On Campus

250 Years . . . So Far

Columbia’s 250th anniversary year was a milepost along the way, not just a look back

Winter 2004-05

Given its long and eventful journey from a small college in Colonial America to a modern university of global reach, Columbia could have observed its now-concluded 250th anniversary year simply by looking back. But it seemed appropriate that the celebration embody not only the University’s distinguished past but its vibrant present. And so the year highlighted the range of activities and interests that mark the University community of today, as well as the underlying spirit of learning that remains Columbia’s reason for being.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the academic symposia that began a lively closing weekend. On the evening of Thursday, September 30, Columbia showcased artistic innovation at the Low Library symposium “Re:NEW Frontiers in Creativity.” Organized by music professor Bradford Garton, the director of the Computer Music Center, and Elaine Sisman, the Anne Parsons Bender Professor of Music and department chair, the event allowed Columbia artists to present installations and new-media music and dance pieces, each of which concluded with response and discussion from the artists, performers, and critics in attendance.

The following day brought “The 21st Century City and Its Values: Urbanism, Toleration, and Equality” to Miller Theatre. Reaching beyond any single discipline, the event gathered architects, planners, legal scholars, and social scientists for a discussion of organizing principles — physical, social, political, and economic — for today’s emerging multicultural cities. “We shaped something broad in scope that aimed to be provocative,” said art history and archaeology professor Hilary Ballon, who worked with Ira Katznelson ’66CC, Ruggles Professor of Political Science and History, to organize the symposium. “The event really tried to encompass a range of the challenges facing us in the twenty-first century — finding ways to create humane and tolerant environments in the face of extremely dense conditions.”

Each concluding symposium embodied the forward-looking impulse that Columbia has long fostered. But among the many things that distinguish the University is its specific environment — the city as a whole, and the Morningside Heights neighborhood in particular. And so, in an event that reflected a particular bit of local history, the best minds of many Columbia generations crammed into the fabled West End bar to hear a lively recitation of the epic poem *Howl*, by the late Allen Ginsberg ’48CC. A capacity crowd of 580 heard four readers bring the poem to life, giving all in attendance a taste of the 1950s Beat scene that was born at Columbia (see "Columbians Ahead of the Beat").

Also harkening back (and perhaps ahead as well), the ever-anarchic Columbia University Marching Band led an outdoor pep rally for the football team, energizing hundreds of students assembled at Low Plaza for the following afternoon’s Homecoming game against Princeton. Almost 11,000 fans turned out at Baker Field for a hard-fought contest that saw the Lions fall just short in a 27-26 overtime loss.

The outcome, however, did little to dampen the festive spirit at the stadium complex: as at the opening weekend, students, alumni, and friends gathered for a barbecue, with a carnival’s worth of diversion for the many children on hand. Broadening Home-coming beyond its traditional focus on College and Engineering graduates, a C250 Parade of alumni and students representing the University’s schools marched into the stadium, led by 12 of Columbia’s Olympic athletes, including gold medalists Trent Dimas ’02GS and Derrick Adkins, an assistant coach for cross-country and track and field. Other notable participants included former president Michael Sovern ’52CC ’55LAW, Columbia 250 co-chairs Henry King ’48CC, a Trustee chairman emeritus, and Kenneth Jackson, the Jacques Barzun Professor of History and the Social Sciences; and Provost Emeritus Wm. Theodore de Bary ’41CC ’53GSAS ’94HON. President Lee C. Bollinger ’71LAW addressed the crowd at halftime, congratulating student-athletes named to all–Ivy League teams and thanking contributors to the celebration.

Columbia 250 formally concluded eight days later with a visit from England’s Prince Andrew, the Duke of York and a direct descendant of George II, who signed the original King’s College charter. Joining President Bollinger in making formal remarks at an October 11 gala dinner at Low Library, Prince Andrew saluted Columbia and its distinguished history; British Consul-General Sir Philip Thomas and University Trustee Marilyn Laurie ’59BC took turns toasting the U.S. and U.K. and the special relationship they continue to enjoy.

“The events of closing weekend exemplified the diversity of programming over the course of the entire C250 celebration,” said Ember Deitz Goldstein ’03BUS, COO of Columbia 250. “We’re extremely pleased that so many people took part, over the closing weekend and over the entire past year.”

Indeed, what a year it was. A four-part series of lectures on Columbia’s history drew more than 1,000 to Low Library in the spring, and symposia over the course of the year addressed subjects ranging from constitutions and democracy to genetic research to Earth’s future. Eric Kandel, Columbia’s Nobel Prize-winning neurophysiologist, was joined at the May 2004 “Brain and Mind” symposium by Richard Axel ’67CC of the College of Physicians & Surgeons; a few months later, Axel would win a Nobel Prize of his own, with former postdoctoral fellow Linda B. Buck, for “discoveries of odorant receptors and the organization of the olfactory system” (see CUMC’s "Axel and Former Postdoc Share Nobel Prize").

The celebration provided the opportunity to tell Columbia’s story, in a variety of media, with the help of those best equipped to do so. Filmmaker Ric Burns ’78CC ’83GSAS used his unique vision to prepare an affectionate portrait of the University shown at alumni gatherings nationwide and also on Channel 13 here in New York. Burns and Columbia 250 Executive Director Roger Lehecka ’67CC ’74GSAS attended several showings of the film around the country, participating in lively discussions with alums who shared their own perspectives on the University and its history.

Alumni participated in other ways as well. Asked by the Columbia 250 Web site to “write Columbia’s history,” scores responded with submissions that will be preserved in a digital archive until CU’s 300th anniversary. Graduates also nominated notable fellow alumni, professors, and other “Columbians Ahead of Their Time,” who were profiled on the Web site in short biographies.

The celebration prompted books of both general and scholarly interest, including *Stand, Columbia*, a well-received history of the University by Barnard’s Robert McCaughey, the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of History, which is the first such account in a century. Other volumes include *My Columbia*, a collection of memoirs by students, faculty, and administrators assembled by Ashbel Green ’50CC ’52GSAS, vice president and senior editor at Knopf and chair of the Columbia 250 publications committee, and *Changing the Subject*, an examination of the history of women at *Columbia*, by Rosalind Rosenberg, also a Barnard history professor (see "Beyond Alma Pater"). Some 50 articles prepared under de Bary’s direction for Columbia

magazine’s “Living Legacies” series will be collected in an upcoming volume.

The articles will also be accessible through a new alumni Web site, to be un-veiled in 2005. That site will incorporate many of the interactive features — such as “Columbians Ahead of Their Time” — created for the Columbia 250 Web site, which generated more than 1,000,000 page views and 300,000 unique visitors. And e-newsletters developed for the anniversary established a medium for communication with alumni that will continue in coming months to provide news of interest and invitations to events on and off campus.

Outside Columbia’s gates, the U.S. Postal Service recognized the anniversary with a commemorative postal card depicting Low Library. The University also helped renovate four neighborhood subway stations, and hosted a special Community Festival in September that drew hundreds from the surrounding neighborhoods — along with city council members and U.S. Representative Charles B. Rangel ’87HON — for a slate of art, sports clinics, food, and more. Among the afternoon’s highlights were musical performances by Taj Mahal, Eddie Palmieri y la Perfecta II, and Dee Dee Bridgewater.

Even farther afield, University officials made the celebration a truly international one by visiting with alumni around the world. President Bollinger attended enthusiastic gatherings in Asia (Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, Taipei, and Hong Kong), London (where he was joined by Provost Alan Brinkley), and Paris (see "Around the World in 250 Years").

After a full year of celebration, the University now turns to the future. Susan Feagin ’74GS, executive vice president for university development and alumni relations, plans to use Columbia 250 as a jumping-off point for future interaction between the University and alumni of all schools. “One of the wonderful aspects of the celebration was that it showed alumni they can enjoy a relationship with the University today, whether they graduated last year or 50 years ago,” Feagin said. “It allowed us to strengthen our connections with our alumni community, creating momentum to build upon for many years to come.”



Guide to school abbreviations

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