May 13, about 120 White students began a new occupation of President Davidson's office, demanding that the college reinstate the 27 expelled Black students. The occupation continued until the college board of trustees met on May 20, without taking action on the case of the North Hall 27. No penalties were imposed on the White organizers of that occupation.

Finally, on May 21, the nine-member Faculty Council began a two-day meeting to consider the expelled students' appeal. Dorothe Dow, head of Wagner's special nursing program and faculty adviser to Black Concern, testified about what she witnessed that day.

According to an article in the Staten Island Advance, Dow stated that she went to North Hall about two hours after the Black Concern students arrived, and an hour after their suspension. She spent most of the next five hours in Haas' office with the students. She testified that Dean Haas "never asked to leave while she was there, and that she thought nothing was wrong so she did not ask the students to leave."

The same article reported the testimony of Philip Straniere '69 M'73, who was one of a group of 200 students who occupied all three floors of North Hall during the Spring 1969 campus strike. A smaller group of 30 to 40 students had then held an hour-long conference with Dean Haas.

"Straniere said that the people filled the office, doorway and hall in an atmosphere of 'polite hostility' on that occasion, in effect preventing Haas from leaving," the Advance reported. "He further indicated that no disciplinary action was taken at that time and that no one in the administration tried to 'free Haas or contended that he was a hostage.'"

In his summary, NAACP attorney Jonathan Shapiro said "that he felt there had been a misunderstanding between Haas and the students

April 23 and that he actually was not held hostage ... [but] that the dean was fearful because he was confronted with a roomful of blacks, whereas he didn't interpret similar action [the previous] year in the same way."

But the Faculty Council was unmoved. It upheld the expulsions of all but two students (who the

council determined had left before the expulsion order took effect).

Another student, senior basketball player Ray Hodge, was granted clemency. Hodge had been drafted by the New York Knicks and, recognizing that an expulsion could endanger his career, the council allowed him to graduate that June without penalty.

The remaining 24 students, including Lonnie, had their expulsion converted into a suspension at the recommendations of deans Haas and Maher. As a result, they would lose all the credits they had earned during the spring

1970 semester but could continue with their college careers at Wagner if they so chose. According to Lonnie, about half of them never returned to Wagner.

### **But the actions of Black Concern had borne fruit.**

OVER THE FOLLOWING SUMMER and fall, Wagner College fulfilled every one of the pledges it had made to the minority students to end the Cunard Hall occupation. Black administrators were hired; admissions recruiting worked to bring more minority students to Grymes Hill; new Black scholars joined the faculty, and new courses about the history and experiences of minority communities in America were added to the curriculum.

None of these were true game changers; they were only first steps on a long path toward greater equity at Wagner. But they were hints that better things were possible for the college on the hill.

“None of these were true game changers; they were only first steps on a long path toward greater equity at Wagner. But they were hints that **better things were possible for the college on the hill.**”

Would the members of Black Concern have gone forward with their protests if they had known the cost to their academic careers?

“It was a lofty idea, trying to turn Wagner around, but the cost was just too high and no one seemed to care,” said Toni King Whitlock, one of the students who was suspended.

But Sharon Richie, a member of Black Concern who had not participated in the meeting with Dean Haas, said, “We had just enough light for the step that we were on ... and it was one step at a time.”

“At 19, 20 years old, we weren’t projecting that far ahead,” said Lonnie. “We just figured we would go through the process and, at the end, they would say yes or no, and then we would have to reassess where we were, based on those responses — but we never

anticipated that part of the consequences could have been so life-changing.”

And what lesson should today’s Wagner students learn from the events of 50 years ago?

“If you believe in something, follow your gut,” Lonnie said, “follow your heart and do whatever you feel is necessary to accomplish your goals. You need to be able to think it through, and be willing to deal with the consequences — because there are going to be consequences for any action you take. ...

**“It’s something I would have done all over again; I wouldn’t change a thing.”**

LONNIE’S FOOTBALL SCHOLARSHIP carried him through two more years of full-time student life at Wagner — close to completing his degree requirements but, due to his loss of credits from the Spring 1970 semester,



Lonnie Brandon speaking at the 2019 Montclair African American Heritage Parade (courtesy MAAHP). Right: Black Concern members on the roof of the Cunard Hall porch during the April 1970 occupation (photo by Christoph Lindner '73). Lower right: Lonnie Brandon #20 plays football for Wagner.

not quite enough for his B.A. He would not earn his degree until the summer of 1978, when he took the pair of courses he needed to finish.

But in the meantime, Lonnie and his then-wife Janice had a growing young family to raise. He had married Janice the summer after his freshman year, and their daughter Nikki was born that same summer, followed by Alonzo III and, in 1975, youngest daughter Kendra. Lonnie had to find a job.

In 1973, Lonnie started working for the municipal government of his home town of Montclair, N.J., initially as an activities director at the recreation department. He went on to serve as parks superintendent, and he was instrumental in starting the Montclair African American Heritage Parade and Festival, which is now a fixture in the town's summer calendar. That led to the creation of a "rites of passage" mentoring program for the town's youth. In 1991, Lonnie became director in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs — the first African American department head in the city's history.

But it would take 37 years after his last regular semester for Lonnie to finally re-engage with Wagner College.

Understandably, he carried a lot of resentment — "big time" — about the way he and other members of Black Concern were treated after the Cunard occupation and the Haas incident.

"A lot of my contemporaries still hold tremendous resentment," he said.

It took an August 2009 visit from his old mentor Mike Kelly, who'd become a Wagner College trustee, to get Lonnie Brandon back on Grymes Hill.

Mike, a former Wagner football player, graduated in 1966. But in 1970, he was spending his evenings coaching Lonnie and the rest of the football team.

"I was the only Black coach and, as such, became unofficial mentor to the Black players," Mike said.

He hadn't known anything about the planning for the Cunard Hall occupation, but he was part of Black Concern's demands: They wanted Mike to serve as the administrator for Black student programs.

That demand was accepted. Mike started working at Wagner on July 1, 1970, and he and Lonnie have stayed in touch ever since.

During his 2009 visit, Mike asked Lonnie to join him as he dropped by the football team's annual Green & White scrimmage and talked to the players. Afterward, Mike took Lonnie to lunch with his friend Provost Devorah Lieberman.

"Mike started telling Devorah my history at Wagner," Lonnie said, "so right away she starts thinking, 'Well, next year it's gonna be the 40th anniversary [of the Cunard and Haas incidents]. We have to do something big!'"

Mike reconnected Lonnie with Brian Morris, a 1965 Wagner alumnus and then a board member of the Alumni Association. Brian had known several Black Concern members, including Homecoming Queen Sharon Richie. Brian, who had gone on to a highly successful career in public relations, suggested using the 40th anniversary of the events to focus on what racial progress Wagner had made since 1970.

"We came up with a plan," Lonnie said, "and then I went and called 20, 25 people who had been involved."

Lonnie dove into the college's archives, reading old news clips about the events of 40 years before, looking through the mimeographed statements distributed by Black Concern and the college, and piecing together an accurate, well-documented picture of what had really happened all those years ago.

Brian Morris, using his connections as a publicist, sat down with a film producer and created a 27-minute documentary using interviews with key players from the 1960s and '70s. In addition to Mike and Lonnie, "Seeds of Change: Reflection of a Year of Student Activism, 1969-1970" (available on Wagner College's YouTube channel) featured alumni Milfred Fierce '60 M'67, Black Concern 1970 co-chair Joan Thorne Manning, Philip Straniere, Toni King Whitlock, Ray Hodge, Marilyn W. Jackson '73 and Linda Dominguez '73.

The documentary was screened April 10, 2010, at Wagner's Spiro Hall, during an alumni seminar Lonnie organized to bring many of the first-hand participants in the 1970 activities back to campus.

"For many of the people who attended the program," Lonnie said, "it was the first time they had been back on campus."

### **For Lonnie, it was far from the last time he was to visit Grymes Hill.**

LONNIE WOULD GO ON TO SERVE two 3-year terms on the Alumni Association board. He also mentored some of the current generation of Black students at Wagner.

When a promising student and football star got into some trouble, Lonnie and Mike asked the college's dean of campus life for leniency — provided Lonnie agreed to mentor him. Lonnie met regularly

with the student — and his roommate — to guide the young men through the rest of their undergraduate careers. Both students graduated in good standing.

A couple of years ago (2018-19), the leaders of Wagner's Black Student Union took an interest in the history of Black Concern, digging into the archives and watching the "Seeds of Change" documentary. That led to a visit from Lonnie.

"Each meeting with him is always wonderful," said Deyja Gentile, co-president that year of BSU. "He is one of those people who leaves you feeling motivated and validated."

That visit inspired the new T-shirt designed for the Black Student Union in November 2018, which featured an April 17, 1970 photo of a group of students standing on the roof of the Cunard Hall porch — with a young Lonnie Brandon at the center.

And that brings us full circle to the beginning of our story, when Lonnie and his wife Jackie accompanied a group of Wagner College students on a January 2019 Alternative Winter Break service trip to Nairobi, Kenya.

Winona Scheff, who wore that BSU T-shirt in Nairobi with Lonnie's picture, remembers well the impression Lonnie and his wife Jackie made on everyone during that trip.

"They both exuded kindness in every word they spoke," Winona said. "They became our grandparents on that trip, providing comfort in moments of vulnerability and laughter in moments of joy. They both are inspirations; we at Wagner are lucky to have them in our family."

During a Wagner history class held online in April 2020, half a century after the Cunard occupation, Lonnie was asked by a student if he had seen any changes at Wagner College as a result of the sacrifices he and his fellow members of Black Concern had made.

"Sometimes I'm a little disappointed that more hasn't happened in the last 50 years," Lonnie said,

"but it's a different place. I'm a firm believer in how organizations change when the people in them change. I think Wagner is a very different place than it was 50 years ago, primarily because the players are different."

The composition of Wagner College's student body and faculty has changed dramatically. In 1970, less than 4% of all students and none of the faculty were people of color.

That increased to 30% of all students by October 2018, and 20% of faculty members by August 2020.

And in July 2021, as this story is being written, people of many racial, sexual and gender identities are serving and leading on the board of our Alumni Association and throughout our administrative staff.

Is it enough? Is everything fixed

now? Of course not. Did the sacrifices of the North Hall 27 make a difference? Yes — and this story is one indication of how the conversation at Wagner was changed by the stand those students took in 1970, and how it has continued to evolve in the years since.

"Has it gone as far as we would have liked to have seen it going, 50 years ago?" Lonnie said. "Probably not — but, again, there's a whole lot of different circumstances.

"One of the things I try to live my life by now is an idea that was presented to me at one of my professional development programs at Rutgers ... that organizations are really ongoing conversations. It's not about brick and mortar, or even people — it's about conversations. Organizations change when conversations change.

"That's one of the things I tried to sell to my contemporaries in trying to get them re-engaged at Wagner — that it's a different place," Lonnie said. "Those people that we had issues with are long gone; the institution is different. And the conversation has changed." ■

“... organizations are really ongoing conversations. It's not about brick and mortar, or even people — it's about conversations. Organizations change when conversations change.”

# BACK TO BUSINESS

*Seahawk business leaders tell us about their Covid 'new normal'*

**I**T'S BEEN A TOUGH COUPLE OF YEARS for everyone, including business leaders. To find out how business has fared through the pandemic, and how it's coming — carefully — back to life, we talked with three Wagner College alumni who are leaders in three very different fields of business.

**Jeff Forchelli '66** is firm chairman and co-managing partner of Forchelli Deegan Terrana LLP, a Long Island-based law firm specializing in complex real estate and land-use matters.

**Bob Sappio '82** is CEO of SeaCube Container Leasing, an international company with headquarters in New Jersey.

**Lisa Bennett '85** is communications chief for Total Rewards, the organization within JPMorgan Chase & Co. that handles employee benefits for its 250,000 associates worldwide.

Despite the huge differences in their industries, what surprised us most were the similarities in how Covid affected their operations and their employees, and how they are coming to grips with the pandemic's current stage.



Jeff Forchelli

## 'STAY POSITIVE, TEST NEGATIVE'

**I**N 1976, WHEN JEFF FORCHELLI started the law firm of Forchelli Deegan Terrana, he was just 10 years out of college. Today, the firm employs a total of 120 people out of its Uniondale, N.Y. offices.

Last March, when everything shut down, the situation was challenging, Jeff said.

"Everything is cash flow," he said. "Once your income stream stops, you're going down fast. And with the courts closed ...

"The solution was, we had to keep going as a firm and keep producing work," Jeff said, "and to do that,



we had to be the coach for our partners. And we encouraged them to encourage their employees, and to stay in touch with their clients.”

Jeff’s firm was very lucky. Three months before the shutdown, they had upgraded all of their computer systems.

“When it hit,” he said, “we had enough capacity for everyone to work from home.”

Through the summer of 2020, there were only five or six people working out of his office — “essential workers” — having lunch delivered every day in a paper bag.

“That summer I had a quote at the end of all my emails,” he said: “Stay positive — test negative.”

As things began gearing back up in the fall, people gradually started returning to the office.

“We set up a reopening committee,” Jeff said, “that watched the reports on the science to keep people as safe as possible.

“Our policy now is, if you’re not vaccinated, you have to get tested every week.”

— and then there’s no restrictions to your movements in the company.

“If you are not vaccinated, that’s your choice — however, we’re asking that you wear a mask, practice good CDC guidance and get tested regularly.”

---

## WHEN THE CDC SNEEZED ...

**A**MONG THE THREE alums we spoke with, Lisa Bennett is the executive whose responsibility is most directly tied to helping the employees of her company, the banking firm of JPMorgan Chase, navigate their way through the pandemic — especially because of the nature of their business.



Lisa Bennett

When governments began shutting down their economies last March, there were exemptions for essential workers and critical industries. Banking was one of those critical industries — and Lisa Bennett’s job as communications chief for the human resources operation of one of the world’s largest banks placed her squarely in the middle of the pandemic-management business.

“I’m responsible for 250,000 people worldwide,” she said. “Seventy thousand of them are in the U.S. Our question is, how do we stay on top of the changes throughout the pandemic that our employees need to know about?”

“Every time the CDC sneezes,” she jokes, “we pull out a hanky.”

As of July 6, Chase corporate employees were all back to working in their offices around the country.

“We are not requiring vaccination,” Lisa said, “but we are requiring employees to input a status. If they are vaccinated, they have to upload a copy of their card. Or they can tell us if they are not vaccinated. Or they can tell us that they choose not to tell us — but they have to tell us something.”

The challenges are myriad — but Wagner alumni are helping their businesses make their way through them. ■

---

## ‘ALMOST PANDEMIC-PROOF’

**B**OB SAPPPIO RUNS AN international company that leases shipping containers.

“The company is 25 years old. We have six offices around the globe,” he said, “with nearly \$4 billion in assets under management — and we do it all with less than 100 people.”



Bob Sappio

Unlike businesses whose activity was throttled during the Covid shutdown, SeaCube Container Leasing actually added business in 2020.

“We were almost pandemic-proof,” Bob said. “Most of our containers are refrigerated. When the economy shifted from buying experiences to buying stuff, consumer goods ... well, everyone still had to eat.”

SeaCube has emerged cautiously from the pandemic.

“We’re not requiring people to be vaccinated,” Bob said. “If you are, we’re requiring proof of vaccination



# T · R · U · E HERITAGE

*Upcoming book by history professor Rita Reynolds documents the little-known community of wealthy, free Black families in pre-Civil War Charleston, S.C. One of them was her own.*

by Lee Manchester



Left, in color: Rita Reynolds. Center, B&W: Rita's mother, Angelina Reynolds, on Riverside Drive in Manhattan as a young woman. Right, B&W: Rhea, Alexina and William Vincent, in Charleston (man seated is unknown). William Vincent is Rita Reynold's great-grandfather, and great-grandson of Thomas and Martha Inglis.

History professor Rita Reynolds joined the Wagner College faculty in 2008. In those dozen or so years, she has become an integral part of the campus community, serving now as the chair of her department.

**T**HROUGHOUT THOSE YEARS, there has been one constant in her scholarly career: her Book, with a capital “B.”

It’s a fascinating project that looks deeply into the life of the little-known community of free Black families in Charleston, S.C. before the Civil War, gaining access through a unique point of entry: Professor Reynolds’ own family heritage.

Now that the book is nearly finished — Rita is in the final stages of work with her editor at the University of Georgia Press — we thought that this would be a good time to fill the rest of the Wagner community in on this extraordinary research venture.

**Rita Reynolds was born** in North White Plains, N.Y., and raised in the Bronx, but “all of my mother’s family, White or Black, is from Charleston, going back 250 years.”

Rita’s maternal grandparents left Charleston for New York, separately, around 1929, fleeing Jim Crow discrimination, and never went back. They met again in New York, recognized one another from back home, courted, married and had nine children.

“My mother was deeply committed to me and my siblings,” Rita said, describing her own upbringing. “She was really a single parent.”

In the summer of 1986, while Rita was pursuing a graduate degree in photography at New York University, her uncle came over to go through an old trunk that had belonged to her great-grandfather. The trunk was full of old family papers, one of which was the family’s “freedom papers,” dated 1824.

“It was the first time I had seen an archival document like that,” Rita said, “but I wasn’t interested.”

Her mother, however, was finishing her own degree and had taken a course in Black history.

“My mom said, ‘You can’t know yourself if you don’t know your own history,’” Rita recalls. “So, in a matter of, like, a week, we went from knowing almost nothing about our family story to tracing our family tree to 1770.”

The freedom papers told of one of Rita’s earliest American ancestors, a Moroccan woman who had been kidnapped and enslaved. She was given the name Lucy Moor, for her Moorish heritage.

“At this point, my mother’s saying, ‘We have to go to Charleston!’” Rita recalls. “Grad school didn’t start back up until October, and from Labor Day I had a whole month of nothing to do — so we took the train down.

“Charleston was like nothing I had ever seen: the architecture, the dialects, the way the people interacted with one another. What was interesting was that they — at least the Black community — seemed to know that we were from there. They would say to us, ‘Who are your people?’ and my mother would step up and start rattling off a list of names.”

One of the people they encountered on that trip was a woman who worked at the Avery Institute, a Black resource center run by the College of Charleston. As Rita’s mother recited the names of her 19th century family members, the woman nodded, saying, “I’m familiar with those. They were very respectable.”

Initially, Rita was startled at how this woman seemed so familiar with folks who had died so very long ago, “but the truth was that oral history was very important,” Rita acknowledges now. “In a really small community, that kind of information follows families for generations.”

It was a troubling, annoying experience, she explained, that set her on the course of researching her family story and the story of free, wealthy Black people in antebellum Charleston.

“We had the names of these people,” Rita said, “and we wanted to see their graves. They were wealthy; they would have had marked graves.”

Rita and her mother went from graveyard to archive to cemetery, but no luck. They knew that the family had belonged to a fraternal group for wealthy, free Black people of mixed heritage called the Brown Fellowship Society, and they knew that the BFS had its own cemetery, but nobody would tell them where it was.

“Whenever we asked where they were buried, we kept getting the runaround,” she said.

Eventually, she returned to the historical society.



Top, in color: Rita Reynolds examining the monument at the site of the Brown Fellowship Society Cemetery — with the names of her forebears. Bottom, B&W: Rita's great-grandfather, William Vincent, with his sisters Rhea and Alexina.

“I went to a guy — who’s a friend now — and said, ‘Okay, I’m tired of this nonsense, and I’m not leaving here until I get some answers,’” Rita recalls. “‘Where the hell are they buried? Where is this Brown Fellowship Society cemetery?’”

Rita’s friend looked at her and said, “It’s been destroyed.”

A Catholic high school had purchased the land where the Brown Fellowship Society cemetery stood, adjacent to the school. When the school expanded, it paved over the cemetery.

“They moved the headstones,” Rita’s friend told her, “but the bodies are still there, beneath that parking lot.”

When Rita came home, she started looking for material to help her understand the era in which her ancestors had lived, “and I was just appalled — there was like maybe two books on free Blacks in Charleston,” she said. “Two books. And one of them had just come out.”

“At that moment, enraged by what they had done to the cemetery, I said, ‘Okay, I gotta do this. I’m gonna do this.’

“My mother became my research assistant,” Rita said. “We spent hours going from the county library or the city records, historical society, church records, the state archives — that was really all we did, but the information we got ...”

“The group we focused on was wealthy, free Blacks in Charleston, because the number was small enough that it was manageable,” she said. In particular, she focused on the Brown Fellowship Society, to which her own family had belonged, which had a membership cap of 50 families.

**The story of Rita Reynolds’ family** in antebellum Charleston is told in “Free and Insane in Charleston: Freedom and Divorce Among Free People of Color in Antebellum South Carolina,” her forthcoming monograph.

It’s a story that is intimately intertwined with the American story itself, and particularly with the dark history of American slavery.

At its core are three people: Thomas Inglis Jr., his wife Rachel ... and his wife Martha.

“I have pieced together the story of Thomas, Rachel and Martha Inglis by focusing on and carefully examining the archival evidence that remains,” Rita writes. “I have painstakingly reconstructed their story from city, state and federal records, church records, diaries and letters written by South Carolinians and the few private documents written by other free people of color in the Inglis community.

“By itself, the proof left by the Inglis family seems at times confusing, but as I unfolded it in historical context, a rich, important and meaningful part of American antebellum social and racial life comes into view.”

**Thomas Inglis Jr. was one** of Charleston’s wealthiest free men of color. (At his death, Thomas’ estate was assessed at the equivalent of \$1.2 million today.) Thomas’ father was a Scottish slave trader

and a Loyalist; nothing is known of his mother, but she is presumed to have been a slave. Thomas, born in 1778, was trained as a barber before his father’s death in 1788, a trade that allowed him to make a decent living.

One of the documentary clues to the magnitude of Thomas’ wealth that Rita discovered was a notice he placed in a local newspaper in 1802, offering a reward for the return of a “small French gold watch” that had been stolen from his home. The rather considerable reward offered, \$5, is today’s equivalent of more than \$125. The watch may have been recovered; 34 years later, Thomas left a similar timepiece to his son.

Another major documentary clue, an inventory of the Inglises’ household goods, compiled for a lawsuit following Thomas’ death, gave Rita an extraordinarily detailed picture of what the interior of the Inglis home looked like.

“Most free blacks rented substandard dwellings that were little more than poorly constructed shacks,” Rita writes, “yet the interior of the Inglis home resembled those of wealthy whites. The abundance of expensive items in their home attested to Thomas’s ability to provide for his family.”

“Most free blacks rented substandard dwellings that were little more than poorly constructed shacks,” Rita writes, “yet the interior of the Inglis home resembled those of wealthy whites. The abundance of expensive items in their home attested to Thomas’s ability to provide for his family.”

Thomas’ will, of course, provided for his wife Martha, a free woman of color, and their five children.

But it also provided for the needs of someone named Rachel Inglis, “who the providence of God has deprived her of reason,” Thomas wrote. Rachel was identified as being confined to the Charleston Insane Asylum, but her relation to Thomas — and Martha — was not spelled out.

“I remember my mother and I going back and forth,” Rita recalls. “Who is she?”

“One day I said, ‘You know, I have a feeling: I think she’s his wife.’

“My mother said, ‘She can’t be his wife. He’s married to Martha.’

“We looked at the poorhouse records,” Rita says, “and, sure enough, she was his wife.”

Further research added detail to Rachel’s story. She and Thomas were married in 1800; they had no children. In 1811, Rachel was committed to the city insane asylum on an attempted arson charge, and there she died 25 years later.

**T**homas’ second wife, Martha Sophia, was a good match for the well-to-do, free Black barber. She was the granddaughter of Lucy Moor, an enslaved woman brought from Morocco to Charleston in the early 1770s.

Nine years after Rachel Inglis’ commitment, Thomas remarried. Although South Carolina did not, under any circumstance, grant divorces at that time, Rita believes that the documentary circumstances indicate Thomas used a legal loophole to nullify his marriage to Rachel in order to marry Martha.

“Legally, at the time, all Blacks are slaves unless they can prove otherwise,” Rita said. “Thomas Inglis understands this. If he says that she is a slave ... well, slaves cannot get married, because you’re property. If he says that she is his slave, then their marriage is void.”

The law said that the city would bear the cost of holding free Blacks in the insane asylum, but that the cost of committing slaves to the asylum had to be borne by their owners. Asylum records show that, shortly after Thomas married Martha, “the asylum says to him, ‘You got to start paying for Rachel now,’ because he declares her his slave,” Rita explains.

Thomas’ second wife, Martha Sophia, was a good match for the well-to-do, free Black barber. She was the granddaughter of Lucy Moor, an enslaved woman brought from Morocco to Charleston in the early 1770s. Lucy was herself freed in 1791 as the result of a treaty negotiated by U.S. Secretary of State Thomas

Jefferson with the emperor of Morocco. Her daughter Susannah, however, remained enslaved for reasons that are still unclear.

Rita’s monograph goes to considerable lengths to explain how numerous White slaveholders had children through illicit relations with enslaved members of their household, and how the White fathers then sometimes provided for the future of their children of mixed heritage, sometimes by freeing them. This, she says, would be a reasonable explanation for why Susannah’s mistress, Sarah Smith, freed Susannah and her children — her valuable property — at the turn of the 19th century. Believing that Susannah was the daughter of Lucy Moor and Sarah Smith’s son, Roger, “Sarah Smith was freeing her granddaughter and protecting her” from Roger Smith’s creditors, Rita writes.

Likewise, Rita believes that Susannah’s daughters, including Martha Sophia, had been fathered by the Smith’s next-door neighbor, Henry Middleton Rutledge, a descendant of two signers of the Declaration of Independence. The surest evidence of this, Rita says, is that Rutledge issued “freedom papers” for Martha and her family in 1824 certifying that they were not enslaved persons, validating Martha’s marriage to Thomas Inglis and serving as a declaration of white guardianship over the Inglis family, especially important in the civil turmoil following Denmark Vesey’s abortive slave uprising in Charleston two years earlier.

“Rutledge’s act acknowledged his paternity of Martha and her sisters,” Rita writes, “since unrelated White men did not intervene in the family affairs of biracial children of the planter elite. Henry Rutledge was the undisputed patriarch of his family with Susannah.

“[Rutledge’s] intimate knowledge of more than 40 years of Martha’s heritage strongly suggests that he was probably her biological father who would not formally acknowledge paternity. He instead provided indisputable proof that Martha and her sisters were not slaves.”

**And that**, in the broadest of outlines, is the story that Rita Reynolds has spent 35 years of her life and her academic career researching.

“Free and Insane in Charleston” is a work of deep scholarship that is also deeply personal, exploring the little-known community of wealthy, free Blacks in antebellum South Carolina through the experience of Rita’s own forebears. It is being published by the University of Georgia Press. ■



# AlumniLink

Events, opportunities, and celebrations for the Wagner family, both near and far

## From your Alumni Board

MY FELLOW SEAHAWKS,

As your Alumni Association Board president, I have the honor of serving the alumni community in partnership with an incredible leadership team and dedicated board members. As volunteers, we collectively advocate and support the Alumni Association's goals, programs and services, and we do our best to represent our global community of over 27,000 alumni.

The Alumni Association Board of Directors is here to serve all of you. Our primary mission is to engage and connect with alumni across generations and locations. Every board member serves on one of our three core committees:

- ❖ Through the leadership of our Alumni Engagement committee, we look to connect Seahawks with one another, provide knowledge sharing through our Alumni Speaker Series and inspire others to give back.
- ❖ Our Student Engagement committee focuses on the career development of our current students through events like Career Conversations and alumni panels.
- ❖ Our Campus Engagement committee looks to embrace all members of the community — our faculty and staff, our departments and our leaders — that make Wagner *Wagner*.

As a board, we are constantly thinking of how we can connect with you through events, volunteer engagements and networking opportunities that benefit current students and alumni alike. We are dedicated

to representing the vibrant diversity of our Wagner College community by ensuring that we grow our board's membership, not only in class years but also in career and volunteer expertise, race, gender identity and sexual orientation. This commitment expands beyond the board through our volunteer-driven alumni affinity groups: Women's Professional Network, Black Professional Alliance and OUTWagner.

As we look to 2021 and beyond, we look forward to welcoming you in person on campus this fall for what will be an unforgettable event: Wagner Weekend, Oct. 1 and 2, bringing together the best parts of our beloved Homecoming and Reunion traditions.

We salute our three board members who have completed their terms after serving six consecutive years. We are grateful for their dedication and contributions to the association: Donna D'Ermilio '75, Ellen Huffman Mathias '14 and Christian Rautenstrauch '13.

A warm Seahawk welcome to our newest members joining the board: Aurora Brennan '13, Nicole Giammarinaro '07 and Sarah Braun '14 M'18 M'20.

Stay involved and connected, whether in person, on Zoom, through social media or at events. We would love to hear from you at [alumniboard@wagner.edu](mailto:alumniboard@wagner.edu). Share your updates and let us know what matters to you.

Go Seahawks!

Carolina Silva '16  
Alumni Association Board President

### ALUMNI ASSOCIATION BOARD

Carolina Silva '16  
*President*

Clare Reed '91 M'94  
*Vice President*

Cailin Kelly '08  
*Corresponding Secretary*

Adrian Adderley '09  
Alyssa Ahern '13

Michael Barrett '68  
Levent Bayrasli '90

Sarah Braun  
'14 M'18 M'20  
Aurora Brennan '13

Joanna Ciavarella '11  
Nicole Giammarinaro '07

Ann Taranto  
Giordano '69 M'70

Darren Greco '98  
Diane Mathisen '79  
Kenneth Nilsen '88

Dillon Quinn '17  
Claire Regan '80  
Kevin Richard '08  
Robert Scalzo '01 M'03

Charlie Siedenburg '95  
Ashley Sodipo '15  
Keith Stith '87

Tom Thurston '69  
Stacy Trent '94  
Elisabeth Cardiello  
'06 M'07

*Ex-Officio Member*  
John "Jack" Felver '65  
*Ex-Officio Member*



## ALUMNA PROFILE

# Aurora Brennan '13

*Some college students check into their dorms, go to their classes, do their assignments, take their tests and, four years later, collect their sheepskins. That's it. Not Aurora Brennan '13.*

### She was a different kind of student.

**W**HICH MADE HER a different kind of alumna. Currently a resident of Hoboken, N.J., Aurora came to Wagner College from Long Island to play tennis and earn her degree.

“But after joining Alpha Delta Pi in the spring semester of my freshman year,” Aurora says, “I became much more involved in campus life: student government, Greek Senate, Panhellenic, Project Sunshine, the Marketing Club.”

Studies abroad also shaped Aurora's future. Time studying in Rome during her sophomore year led her to change the focus of her undergraduate career to marketing and international business. Later, graduate school in Galway, Ireland gave her a master's degree in strategic marketing.

Today, Aurora works in media strategy with Horizon Media in Manhattan — “one of the most innovative marketing and advertising firms,” she proudly says — as an associate director.

Outside the office, Aurora puts her time to the benefit of others, fostering kittens, volunteering with the Ronald McDonald House Charities (rmhc.org) — and supporting Wagner women, both students and alumnae, in the Women's Professional Network.

“Our mission with WPN is to empower Wagner's female community across all professional disciplines, at every stage of their careers,” Aurora says, “providing everyone with tools for a variety of situations: interviewing, negotiating salary, changing careers and more.”

The Women's Professional Network of the college's Alumni Association was founded in 2014, gaining

focus in 2017 as a professional development initiative where students would attend “lunch and learn” seminars hosted by successful alumnae.

It was in 2017 that Aurora Brennan joined the WPN, hosting her first lunch-and-learn in 2018.

“It was wonderful to hear from so many current students,” she says. “The highlight for me was

discovering that one of the students, Rina Baynes, was on the tennis team, and we have kept in touch ever since.”

In 2019, Aurora stepped up to serve as WPN's co-chair.

“When we went remote in 2020, Aurora contacted us to see how she could continue helping our students through those troubling times,” says Nicolina Astorina, Wagner's director of alumni relations.

Aurora came up with “Adulthood 101,” a virtual WPN program to help graduating seniors chart their transition out of college and into adult life. You can watch the complete program on the Wagner College YouTube channel.

At last count, the WPN served 192 members — 112 alumnae and 80 students.

For Aurora, the Women's Professional Network is exactly what she wishes she had when she was a Wagner student.

“I always think back to my days on campus and how I wish WPN was around so I could attend a lunch-and-learn with Lisa Bennett or Mary Caracappa,” two alumnae and members of our board of trustees, “who have always been incredible advisers and advocates for Wagner and WPN,” Aurora says.

Thank you, Aurora Brennan '13, for helping to create the tools today's Wagner women need to succeed! ■





# Waggies in the News

## What's the deal with Waggies and Christmas?!



**Mark Chmiel '85** played Phil the Mailman in “Dolly Parton’s Christmas on the Square,” which ran on Netflix during the 2020 Christmas season.

The film was shot in Atlanta over the summer of 2019 — perhaps not the best time of year to be shooting a Christmas film.

“I’m just relieved that when you look at the movie, you can’t see the sweat — but know it’s there,” Mark told reporter Terry Ahner of the Lehigh Valley Times-News.



**Keith Giglio '85** and longtime writing partner — and wife — Juliet Giglio were the screenwriters behind “Dear Christmas,” featuring Melissa Joan Hart and Jason Priestley, on Lifetime last Christmas.

The Giglios are old hands at writing Christmas films for Lifetime. Their movie “Christmas Reservations” ran in 2019, and “A Very Nutty Christmas” screened the year before.

Both Giglios teach screenwriting: Keith at Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Communications and Juliet at SUNY Oswego. ■

## Ming’s next chapter

THOSE OF US WHO WERE on the Hill a decade ago got to know Naofall Folahan '14, a tall, friendly basketball whiz from Benin with an infectious smile. “Ming,” as everyone called him, was the Seahawks’



all-time leading shot blocker. After graduating, he played for a few years with the Canadian Basketball League, ultimately landing in Halifax, the bustling capital of Nova Scotia — and there, he founded a new kind of basketball academy.

Ming’s charm, hard work and innovative approach to the business of the private sports academy drew the attention of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Canada’s public broadcasting service, which aired a feature on him in March.

The following month, a second feature covered a vandalism attack on Ming’s Halifax Prep. “It goes to two things,” he said, “either a racial thing, or it can be a colleague who doesn’t want to see this succeed.” ■

## Three Wagner Seahawks recently earned Ivy League degrees in medicine:



**Anthony Tucker-Bartley '17** earned a doctorate in medicine, cum laude, from

Harvard Medical School. Now an anesthesiology resident at Massachusetts General Hospital, he is also conducting research at Boston Children’s Hospital on painful disorders that affect children.



**Patrick Connelly '16** earned a doctorate in veterinary medicine from Cornell University College

of Veterinary Medicine and is now completing a Ph.D. in ecology at Fordham University. Connelly is researching infectious disease ecology and epidemiology with dual focuses: infectious diseases for wildlife

health, and conservation and zoonotic diseases relevant to global health.



**Karina Roinestad '16** earned a doctorate in veterinary medicine from Cornell University College

of Veterinary Medicine and is now working as an emergency veterinarian on Staten Island.

# Presidential History Tourists

Descendants of President Clarence Stoughton visit campus 76 years later



▲ Laura Boothman, Lee Manchester and Donna Stoughton

Wagner College President Clarence C. Stoughton – Wagner College portrait. ►

**M**OST OF THE MESSAGES Wagner College receives through its Facebook page are fairly routine — requests for admissions information, event dates, things like that.

The message we received on Feb. 20 was anything but routine.

“My name is Laura Boothman,” it read. “I am the great-granddaughter of Clarence Stoughton. I will be visiting New York and would like to see the campus for sentimental reasons.”

Clarence Stoughton, our 10th president, started with the college as a teacher in 1919, serving as the school’s top leader from 1935 to 1945. The first non-clergyman to serve as Wagner president, he is remembered today for many things: starting a night school and a nursing program, speaking out against the rise of fascism, and seeing the college through the war years.

I responded immediately, and we made arrangements for Laura and her mom, Donna Stoughton, to visit over Memorial Day weekend, after all of our commencement programs had finished.

There was lots on campus to show them. “Prof” Stoughton (as his adoring students called him) and his wife Hilda came to Staten Island in 1919 from Rochester, N.Y., where they’d been raised.

Campus housing was very limited, so Wagner put the Stoughtons up in a two-room suite on the third floor of Cunard Hall.

Three years later, in 1922, the school built several new cottages for faculty housing, including one for the Stoughtons — the cottage that currently houses our Public Safety program. That’s where the family lived when their first child, Donald, was born in October 1926.

“Prof” took a break from Wagner for a few years, trying his hand in the local real estate business from 1927 to 1932 — but, apparently, his love of the college won out. Stoughton served as registrar, then dean, and finally — at age 40 — became president of the college in 1935. During his tenure as president, Clarence and Hilda Stoughton lived with their children in the house built in 1918 for the head of the college, which today we call Kairos House.

After leaving Wagner College in 1945, he continued working for Lutheran institutions, serving for four years as stewardship secretary for the United Lutheran Church of America before becoming the first lay president of Wittenberg College — later, Wittenberg University — in Springfield, Ohio, a post in which he served from 1949 until his retirement in 1963.



Laura Boothman and Donna Stoughton on the porch of Kairos House, which was home to the Clarence Stoughton family from 1935 to 1945. Donna is wearing the Wagner letter jacket owned by her father, Don, Clarence Stoughton’s son.



Lee Manchester with Donna Stoughton and Laura Boothman in Main Hall, outside the auditorium. Main Hall was the college's primary classroom building during President Stoughton's term in office.



Mother Hilda and baby Don Stoughton (in christening gown) outside the Stoughton cottage (now home of our Public Safety Office) on the Wagner College campus, 1927



Hilda Spitz with Clarence Stoughton, in Army uniform, in Rochester, ca. 1918

Our Memorial Day guests were descended from "Prof" Stoughton's son Donald and his wife, alumna Adele True '48, whose family operated True's Deli in Jersey City (which, today, is a bodega). Donald studied at Wagner from 1943 to 1945, but when his father left the presidency he transferred to Muhlenberg, later enrolling at Hamma Divinity School, part of Wittenberg College. Don and Adele married in 1948 and, following Don's ordination, he continued in the ministry until his retirement in 1988. Donald died in 2013, followed by Adele five years later.

I was grateful that "Prof" Stoughton's granddaughter Donna and her daughter Laura spent part of their holiday vacation reconnecting us with one of our strongest presidents and two memorable alumni — and also that they shared with us a cache of Stoughton family photos, giving us a window into those Wagnerian lives of the past century. ■

— LEE MANCHESTER



Adele True "hee-hawing" around, 1946



Clarence and Don Stoughton at the family's summer retreat, Villa Hilda, in Belgrade, Maine



Hilda and Clarence Stoughton in the Wittenberg College president's residence, ca. 1962



Donald Stoughton and Adele True's wedding, Sept. 26, 1948. Clarence Stoughton is standing, far right.

## First Fellows

**Last spring, after the pandemic closed our campus, President Joel Martin was losing sleep worrying about the seniors who would soon graduate into a Covid-ravaged economy.**

He couldn't make everything better for everyone.

But with our finite resources, he came up with a program that would benefit a dozen graduates — and the college, too.

The Presidential Fellowship placed graduates in a variety of academic and administrative departments, providing support and serving as “near-peer” mentors to current Wagner students.

The “First Fellows” have moved on, either to grad school or new jobs — but the program itself continues, enrolling three graduates this year with targeted goals. ■



### Holly Alexander '20

**Hometown:** Kingston, Jamaica

**Majors:** Government & Politics, English

**Fellowship assignment:** Researcher, teaching assistant, Department of Government & Politics



### Conchetta Aronowitz '20

**Hometown:** Kenilworth, N.J.

**Major:** Theater Design, Technology & Management

**Fellowship assignment:** Theatre Department sound engineer



### Liz Arvanitis '20

**Hometown:** Forked River, N.J.

**Major:** Public Policy & Administration

**Fellowship assignments:** Manage Covid tracking data for President's Office; sociology teaching assistant



### Terrell Braithwaite '20

**Hometown:** Staten Island, N.Y.

**Major:** Sociology

**Fellowship assignment:** Peer mentoring and social development of minority first-year students



### Donovan C. Davis '20

**Hometown:** Los Angeles, Cal.

**Major:** Sociology

**Fellowship assignments:** Peer mentoring; diversity & inclusion initiatives; student mental health



### Abigail Dorcin '19

**Hometown:** Cap-Haïtien, Haiti

**Major:** Business administration

**Fellowship assignments:** Bonner Program; creating internship database for Civic Engagement minor



### Joseph J. Grillo Jr. '20

**Hometown:** Bohemia, N.Y.

**Major:** Business administration

**Fellowship assignment:** Analyzing data on inflow and outflow of Staten Island residents during Covid-19



### Annabeth A. Hinman '20

**Hometown:** Rochester, N.Y.

**Majors:** Government & Politics, Philosophy

**Fellowship assignments:** Writing Center; Gender Studies assistant



### Ruth Kupperberg '20

**Hometown:** Wantagh, N.Y.

**Major:** Theater performance

**Fellowship assignments:** Theatre Department; Alumni Office



### Emily Lagace '20

**Hometown:** Augusta, Maine

**Majors:** Theater studies, English

**Fellowship assignments:** English Department; Theatre Department



### Emmy Steele '20

**Hometown:** Wayne, Pa.

**Major:** Arts administration

**Fellowship assignment:** Theatre Department



### Nicolas Velez '20

**Hometown:** Staten Island, N.Y.

**Major:** International affairs

**Fellowship assignment:** International Affairs



# ClassNotes

Updates from old friends across the generations

## 1950

Some 30 of **Joel Cohen's** satirical columns for the San Diego Jewish World have been collected for his new book, "Mostly Mishegas: How Trump Tried to Make My People Greater Than Ever."

## 1957

**John Bale** and wife Marion Gunther '58 celebrated their 62nd wedding anniversary in February. They have visited 67 countries and 48 states. John served for 13 years as president of the New Providence (N.J.) Historical Society.

## 1958

**Marion Gunther** and husband John Bale '57 celebrated their 62nd wedding anniversary in February. They have visited 67 countries and 48 states.

Marion researched two of her family lines and published these genealogies in conjunction with the McSherrystown (Pa.) Historical Society. These comprised over 24,000 people, some of them going back to the 1500s. Marion conducted her research in Switzerland, Germany, France, Pennsylvania and Maryland.

Staten Island Advance columnist Carol Ann Benanti observed the 67th wedding anniversary of **Daniel S. Muller** and his wife Mary Alice with a profile this March. The couple live in the West Brighton house they purchased in 1962.

Barbara Pisetzner, wife of Dr. **Ira Pisetzner**, died on Feb. 4 at the Delray Beach, Fla. hospice. She was 82.

## 1960

**Frances Ricciardi Saraceno** '60 M'62, great-grandmother of Lucas, is

retired from her work as an adjunct professor of Spanish at SUNY New Paltz. She was the translator of Rogelio Cuesta's "Escaping from the Prisons Within: Ethics as a Process of Liberation (Escaparse de las prisiones interiores)," published by Xulon Press in 2008.

## 1961

**Smedley Lynn** tells us that, after 50 years, he and his wife have relocated to Mt. Juliet, Tenn., "to be close to our daughter, downsize, enjoy lower taxes and get Covid-19." Fortunately, he recovered and is looking forward to visiting his son and grandchildren in Germany.

## 1962

Seahawk football player **Bobby Plotkin** was profiled by journalist Kim Strong in his hometown newspaper, the York Daily Record,

when he lost — and then found — a beloved pinky ring, highlighting the Bayonne native's essential optimism.

## 1964

**Ann Barbarino Christensen** '64 M'73 has retired from the NYC Department of Probation, where she was chief of the Staten Island Family Court Services Branch. She and her husband Warren, a retired high school teacher, have been married for 55 years and have three sons and six grandchildren. After practically a lifetime on Staten Island, the couple moved to Point Pleasant, N.J., where they are actively involved in many community organizations and enjoy the beautiful beaches.

**Bob Hauptman** told us of his plans to attend a small reunion of the first Bregenz

{CONTINUED ON PAGE 36}

### Keep in Touch!

**Email:** alumni@wagner.edu

**Web:** wagner.edu/alumni

**Mail:** Alumni Office, Reynolds House, Wagner College, One Campus Road, Staten Island, NY 10301

**Deadlines:** This issue reflects news received by April 30, 2021.

**Content:** Wagner welcomes your news and updates. We ask that you send us

announcements of weddings, births and graduations after the fact.

**Photos:** We accept photos of Wagner groups at weddings and other special events. With the photo, send the names and class years of all alumni pictured; birth date, parents' names and class years with photos of children; and dates and locations of all events.

**Photo Quality:** Photos must be clear and of good quality. They will be returned at your request (please attach your address to the photo). Low resolution images will not be accepted.

{CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35}

cohort (1962-63) this September in Stowe, Vermont. He expects to publish his 16th book, "A Popular Handbook of the Emotions," and is diligently working on "Debunking Scholarly Nonsense." Kira, the daughter he adopted when he was 60 years old, is now 20 and in college. Another alumnus of that inaugural Bregenz cohort, **William C. "Bill" Johnes**, ran cross country for coach John "Bunny" Barbes '39. Bill, who majored in German, is retired from his career as a language professor at SUNY Potsdam.

## 1966

Wagner College trustee **Jeffrey D. Forchelli**, managing partner of the law firm of Forchelli Deegan Terrana LLP, was chosen in March for the Long Island Business News Power 25 Law list. **Neal Mochel**, who retired as a fire safety inspector and firefighter, volunteers at the Interfaith Council food cupboard, the North Carolina Botanical Garden and Habitat for Humanity. "One daughter had Covid and didn't tell us till she was almost over it," he says. "None of her family caught it." Neal and wife Dana Miller Mochel '68 have been at the same house since 1971 and are looking at retirement communities.

## 1967

Since our last issue, **Russ Johnson** '67 M'72 has published two new novels: "Sanibel Bones," the 10th book in his NYPD Detective Pete Nazareth series, and "The Moscow Initiative," a geopolitical thriller about collusion between the presidents of Russia and the United States. They are, respectively, Russ' 16th and 17th novels.

## 1968

**Susan Rissmiller Bittler** is enjoying her third year of living in the independent section of a senior retirement community in rural western Pennsylvania. **Dana Miller Mochel**, retired from nursing, was working as an animal health tech until the job became full-time, though she still does it as a volunteer at the county animal shelter. "One daughter had Covid and didn't tell us till she was almost over it," says Dana's husband, Neal Mochel '66. "None of her family caught it." The Mochels have been at the same house since 1971 and are looking at retirement communities. In December, New York City renamed a Staten Island street for the late **Arnold Obey** '68 M'73. A Seahawk basketball player and Hall of Fame inductee, Obey was a longtime educator and marathon runner.

**Raymond Schuster's** wife, Linda Hoddinott Schuster '71, died on April 15, 2020.

## 1969

Dr. **Fred J. Schiffman** is an oncologist on the staff of Miriam Hospital in Providence, R.I. He is co-editor of the latest edition of a key reference book on internal medicine, "Cecil Essentials of Medicine (10th Ed.)," published this spring by Elsevier.

## 1970

Nursing graduate **Christine Fleming Mahon**, a member of the Maricopa County (Ariz.) Medical Reserve Corps, has been volunteering since January as a vaccinator. "I've given hundreds of shots," she says, "worked in a wide range of settings and met great people, so it's been a very rewarding experience. It's wonderful that I can still make a difference at the

end of my 50-year nursing career."

## 1971

**Leland Jacob** is a volunteer at Crossroads Farm in Malverne, N.Y.

## 1973

Film producer and jazz musician **Richard Baratta** reported that his latest album, "Music in Film: The Reel Deal," was released last September. By the end of November, it had over 800,000 streams on Spotify and was #26 on the jazz charts for worldwide radio play. **Janice Bell Meisenhelder**, a nursing professor at Boston's Emmanuel College, has just published a journal article, "Maternal Grief: Analysis and Therapeutic Recommendations," building upon her most recent book, "Surviving the Unthinkable: The Loss of a Child."



Steve Russo '78 with his equipment at the Varia Planetarium, part of the East Kentucky Science Center in Prestonsburg, Ky. Steve, who worked at the Wagner College planetarium as a student, recently retired.

## 1975

**Bruce Thomas** had already lived through two careers — teaching in Jersey City, N.J., for 34 years, and working for the Hudson County (N.J.) Office of Aging for 15 years — when he embarked on his third career: working as a substitute school crossing guard for Union Township, N.J. “At 75, I see no reason to stay home and be idle,” Bruce said, “when I can be out in the fresh air for a couple of hours a day helping children get to and from school safely.”

## 1976

Theatre major **Carole Peterson**, who left her earlier career as a computer programmer and project manager for Ross Stores, retired as compliance manager for Wente Vineyards in Livermore, Cal., just before the pandemic shutdown. She and husband Jim Brice, now fully vaccinated and living in Pleasanton, Cal., are beginning their post-pandemic retirement by “getting out of the house on day trips and enjoying views other than our back yard.”

## 1978

**Steven L. J. Russo** retired this spring after 10 years as director of the East Kentucky Science Center and Varia Planetarium in Prestonsburg, Ky. His planetarium career began while he was a student at

Wagner, where he presented shows in the building known today as Spiro Hall. Steve also spent 14 years as a meteorologist on radio and TV in upstate New York. He and his wife Jan are staying in Prestonsburg, and he will continue as a volunteer at the Varia Planetarium.

## 1979

Dr. **Patricia Barry** has been keeping busy, working one or two days a week as a radiologist and caring for elderly (but well!) parents and a disabled son. She and her husband are delighted to see their 18-month-old grandson as much as possible.

## 1980

In December, **Karen Lynch** was inducted into the Staten Island Sports Hall of Fame on the strength of her coaching record, which includes a perfect season at Port Richmond High School and a CUNY Conference Basketball Coach of the Year trophy garnered while coaching at the College of Staten Island. Karen was a double-sport Seahawk, playing softball and basketball at Wagner, where she still holds the single-season record for assists.

Last year, **Rob Weening** and his wife moved from California to the Texas Hill Country, where he accepted a new position as managing director for Highcrest Capital, an



Cam Gill '19 holds the Lombardi Trophy after the Tampa Bay Buccaneers won Super Bowl LV

investment firm located in Fredericksburg.

## 1982

**John Eric Jacobsen**, founder of Jacobsen Business Seminars, recently published his fourth book, “Soft Skills,” about the people skills necessary in job hunting and career change.

## 1983

**Scott Fink** sold his automobile dealerships in the Tampa, Fla. area, Fink Auto Group, to Lithia Motors, a public company.

## 1985

**Lydia “Diane” Plummer-Alleyne** is celebrating the anniversary of the Lydia Mode LLC, a consulting business specializing in support for small and mid-sized firms in the public sector. As a student, Diane served as 1985 class

president, and she was president and vice president of Black Concern. Visit her on the web at [thelydiamode.com](http://thelydiamode.com).

## 1986

**Ken Smolinski** and his wife welcomed their first grandchild, Griffin Stanley Smolinski, into the world on March 9.

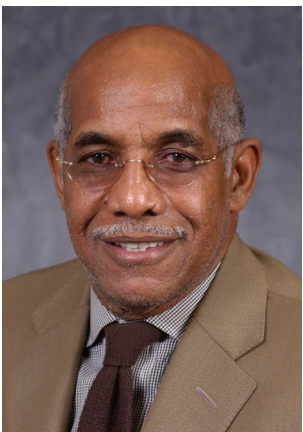
## 1989

This spring **Patricia Adamo** earned her master’s degree in animal behavior and conservation from Hunter College. In December, New York City renamed a Staten Island street for the late **Patricia Mary “Pat” Farrington** M’89. A lifelong Staten Islander, Farrington was the founder of a hospice program that comforted many families in their darkest hours.

{CONTINUED ON PAGE 40}

CENTER FOR BLACK STUDIES

# HISTORY MAKERS



## Milfred Fierce '60 M'67

Seahawk basketball star was a pioneer in developing the field of Black & African Studies in American higher education

MILFRED FIERCE '60 M'67 HAS ALWAYS been in the middle of everything.

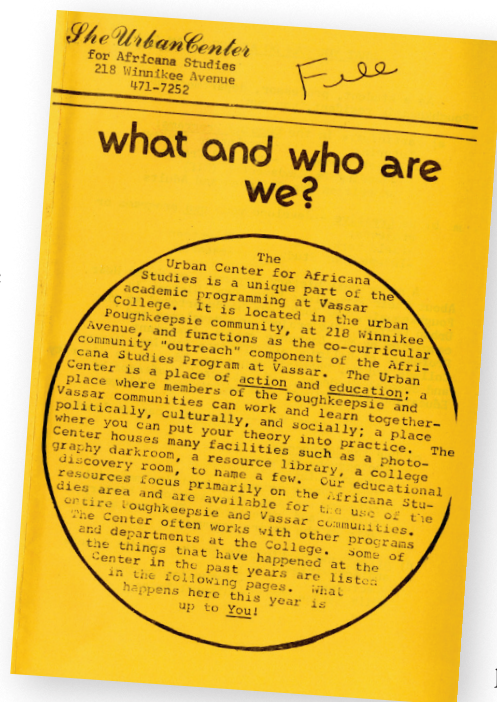
As a Wagner College student athlete, he was “one of the best

basketball players in Seahawk history,” according to his hall of fame induction citation. “Possibly the greatest defensive player in Wagner basketball history, Fierce was captain of the Seahawks in each of his last two years.”

Fierce graduated in 1960 with a major in economics — but his future was in education.

For several years Fierce taught at Junior High School 35 in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, a mile and a half from his family home in Crown Heights. He earned his master’s degree in





education from Wagner in 1967, which qualified him for positions of greater responsibility in the New York City public school system.

That same year, nearby Brownsville was the site of an experiment in establishing local control over a predominantly Black community's public schools. A months-long teachers' strike at Junior High School 271 in the fall of 1968 to protest the shift led Fierce to join the school's staff as a combination guidance counselor, Black history teacher and assistant principal.

It was at J.H.S. 271 that Poughkeepsie's Vassar College found Milfred Fierce in the winter of 1969. Black students at the prestigious women's school, one of the Seven Sisters, were working with college administrators to create a new Black studies program.

"When the Brooklyn native was first contacted," wrote Wagner communications director Brian Morris '65 for a 1970 profile in this magazine, "he was impressed but not interested.

"The second time the Vassar students knocked on his door, Fierce was ready."

According to Morris, Fierce was "a man whose philosophy is to 'go anywhere on earth, do anything, to serve the black people in their struggle.'"

In July 1969, Fierce became the first director of Vassar's Urban Center for Black Studies — one of the only such programs then in existence, started just one year after the first Black Studies department was created at San Francisco State College.

"He is teacher, administrator, director of the urban center, chairman of the black studies department," Morris wrote, "and 'sort of unofficial counselor to the community.'"

The community angle was a central feature of the Urban Center.

"The type of program we are trying to develop here is truly a pioneer program," Fierce told Wagner Magazine in 1970, "the idea of an urban center for study located at the grass roots. It was the students who advanced that the center should be located in the heart of the black community," some two miles from the Vassar campus.

Most of those Black students lived together in a house on campus, Kendrick House, where Fierce and his wife were "house fellows," or dorm parents, according to Claudia Lynn Thomas, who

was president of the college's Students' Afro-American Society. They were happy that the Black Studies program had been started — but unhappy that they still could not major in the field.

Following unsuccessful negotiations with the administration in October 1969, a group of 34 SAS members staged a well-organized, peaceful takeover of Vassar's Main Building. The college responded constructively, agreeing to strengthen the Black Studies program so that students could earn their degrees in the field — and the strike ended.

"The Black studies program at Vassar College became a model for colleges around the nation," Claudia Lynn Thomas wrote in 2006. "Its faculty included prominent scholars, and Milfred C. Fierce directed the program with a style unique to his sincerity, candor and expectations of students."

Milfred Fierce continued in the field of Black and Africana Studies for the rest of his career. He earned his Ph.D. from Columbia while teaching at Hunter College in the 1970s. Later, he invested nearly two decades in the Africana Studies program at Brooklyn College, retiring in 1999 as chairman.

"Africana Studies has the bold and imposing task of educating a relatively uninformed academic community and wider world about the monumental contributions of Africans and people of African descent throughout the annals of human history," Fierce wrote in a 1991 monologue for Cornell University.

"Africana Studies has the capacity to breathe fresh air into the social sciences and humanities," he wrote, emphasizing the significance of the field for the entire academy. "When the frontiers of our knowledge of human understanding and potential are advanced, there are no losers."

All the while, Fierce has maintained his connection to his alma mater, including service on the Wagner College Board of Trustees in the 2000s. That position — as well as his experience at Vassar — gave him a unique perspective when he participated in a 2010 alumni symposium on the 1970 occupation of Cunard Hall by Wagner's Black and Brown students.

We are proud to spotlight Milfred C. Fierce, Ph.D., as a Wagner History Maker. ■



Arts administration alumna Kara (Plant) McEachern '06, director of operations for the Plymouth (Mass.) Philharmonic Orchestra, holds the newest member of her family, Genevieve Clara McEachern, born June 23, 2020. With them are Kara's husband, Michael, and older daughter, Molly.

{CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37}

## 1990

**Maria Giura's** second book, "Celibate: A Memoir," was published last fall by Apprentice House Press. "Celibate" won a 2020 Independent Press Award and focuses on Maria's decade-long relationship with a Catholic priest and her journey to find her own true vocation. Wagner alumni readers should note that some scenes take place at Wagner, which Maria has renamed "Westerly College" in the book. **Cynthia Quinlan** started a nonprofit in 2012, Love Unconditionally Now Abundantly: L.U.N.A. Reflections Inc., which provides workshops to empower girls and women. The organization has been running a series of virtual workshops annually to support women's growth, health and overall well-being. Visit its website at [lunareflections.org](http://lunareflections.org).

## 1998

**Gregg Gavioli** and wife Lesley recently welcomed their third child,

Emmerson Gavioli, into their family. Gregg, who is based in New York, recently celebrated his 15th anniversary as managing director of Solomon Page, one of America's largest recruiting firms. He has also been serving for the past four years as a special adviser to the Wagner Select Business program with Prof. Donald Crooks and trustee Mary Caracappa and assisting students with job placement.



Daniel Genovese-Scullin '07 (above, right), a Wagner College Theatre program graduate, changed careers in 2015, becoming a nurse. In May 2017 he married Anthony Genovese, and three years later their daughter MaryRose was born – brought into the world with the help of Anthony's twin sister, who donated an egg, and Dan's sister, who carried their baby.

## 2000

**Chris Curti** has published a novel for young adults, "The Wolves of Nakoba Ridge," about a ninth grader who faces off against the bullies who roam his high school hallways and the demons that haunt his dreams. "I greatly enjoyed my time at Wagner," Chris says, "the wonderful professors, the Oval and the great friends I made while residing in Towers."

## 2003

Plymouth, Mass. native **Eddie Bates** has joined Focus Real Estate in Boston, Mass. as a licensed realtor. Bates previously served as an urban planner in Brookline, Mass.

## 2006

**Samantha (Hammel) Bower** is happily married with three boys, ages 8, 5 and 1. She owns the Performing Arts Connection in Sudbury, Mass.

## 2007

Nursing graduate **Nicole Filippazzo Giammarinaro** recently co-authored "Team Lavender: Supporting Well-Being During the Covid-19 Pandemic," a case study published in Nursing 2021: Journal of Clinical Excellence. **Christine Wendt**, manager of social services and care coordination at Hackensack University Medical Center and Palisades Medical Center, graduated early this year with her second master's degree from St. Joseph's University in healthcare administration. She also recently completed a Women in Leadership certificate program from Notre Dame University.

## 2009

Graphic novelist **Robert Geronimo** wrote the story for a new 80-page B&W book, "Wirehead," with art by one of his students. Geronimo describes the book, released in March, as "a mixture of '70s horror and '80s sci-fi." **Steph Loffredo**, social marketing strategist for brands at digital agency Huge, was recognized with a Future Leader Award by online magazine Digiday for

# Knot Notes

developing a machine that dispenses free tampons, called Hoooha.

## 2010

This spring **Danielle Sheehan Scharp** was accepted into Columbia University's highly competitive nursing Ph.D. program.

## 2011

**Jake Shore's** play, "Adjust the Procedure," about life during the coronavirus pandemic, was staged online this spring by Spin Cycle in association with JCS Theater Company. Jake directs the Academic Advisement Center at St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn and teaches creative writing at his alma mater.

## 2012

Former Seahawk linebacker **Dom Gaston** was tagged this February as head coach for Sparta, N.J.'s Pope John High School football program, where he had previously served as defensive coordinator. He spent three seasons as wide receivers coach at Bates College, and worked last year as wide receivers coach and recruiting coordinator at Bryant University.

## 2013

Wagner College Theatre graduate **Chris Luner** co-created, produced and was assistant director for an independent feature film, "Ranch Water," shot

in Texas during the pandemic. Visit [ranchwaterfilm.com](http://ranchwaterfilm.com) for festival screenings and release date.

## 2014

**Sarah Braun '14 M'18 M'20**, after working for the Admissions Office for five years at her alma mater, recently took a new position as admissions director at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. Wagner College Theatre alumnus **Brian Falduto** reported that "last year I wrote, produced and acted in a cute little experimental queer short film, 'Nosebleed.'" The film was selected for the 2021 LGBTQ+ Los Angeles Film Festival.

## 2015

**Kerri Lee Alexander** has been named assistant vice president of student affairs and chief inclusion officer at Xavier University of Louisiana. After graduating from Wagner, Kerri earned a master's degree in theological studies from Princeton and completed coursework for a Ph.D. in history from Howard University.

Actor **Evan Odeseye** appeared in three episodes of the Showtime series "City on a Hill" when it aired its second season this spring. In December, former Seahawk basketball standout **Orlando Parker** was picked up by the London Lions, a top-tier



Alumni Association board president Carolina Silva '16 (right) got married to her college sweetheart, Ashley Olsen '11 M'17, on April 10, 2021, in Brooklyn, New York. They celebrated their wedding with an intimate reception at home with their family and loved ones. Congratulations, alumnae!

British Basketball League team. He has previously played professional ball in Colombia, Ireland and Germany, most recently with the P.S. Karlsruhe Lions.

## 2016

Five years after finishing his Seahawk pitching career, **Michael R. "Mike" Adams** (not to be confused with 2013-14 Phillies relief pitcher John Michael "Mike" Adams) was signed in January by the Phillies organization. He was co-owner of the Baseball Performance Center in Pleasantville, N.J., a training facility for pitchers seeking placement on college and professional teams, and worked part-time as a scout for the Milwaukee Brewers. Another former Seahawk baseball standout, **Ben Ruta**, was picked up in the

December draft by the San Diego Padres organization, where he will play for the Triple-A El Paso Chihuahuas. Ben played for four years in the New York Yankees organization, most recently with the Double-A Trenton Thunder.

## 2017

Seahawk offensive lineman **Greg Senat**, formerly with the Dallas Cowboys and the Kansas City Chiefs, was signed in March by the Cleveland Browns.

## 2020

Former Seahawk All-American linebacker **Cam Gill** played a high-profile role in this year's Super Bowl win by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers when he sacked Patrick Mahomes, quarterback for the opposing Kansas City Chiefs, forcing a fumble. ■

# In Memoriam

*Celebrating lives that enriched the Wagner family*

## ALUMNI

Helen Sandberg Swartz '42  
Evelyn Ellis Drescher '44  
Virginia Bloom King '46 M'52  
Rev. Alastair Sellars '46  
Margaret Kiltbau Fornari '47  
Aurora Falzone Rufolo '49 M'57  
Norman E. Schaefer '49  
Jean Lawrie Ely '50  
Bernice Kiefer Hanson '50  
Philip F. Schick '50  
Donald C. Spruck '50  
Rev. Bernard F. Engelhardt '51  
Anita Dinnerstein Targan '51  
Rev. Theodore W. Warren '51  
Kaare Allan Johnson '52 M'60  
Marie L. Pahnke Pflaum '52 M'53  
Honnora Farrell Santoro '52  
Henry J. Foerst '53  
Rev. Ernest W. Johns Jr. '53  
Victor A. Perosi '53  
Herbert D. Kuhl '54  
Ralph J. Maffeo '54  
Herbert F. Schumann '54 M'63  
Rev. Russell B. Greene Jr. '55 M'62  
Jeffrey J. Safford '56 M'60  
Susan Patchin Drury '59  
Judith O'Donnell '59 M'65

Michael S. Simon '59  
Harp Junta '60  
John H. Koehne '60  
Robert W. Smith '60  
Joseph Metzger III '61  
John A. Keeler '62  
Joseph F. Sansone '62  
Howard E. Stevenson '63 M'70  
Ralph A. Beisner '64 M'68  
John F. Crews '64  
Thomas Richard Leach M'64  
Van H. Neher '64  
Daniel R. Seidel '64 M'75  
Kenneth T. Busteed '65  
William C. Hass '65  
Harold W. Haugeito '65  
John H. Hord '65  
Elena C. Fiorelli Santo '65  
Richard Cornali '67  
Caroline Banks Planting '67  
Nancy Jo Behling Dillon '68  
Dale M. Dunlop '68  
Michael Allen Jones '68  
Joseph F. Kelly M'68  
Vincent Romeo '68  
Oliver R. Featherston '69  
Clifford C. Halper '70  
Pat M. Pappalardo '70

James J. Ronga '70  
Andrew A. Senese '70  
Peter S. Breslaw '71  
Kathy Perricone Kleinlein '71 M'74  
Linda Hoddinott Schuster '71  
Peter Hudson '72  
Elizabeth A. Sheil Dubovsky '73  
Kathleen A. Bobbitt '76 M'78  
Leo J. O'Donnell '79  
Carolyn Gay '80 M'83  
Anthony M. Deluca '82  
Rev. Dr. E. Harold Jansen, H'83  
Sarah "Sassy" MacDermot '88  
Bonnie "Nummy" Jolanthe MacDermot '88  
Michael Allen Jones '89  
Jean D. McLaughlin M'97  
Cesibelle Lara-Umana '20

## FACULTY

Martha Bixler

## FRIENDS OF WAGNER COLLEGE

Lucille Chazanoff  
Herman Emigholz  
Daniel "Danny" B. King II  
Patricia L. McElligott  
Virginia G. Monterosso  
Brian Schwartz

## FACULTY REMEMBRANCE

### **Kathleen A. Bobbitt '76 M'78,**

associate professor of microbiology, died in January following a lengthy illness. She was 66. Kathy, who joined the Wagner faculty in 1981 and taught generations of students in biology and microbiology, was beloved by students and colleagues. One student wrote that Kathy was "one of the smartest professors I've ever met." "I know that we will all miss Kathy's presence on campus," said Provost Jeffrey Kraus, "but she will always be in our hearts."





## Pasquale 'Pat' Pappalardo '70

Pasquale "Pat" Pappalardo '70 died last November from leukemia. He was 81. Born in Naples, Italy, Pat and his brother Joe immigrated to the United States, opening their namesake pizzeria in Castleton Corners, Staten Island, in 1960. In the Seventies Pat went into real estate, opening Papp Realty. "He was one of the honorable, good guys," said Staten Island realtor George Wonica, "one of the super ones out there."



## Elizabeth Dubovsky '73

Elizabeth Dubovsky '73 died in February from complications of pancreatic cancer. She was 69. Betsy met her husband Bill Dubovsky M'73 at Wagner; the couple lived in Eltingville, Staten Island. A self-proclaimed "not-for-profit lifer," in 1998 she became the first executive director of the Staten Island Foundation, serving there for 22 years. "She inspired us to be our best selves," said foundation board member Alice Diamond, "and her legacy will continue to inspire Staten Island."



## Cesibelle Lara-Umana '20

Cesibelle Lara-Umana '20, a Brooklyn-born physical therapy assistant, was completing her sociology degree at Wagner when she died in December 2019 at the age of 26. She was the wife of Timothy Umana, who works for the college in Central Services, and the mother of Esmerelda and Emma. Known for her infectious laugh, her elaborate themed parties and her love of Disneyworld, Cesibelle lived by the Tinkerbell motto: "All you need is faith, trust and a little pixie dust."



## Virginia G. Monterosso

Virginia G. Monterosso, who died in February, was a devoted friend of Wagner College. Ginger, as her family knew her, was a career librarian, serving in the 1980s at Wagner's Horrman Library and, later, with the law firm of Kenyon & Kenyon. She had numerous alumni in her family, including her late, beloved husband Judge Vincent J. Monterosso '63, son Paul '03, and Monterosso extended-family members Richard '67, Paul '72 M'76 and Kari '04. In her late husband's honor, Ginger endowed the Monterosso Scholarship Fund ([wagner.edu/give](http://wagner.edu/give)), which welcomes your support.

## Turning the Lights On

*Reflecting on the Liberal Arts College* By Laura Morowitz

When I was in college, I took my first course in art history. My love for the subject hit me like a bolt of lightning and I knew I would eventually go on to graduate school and obtain my Ph.D. But right after college I needed some time to get my German up to speed and to make some money. I took a year off and was fortunate to get a job with a financial company that specialized in making loans to art dealers and collectors. My boss was a man named Gideon Strauss, a 75-year-old, bow-tie-wearing, cello-playing emigre, perhaps the most cultured and — certainly to a 22-year-old girl from Brooklyn — the most intimidating person I had ever met.

When the phone rang, he would answer the phone, “Strauss here,” and then proceed to converse with the speaker in English, German, French, Italian or Hebrew. When I met him, he had just determined to teach himself Russian. Born in Vienna, Gideon grew up in Berlin into a life of great culture and considerable wealth. He spent his adolescence in Swiss boarding schools and was certainly being fitted for a life of privilege.

But this destiny never came to pass.

Instead, he became a refugee in Hitler’s Europe, where his family

“Many, many more people could never imagine the life of comfort, camaraderie and learning that we are so lucky to take part in.”

lost all they had. In the late ’40s he became one of the first pioneers in the new state of Israel. He then made his way to the United States, becoming a banker and, in his 60s, a deeply knowledgeable expert on contemporary art.

One day I overheard a client asking Gideon where he had gone to school.

Gideon told him he had been educated in Swiss boarding schools.

“No,” the client said, “I mean university. Oxford?” he asked. “Or did you stay closer to Berlin?”

“I didn’t,” Gideon said, “I never had the chance to attend college.”

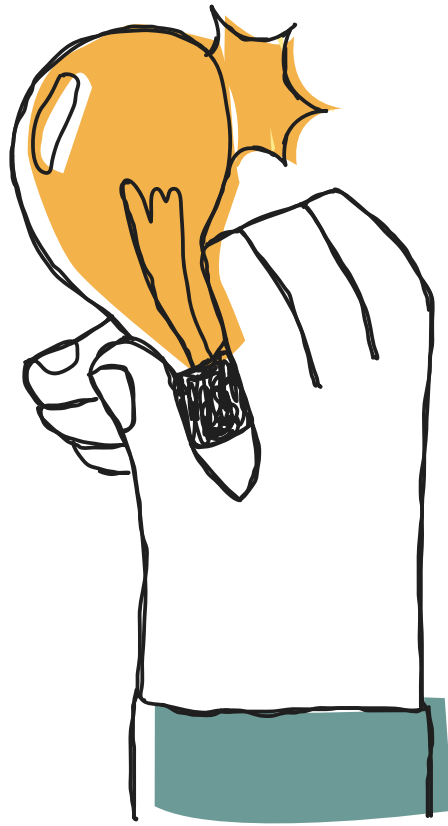
Not a man prone to self-pity, this was the first time I had heard the note of regret in his voice. His sadness at not having attended university was something he would repeat to me over the years. Despite the vast difference in our ages, and his impressive and enormous life experiences, I realized that in this arena, Gideon envied me.

The college that Gideon had longed to attend was not a trade school, a conservatory or an art school. No, the experience he yearned for was a liberal arts college.

The term “liberal arts college” is one you have surely heard — after all, you attended one! Perhaps the simplest way to describe one is to say that it is the only place where you can declare your major is “undeclared.” Students say it in a half whisper, almost as if it were a badge of shame — but they, too, wind up committed and happy.

Some arrive at school with the joy of long courtship, having known since the age of seven that they wanted to be a nurse, or set on discovering the origins of language.

Some have been in a committed relationship with their chosen path, acting in every play since entering high school, or writing



for every blog they could find. Those are wonderful.

But those who have arrived on campus undeclared may well fall in love, as I did, with a field they did not even know existed. They may suddenly realize that all they've ever really wanted to do is speak French, or learn as much as they could about ancient religions, or solve the most complex physics problems.

The beauty of the liberal arts colleges is that all students will have a chance to do these things, even if they've long settled on what they would like to do for a living. If they don't study biology, they'll study chemistry or physics. And if they don't read a great play by Shakespeare, they'll read a great novel by James Baldwin or Margaret Atwood or Salman Rushdie. So not knowing exactly what you want to focus on isn't a drawback at a liberal arts college — it's the very point of it.

Wagner is a liberal arts college, and I know you remember your experience here. You eventually chose a major and devoted a certain number of courses to its study. But you also got to take lots of courses just because they interested you. Taking those classes might not have made you more of an expert in your chosen occupation or guaranteed that you would earn more money. But they made you a more interesting person, someone who understands more parts of the world and how they interact with one another. They probably made you a more compassionate person by allowing you to step into the shoes of people with different experiences

than yours, to contemplate the problems of a far wider share of humanity. They made you more innovative and creative, growing your ability to examine problems and issues from a multiplicity of perspectives. And, if your college experience was like mine, they made you a happier person for revealing to you the endless resilience, fortitude and diversity of human beings, as well as how often problems we thought were ours alone have been contemplated and considered over continents and often through centuries.

Each year at Wagner College, I get to teach a new group of students in their first-year learning community, a collection of three courses these thirty or so freshmen take together to kick off their experience of our signature curriculum, the Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts. You want to know what I tell them as they begin their college education — the deep, broad education that Gideon Strauss so longed for?

Practicality is important — but no less important is passion. This is your life; choose to do what you love. That is your greatest chance to be successful, if success means a life of meaning and joy.

Expand your horizons. That is the name of a study-abroad program here at a Wagner, but I mean it in a much broader sense. While at Wagner, make sure the world you construct for yourself — the people you befriend, the experiences you have, the books you read, the discussions in which you take part, the research you do, even the foods you try! — is different and pushes you out of your comfort zone.

Appreciate the incredible privilege of being where you are. Many people yearn for the days of being back in college, and the freedom and stimulation it entailed. Many, many more people could never imagine the life of comfort, camaraderie and learning that we are so lucky to take part in.

Gideon Strauss reminded me of how fortunate I was to have been shaped and equipped for life by a liberal arts education. I will never forget it. ■

*Laura Morowitz, Ph.D., a professor of art history, has been a part of the Wagner College faculty since 1996. Her 2009 historical novel, "The Miracles of Prato," was co-authored with Wagner English professor Laurie Lico Albanese. Her forthcoming book, "Erasures and Eradications in Modern Viennese Art, Architecture and Design," was co-edited with Megan Brandow-Faller.*

## WAGNER COLLEGE



### September

Graduates of the Last Decade Happy Hour  
9/23/21, NYC

---

### October

Wagner Weekend  
10/1/21-10/2/21, Wagner College

OutWagner Tea  
10/16/21, NYC

---

### November

Black Professional Alliance Alumni Happy Hour  
11/10/21, NYC

---

### December

Holiday Reception for Alumni  
12/3/21, NYC

For more information,  
visit our events calendar website:  
[wagner.edu/alumni-events](http://wagner.edu/alumni-events)