Alumni

Columbia's New Yorkers

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“New York gives people a feeling of belonging, regardless of background,” says Nicole A. Gordon ’74BC ’77LAW, one of the prominent New York alumni featured in the pages that follow.

“There’s nowhere else in the world where you can see so many different kinds of people and know that at some level they can all make a way for themselves.”

Nearly half of Columbia’s 250,000 alumni—both transplants and homegrown—now live in the greater metropolitan area. Here, with a dozen portraits, we salute a few of our most notable New Yorkers. Whether feeding a hunger for knowledge or for a caviar omelet, watching the news or gazing at the planets, casting a vote or taking a child to school, City dwellers are linked to Columbians who have made their way to positions of influence.

It’s no wonder that so many Columbians help drive New York forward. As soon as students morph into alumni, they hit the ground running. Celebrating the University’s talented young alumni, this feature culminates in a group photo ("Young Lions," below) that gathers recent graduates from each of Columbia’s 15 schools.

Brian Lehrer ’96PH

Debate of the issues, a mirror on the way we live, and community building —together these define Lehrer’s acclaimed WNYC radio show. Lehrer, who taught journalism at Columbia before studying public health, joined public radio in 1989 as host of a daily call-in program. Over the years, Alice Walker, Queen Noor, Lou Reed, Yogi Berra, Richard Perle, and Desmond Tutu have all been guests; callers have ranged from concerned middle-schoolers to Senator Hillary Clinton. Lehrer stands out for his formidable research skills, easy on-air manner, and ability to get people to take each other seriously despite their differences. “People say I’m lucky to get to talk for a living,” Lehrer says, “but really I get to listen.”

David Emil ’77LAW

He was an owner of New York’s highest (and highest-grossing) restaurant, Windows on the World. In response to the loss of 79 employees on 9/11, he helped establish Windows of Hope, a relief fund for the families of victims in the hospitality business. Besides a restaurateur, Emil is also a lawyer and a third-generation Manhattanite who plays the piano and lives down the block from Columbia with his wife, Jennifer Crichton ’02GSAS, and their two kids. A self-proclaimed “lover of urban life,” Emil was Battery Park City Authority president from 1987 to 1994 and oversaw the construction of Stuyvesant High School, now attended by his daughter. He spent his undergrad years in New Haven and adds, “I loved Yale but was happy to come back to New York.”

Emanuel Stern ’90SIPA

The Soho Grand Hotel opened in 1996 and quickly became one of New York’s hippest spots to stay and be seen. “We spent a lot of time analyzing whether the neighborhood would support a hotel, so it’s gratifying that it has been embraced by the community,” says Stern, president and chief operating officer of the real estate investment company Hartz Mountain Industries, Inc., which financed the Soho Grand. Among the company’s other office, industrial, retail, and hotel properties is the nearby Tribeca Grand and a pair of buildings on the Jersey City waterfront. The latter, Stern explains, “is an extension of Manhattan’s financial district. The Hudson River is a geological barrier, a political barrier—not a market barrier.”

Sheena Wright ’90CC ’94LAW

A Harlem resident raised in the South Bronx, Wright proudly traces her ancestry back to Senegal. President and CEO of the Abyssinian Development Corporation, she spearheads revitalization programs in housing, human services, economic development, and education in Harlem, such as the construction of the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change—the first school to be built in the

community in 50 years. Wright draws inspiration from her mother, AIDS awareness leader Debra Fraser-Howze, and hopes that her own work in promoting “Harlem’s second renaissance” will, in turn, “plant the seeds of activism” in her two children.

Joel Klein ’67CC

On his C.V. —an outer-borough boyhood, a Washington private law practice, and terms as deputy White House counsel (President Clinton), assistant attorney general (antitrust: he sued Microsoft), and chair/CEO of Bertelsmann, Inc. Now Klein brings his vision of meritocracy and accountability to the City’s 1,200 schools. “I grew up in public housing, went to public schools, and have a passion for public education,” he says. “I am a New York kid.”

Eli Zabar ’67GS

“Today, they call it attention-deficit disorder, but my mother’s word for it was the Yiddish shpilkes,” says Zabar. “How I got through Columbia is beyond me.” Whatever they call this ants-in-the-pants syndrome, Zabar has channeled it into Eli’s eateries known for their flavorful yet simply prepared cuisine, plus an artisanal bread bakery, a catering business, a wine boutique, a gift shop, and gourmet groceries. His family’s ever-expanding Broadway store may epitomize Upper West Side deli chic, but this hands-on Zabar commands the Upper East Side with his sprawling markets and top-of-the-line restaurants.

Neil de Grasse Tyson ’91GSAS

Bringing the cosmos down to earth is Tyson’s passion as a speaker, as a writer, and as director of the American Museum of Natural History’s Hayden Planetarium—the very place that inspired his love affair with the universe as a nine-year-old kid from the Bronx. Tyson’s honors run the gamut from being named “sexiest astrophysicist alive” by *People* magazine in 2000 to having an asteroid named after him by the International Astronomical Union. However, Tyson’s greatest talent is bringing the

frontier of modern cosmic discovery to the public in a city where it’s not always so easy to see the stars.

Shelly Lazarus ’70BUS

Chairman and CEO of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide, Lazarus started there in 1971 when founder David Ogilvy still walked the halls and preached that the purpose of advertising was to build great brands. One of only four women in her class at Columbia Business School, Lazarus is now one of the most influential executives in advertising—“the business I love,” she says. Her role is a far cry from what being a woman in advertising usually meant when she was growing up—appearing in an ad for cold cream to attract a man or for a household product to clean for one. While managing high-powered careers, she and her husband, George Lazarus ’71PS, a pediatrician, have raised three children. She says being a mom has made her a better leader.

Ti-Hua Chang ’77JRN

For the last 11 years, four-time Emmy Award–winner Chang has brought the news to millions of WNBC-TV viewers in New York. Raised at 105th Street and Columbus Avenue, he has worked at TV stations across the country—Biloxi, Mississippi; Philadelphia; Denver; and Detroit. When he returned to New York in 1993, he saw the City with new eyes. “As a reporter, I travel around much more than I did growing up. I go to neighborhoods I never went to before. I understand the City far more thoroughly, ”explains Chang, who has also won a prestigious Peabody Award. “The New York metro area is so diverse, it’s like covering a country.” Chang is especially proud of discovering the four witnesses to the 1963 murder of Medgar Evers, which led to the reopening of that famous case.

Arlene Levine Goldsmith ’61SW

“Every child deserves a family,” says Goldsmith, executive director of New Alternatives for Children, who co-founded the agency in 1982 in response to New York City’s “boarder baby” crisis, when babies with HIV, drug-exposed babies, and disabled toddlers overflowed hospital wards. In the decades since, she has worked to improve family stability and services for more than 1,700 low-income medically fragile children and their siblings. “Beneath the exterior of New York, beneath the glamour and the affluence, is a great deal of poverty,” says Goldsmith, who was a child herself when she first became interested in social work. “I want to open up doors for these children.”

Nicole A. Gordon ’74BC ’77LAW

The founding executive director of the independent, non-partisan New York City Campaign Finance Board, Gordon cherishes Greek, Latin, and a wrapper from a piece of gum Paul McCartney gave her during a Beatles recording session. The success of the board’s efforts to reduce the influence of private money on elections, she says, “has shown that the City can have a political culture where integrity and playing by fair rules are possible.”

Neil Hernandez ’98SIPA

Steering Hernandez to high places, his Ecuadorian immigrant parents named him after moonwalker Neil Armstrong. The first college graduate in his family, Hernandez, an avid poet, served as a Suffolk County A.D.A. while pursuing his MPA at Columbia. In 1998 he joined the Department of Juvenile Justice and became its commissioner in 2002. Among the pleasures of his job, he counts “demonstrating to young people in detention that the glass is half full and that they have the power to fill it.”

The Young Lions



Front row (left to right): Adriene L. Holder ’91LAW, 38, attorney-in-charge, The Legal Aid Society Greater Harlem Office; Coren Sharples ’94APP, 38, partner, ShoP/Sharples Holden Pasquarelli; Dr. Sandra Burkett ’97DOS, 39, assistant director of primary care, Columbia University School of Dental & Oral Surgery Division of Community Health; Kelly Lenz ’97SEAS, 28, project coordinator, New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner; Stacey Wright ’99PH, 30, public health educator, New York City Department of Health Daedre Levine ’92BC ’03SIPA, 33, executive director, Vote for America & co-founder of WOMEN PAC (We’re On the Move for Equality Now Political Action Committee); Andrea Elliott ’99JRN, 31, reporter, *The New York Times;* Dr. Kim Van Naarden Braun ’97PH ’04GSAS, 31, epidemiologist, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention; Dr. Dineo Khabele ’89CC ’94PS, 35, gynecologic oncologist and assistant professor, Montefiore Hospital & Albert Einstein College of Medicine; Dana Schutz ’02SOA, 27, artist.

Middle row (left to right): Jonathan Sobel ’88CC, 37, managing director, Goldman Sachs & Co.; Emil Wilbekin ’90JRN, 36, editorial director and vice president of brand development, VIBE Ventures; Natalie Wright ’02SW, 25, program supervisor, Partnership for the Homeless; Catherine M. Carota ’01SW, 27, social work supervisor, St. Luke’s–Roosevelt Hospital; Ted Rall ’91GS, 40, writer and cartoonist; Eric Hadar, ’89BUS, 39, president, Allied Partners; Marjorie Torres ’91SEAS, 36,

founder and CEO, Concrete Stories, LLC; Yael Alkalay ’97BUS, 35, founder, Red Flower; Marc Matyas ’96GS, 34, founder, Rooftop Management; Dr. A. Martin Clark Jr., ’00PS, 32, orthopaedic surgery resident, NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital.

Back row (left to right): Jill Gallin ’97NRS, 32, pediatric nurse practitioner, William F. Ryan Community Health Center; Christina Scully ’01CC, 24, special projects coordinator, New York City Parks Department; David Schickler, ’95SOA, 34, novelist and screenwriter; Betsy Witten ’92LAW, 38, director, Education Initiatives, CASES, Inc.; Janice Min ’90CC ’91JRN, 34, editor in chief, *US Weekly*; Mark Tuckerman ’93GSAS, 39, associate professor of chemistry and mathematics, New York University; Kirsten A. Frivold ’03SIPA, 33, vice president, Goldman Sachs & Co.; Melissa James Gibson ’91GS, 39, playwright.

Guide to school abbreviations

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