Books

A Harlem Alliance

By
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|
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The Abyssinian Baptist Church is world famous, a scheduled stop for scores of Sunday tour buses, but how many visitors are familiar with the hundred other long-established churches that dot the Harlem landscape?

Harlem Treasures: A Unique Guide to Our Neighborhood Treasures and Sights, a handbook published last spring, enlightens the tourists—and native New Yorkers—who come uptown for such cultural landmarks, directs the serious seeker to Harlem's side-street architectural, spiritual, and culinary jewels, and entertains the armchair traveler with historical tidbits, some familiar and some not. Of course Duke Ellington '73HON led the house band at the Cotton Club, but how many know it was opera impresario Oscar Hammerstein, grandfather of the Broadway librettist and lyricist, who built the Harlem Opera House, where on an amateur night in 1934, Ella Fitzgerald was discovered?

This compact, 114-page volume includes detailed maps, archival photos, a history of Harlem, and a guide to restaurants, museums, theaters, 91 community churches, and two mosques, as well as a code of behavior for visitors who go to services, where "dignity and celebration are the themes that underscore worship." (Please do not walk across the altar, or remove the flowers there, and do join us for the whole service, not just the gospel music. Dispose of your used gum in trash containers, and kneel or stand along with the congregants.)

Funded by a grant from Habitat for Humanity, *Harlem Treasures* is the first product of Columbia's Alliance for Community Enhancement (ACE), a nonprofit management lab run by students working toward their Master of Public Affairs degree in the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). A joint effort with Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement (HCCI), a far-reaching organization

formed in 1986 to provide neighborhood economic development, housing, and social services as well as spiritual support, the guidebook draws on the expertise of Harlem ministers, members of their congregations, and neighborhood residents. The May 2003 *Harlem Treasures* publishing party was a gala gathering at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Assistant Professor of Public Affairs David Maurrasse teaches the three-credit laboratory course at Columbia and is chairman of ACE's board of directors. The sweeping view of West 125th Street and beyond from his 13th-floor office in the International Affairs Building often takes in red double-decker tour buses. ACE's guidebook could not be more perfectly timed: In 2000, as *Harlem Treasures* notes, Harlem was the number one New York destination for European and Japanese visitors, outranking even the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building.

The *Harlem Treasures* project was launched under Maurrasse's predecessor, Mark Gordon '81CC '82SIPA, a former deputy in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and now dean of the School of Law at the University of Detroit Mercy. Realizing that increasing numbers of students from SIPA's MPA program were going into nonprofit jobs, Gordon says, "It struck me that a good way to prepare would be for them to run a non-profit themselves, while they were at Columbia." He and Paula Wilson, associate professor of budgeting and public affairs at SIPA and acting director of the management and institutional analysis concentration in the MPA program, co-taught the first ACE lab, the purpose of which was to think through setting up a student-run nonprofit organization. Later, a subset of students from the original class drafted ACE's incorporation papers, with Randolph Goodman, an adjunct professor of public affairs who teaches nonprofit law at SIPA.

During this time, Barnard Assistant Professor of Political Science J. Phillip Thompson happened to introduce Gordon to the late Preston Washington, who was head of HCCI. In an informal chat about the benefits and drawbacks of tourists visiting Harlem church services, the idea of a guidebook took shape. Over the next two years, students in Gordon and Wilson's class conducted research, wrote the text, gathered historical and contemporary photographs, arranged publication, and conducted a marketing survey to establish the price ($15—sold through ACE and at HCCI churches, with profits going to both organizations). "ACE was a win-win project," Gordon says. "It's good for everybody."

Lucille McEwan, president and CEO of HCCI, concurs. “To have a group helping us that could write well, interview many of the ministers, collect their information on the history of the religions, document it, and write it up cogently, and find appropriate pictures—it was great.” *Harlem Treasures* has sold well, and McEwan expects to order more copies.

Sara Kochanowsky ’04SIPA, who took the full-year ACE course last year, now serves as executive director. Each fall, the previous year’s executive director becomes a member of ACE’s board, and a student from the previous year becomes the new executive director. This provides the continuity that allows ACE to accomplish its current goals and to set new ones. Kochanowsky is among the small percentage of graduate students who enter SIPA with the nonprofit world as their target. As busy as any executive director, she oversees ACE’s outreach arm, setting up educational conferences and brown-bag lunches to introduce other SIPA students to ACE and keeping track of its other committees. “Nonprofit is small, but the people interested in it are really passionate,” she says.

The 15 current ACE students are divided into three committees: one marketing *Harlem Treasures*, one developing on-campus awareness of ACE, and the third piloting a youth-mentoring initiative with the Harlem Children’s Zone, a community-based organization that runs 15 sites serving more than 12,600 children and adults. The mentoring program is something that evolved under Maurrasse’s tutelage, and as ACE completes time-limited projects like the guidebook, mentoring high school students may become the organization’s core business.

The youth-mentoring initiative is close to Maurrasse’s heart. His latest book, *Beyond the Campus: How Colleges and Universities Form Partnerships with Their Communities* (Routledge, 2001), now in its second printing, has found a wide audience in public and private universities, from Maurrasse’s alma mater, the University of Michigan, to South Bank University in London. These schools look to the book for guidance in their continuing efforts to bridge a town-gown gap that just a generation ago looked more like a chasm.

As an undergraduate at Michigan, Maurrasse was swept up in a vibrant era of activism that was centered around the dismantling of apartheid and examined all forms of separation and isolation. Along with other Michigan students, he was active in a campaign called “Access to Education,” which helped broaden the university’s admissions recruitment to include students from large inner-city high schools as well

as elite suburban districts and private schools.

When Maurrasse says that he believes in exposing impressionable youth to the concept of civic engagement, he is speaking of the youth ACE has yet to reach, but he could as easily be talking about his own students. In the midst of describing the rewarding commitment to social change that nourished his undergraduate days in Detroit, he says simply, “Since it happened to me, I think it can happen to other people.”

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