President Matthews Delivers a Clear Vision of LaGuardia’s Future

Following is the text of Interim President Matthews’ speech as delivered at the Professional Staff Meeting on December 1, 1999.

Hello. It occurred to me that although I have delivered speeches at colleges all around the country during the past twenty years, I had never really given a formal speech at LaGuardia. It feels funny. It feels good.

When I first arrived, an old friend came up to me, threw her arms around me and yelled, “welcome home!” Then she whispered—“Boy are you in trouble! Nobody could reach the expectations that we have for you.” So, I begin by thanking you for the warm welcome and for your patience with my not having totally transformed the college in twenty days. Change—even welcome change—can be tricky, but I would be remiss if I did not state that I do expect significant change to occur and am assuming that it will happen with a little help from my friends.

The past few years have not been easy for the college—CUNY community colleges have been dismissed as useless or irrelevant, derided for not serving students well and berated for not graduating them fast enough.

On the other hand, the winds of change do seem to be blowing, and there does seem to be cause for cautious optimism. You know better than I about the trials and tribulations of the last three years, and I respect the energy and time you have spent defending what we do well while simultaneously taking a hard look at what we must change. We will emerge stronger from this ordeal because your integrity and focus have pointed the way.

Before I arrived, all VPs, deans, directors and chairpersons were asked to share with me the high points of the past few years as well as aspects that needed strengthening (Continued on page 2)

A $7.6 Million Federal Grant Awarded to the Queens Urban Partnership of LaGuardia

In what is the largest single grant ever to come to LaGuardia, The United States Department of Education has awarded LaGuardia’s Urban Partnership a $7.6 million grant to initiate a comprehensive program to help “at-risk” seventh graders stay on an academic path that will lead to a college degree.

Through the five-year grant, 1,900 disadvantaged youngsters from three intermediate schools in Queens will participate in a multifaceted program that will provide them with tutoring and mentoring, counseling and career guidance, summer and after-school programs, and college and career exploration throughout their elementary and high school years. The grant also will provide professional development workshops for teachers and programs that will involve parents in their children’s educational decisions.

“The majority of the students targeted for this program are immigrants from low-income families whose limited English language skills and economic situation present challenges to their academic success,” said McSheff Patterson, the director of QUP who will be working on the expansive program.

“For these students to meet the standards and prepare for post-secondary education, we must enhance and expand the services available to them as well as to their parents and teachers.”

Funding for this ambitious program comes under President Clinton’s Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), which awarded $120 million to 185 programs that will help more than 200,000 disadvantaged children in the middle grades prepare for and succeed in (Continued on page 4)

LaGuardia Investigates Transfer Trends Among Minorities

At a time when affirmative action rulings and other state policies are affecting minority students’ entry into higher education, LaGuardia has received a $150,000 Ford Foundation grant to study the transfer trends of underserved students from two-year to four-year institutions.

During the 18-month project, the college, which developed a successful transfer model with Vassar College, will look at the nation’s successful transfer programs within the public sector and will investigate the attitudes and legislation that support and impede transfer. Particular attention will be paid to California, Florida, Michigan, New York, (Continued on last page)
In an effort to develop strong communication between the borough's ethnic and racial groups, the college recently co-sponsored three roundtable conferences featuring leaders from nine local immigrant communities.

“They came together to learn from one another,” said Despene Gazianis-Stough, the conference coordinator, “and to discuss and develop common strategies designed to uplift the quality of life for all the borough's residents.”

Speaking at the well-attended events were Joseph Rose, commissioner for the New York City Department of City Planning; Melinda Katz, director of Community Boards from the Queens Borough President’s Office; Roger Sanjek, professor of Queens College and author of *The Future of Us All*.

“The Changing Face of Queens” conferences are the latest in a series of events sponsored by the division and the Jewish Community Relations Council headed by Rabbi Bob Kaplan.

Ms. Gazianis-Stough explained that the joint venture, known as “The Queens Forum,” was formed four years ago when the rabbi approached the college about the possibility of establishing a collaborative that would engage different ethnic and racial groups in a dialogue that would foster greater understanding.

The alliance held its first major conference, “Queens in the Year 2001: Developing a Strategy for Our Common Future,” in 1997. There strategic plans were developed around four major themes:

- business/economic development;
- education;
- ethnic diversity;
- public safety.

A conference designed to help community-based leaders to develop skills in coalition building followed soon after.

The Queens Forum is planning its next conference in March.

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In the photo, left to right: Dan Luria, vice president of strategy and measurement at Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center; Gayle Baron, executive director of the Long Island City Business Development Corporation; Roberta Matthews, interim president; Judy McGaughey, vice president; and Will Saunders, LUCED director, chat before the start of LUCED's annual conference on quality management and the small business. As a nationally recognized economist and expert on manufacturing in the United States, Dr. Luria’s keynote address covered the current state of the American manufacturing industry and strategies that small manufacturers can use to improve their performance. Other speakers included Peter Meyer of Sequins International, Inc. and Carl Pomer of UNITE who discussed how the union and management have cooperated in improving the quality of work, productivity, and the bottom line of the company. Lloyd Robinson, president of Avisco New York Corporation also spoke on his experiences in implementing a quality management program there. The conference is one of the activities sponsored by LUCED’s Industrial Management Resource Program, the Division of Adult and Continuing Education, and the Long Island City Business Development Corporation.

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**Department of Defense Award to LUCED**

The United States Department of Defense has awarded the LaGuardia Urban Center for Economic Development (LUCED) a $98,000 grant to provide specialized and professional technical assistance to minority- and women-owned businesses that wish to sell to the department and other governmental agencies.

The center will be one of the six Procurement Technical Assistance Centers that have been set up throughout New York State.

The program, which is a new one for LUCED, will build on the success of the college’s Preparing for Profit program (PREP), an eight-year-old program designed to teach the same targeted population how to compete for government contracts.

Since the college, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and the New York State Department of Economic Development launched the program, PREP graduates have been awarded more than $30 million in contract awards from public and private organizations.
Cooperative Education

Students Learn There’s No Business Like Your Own Business

Initiative of the Employer Relations Committee, was developed to assist students to add to their career options in an ever-increasing, complicated job market.

Moderated by Paul Levine, a faculty advisor, the panel included: Octavio Vacca, a current LaGuardia business administration major who has established a computer repair and sales business; Julio Bofill, a 1996 commercial photography graduate; Daedre Levine, the founder of Levine/McEvoy Fundraising Consultants, a democratic fundraising firm based in New York City; and Herb Austin, an international trade specialist with the United States Small Business Administration.

Speaking to a packed room of students and faculty, the panelists spoke about how they became entrepreneurs and about the promise that business ownership holds.

“You have to do something you like in life,” said Mr. Bofill, whose photo images have been published in national and international publications in the entertainment field. “That’s what leads you to try harder.”

With regard to keeping a positive outlook, Ms. Levine’s advice was to expect setbacks. “A problem is an opportunity to learn from,” said Ms. Levine, who received the Rising Star of Politics 1998 award from Campaigns and Elections magazine. “But make sure your first few setbacks do not drive you away from the task at hand, and that is starting your own business.”

Mr. Vacca said that “the most important thing is planning. Everything should start small. Organizing yourself is very important.”

With regard to start-up monies, Mr. Austin explained that clean credit, management expertise, and some capital of your own are the important ingredients of getting a guaranteed loan from the Small Business Administration.

When talking about the courage to start a business, Mr. Vacca said, “It’s not hard when you are passionate and dedicated to what you want to do.”

Associate Dean Paul Saladino looked out at the students who were attending a presentation on entrepreneurship and noted that many LaGuardia students are true entrepreneurs.

“The spirit is there,” he said. “And for the right person, the advantages of business ownership far outweigh the risks. If you don’t take the risk, you’ll never know the opportunity.”

The presentation, organized by the division’s Community Connections Opportunities
Professionals Engage Arts and Technology Students in the Arts

To further enrich its arts education program, Robert F. Wagner Jr. Institute of Arts and Technology has developed a program where professionals in the arts and media come into the classroom and teach their crafts.

Fifteen artists with expertise in the visual arts, print media, and the performing arts join the faculty every Wednesday to engage the students in hands-on activities during two-hour workshops.

“We have been looking at ways to strengthen our Wednesday enrichment arts program,” said Terry Born, the co-principal of the college’s third alternative high school and New Visions school. “What better way than to invite young and enthusiastic professionals to participate in this exciting learning experience.”

Under the Studios 2000 program, all ninth graders participate in two-week orientations where they go through all the studios, and at the end of the year will declare which area they wish to concentrate on for the next three years.

“We want the students to understand that they are making a serious and long-term commitment,” said Ms. Born.

Those who opt for the performing arts studio will take classes in hip hop poetry and performance, hip hop and modern dance, and live and digital music production. The visual arts studio will delve into video production, illustration and animation, graphic arts, web programming and design, and photography. And students with an interest in writing will take classes in creative writing, newspaper and magazine production, as well as public relations and promotion.

To further strengthen the experience, Ms. Born said that the high school is developing arts-related internships where students will be placed in music studios, museums and art galleries, radio stations, and performing arts venues.

“Our internship program will still have students volunteer in schools and hospitals,” said Ms. Born, “but more and more we are trying to create experiences that tie into our students’ future career aspirations.”

The program is supported by a number of grants and a series of fund-raising events that will take place throughout the year.

What also makes this program doable are the fully-equipped high school studios. On the premises is a video studio, photography lab, computer lab, multi-purpose gym, and a multimedia library that is used for animation production and publications.

In developing the primary studios, Ms. Born explained that each centers around class projects that take the student through each of the sub-studios. For example, a student who is creating a free-hand drawing in the illustration workshop may then go to the Macintosh computer lab where the young designer will use one of the graphic arts software packages to refine the drawing.

“The sub-studios are nicely enmeshed so that the students are exposed to every aspect of the field,” said Ms. Born. “When they complete the program they come away with a broad understanding of the art form.”

Since the program is project-oriented, the students also come away with a solid body of work. “Between the project-oriented activities that have students producing their own CDs, directing their own theater productions, putting together their own publications, and the arts-related internships,” said Ms. Born, “our students are receiving a valuable educational experience that can shape their academic and career futures.”
Performance Dates Bloom on LPAC’s Spring Calendar

**Weekend Family Series • Price $8**

**BLACK HISTORY MONTH CELEBRATION!**
Jubba Jazz & Jammin’
Sunday, February 6 at 2 pm

**ALICE IN WONDERLAND**
Story Theatre Company
Saturday, March 25 at 2 pm

**ELLIS ISLAND**
American Family Theatre
Sunday, April 16 at 2 pm

**Performance Series • Price $5**

**TEATIME CONCERT SERIES**
A GILBERT & SULLIVAN SAMPLER
by Goldard Onstage
Friday, March 3 at 1:30 pm

**QUEENS: A JAZZ HISTORY OF THE**
Borough Through the Music and Memories of Leonard Gaskin
with the Astoria Jazz Band
Friday, March 17 at 1:30 pm

**MOLLY VIVIAN HUANG, PIANIST**
Classical, Contemporary and Popular
Music for the Keyboard
Friday, March 31 at 1:30 pm

**FIRST NY MULTICULTURAL FILM FESTIVAL**
PERSPECTIVES OF BEING AN IMMIGRANT IN AMERICA
Friday, April 7 at 7 pm
Saturday, April 8 at 2 pm, 4 pm & 6 pm
Sunday, April 9 at 2 pm, 4 pm & 6 pm

Vocational Education Grant Trains Minorities for Careers in Theater Industry

In an effort to bring more minorities and women into the theater arts industry, the LaGuardia Center for the Performing Arts is offering a free theater arts training program to this special population with the help of a $40,000 vocational education grant.

Under the Nontraditional Training and Employment Program, which began last November, the department is offering two classes—arts administration and technical training. Each course will consist of a ten-week internship experience.

“Most professional arts training programs are costly and not accessible to low income, minority, and female students,” said Zuri McKie, director of the LaGuardia Performing Arts Center. “This program will allow this population the opportunity to receive academic and applied career training in these nontraditional areas at no cost to them.”

Students in the technical training course learn how to use modern theater technology, from computerized lighting and sound equipment to rigging and set production. The arts administration course will prepare them for all aspects of arts management, including public relation strategies, funding for nonprofit arts groups, marketing and box office management.

After ten weeks in the classroom, students will step into a paid internship. Along with the practical, real work experience that the internship offers, Ms. McKie said it also serves as a link to a network of professionals

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Belle Zeller Scholarship Goes to LaGuardia Graduate

Zorayda Cocchi
Belle Zeller Scholarship Winner

York's prestigious Belle Zeller scholarship for academic excellence and community service.

Zorayda Cocchi, a 33-year-old resident of Astoria, was singled out for achieving a perfect 4.0 index despite the formidable hurdles she encountered as a recent immigrant in a new country.

Her quest for higher education began five years ago when she rejected her father's traditional beliefs that women do not have to get an education and instead ventured to America where she knew a woman could fulfill her educational aspirations.

She enrolled in LaGuardia's occupational therapy assistant program in 1997, and she was immediately tested when she plunged into a full-time schedule that consisted of challenging science courses.

With a limited command of the English language and a ten-year hiatus from school, Ms. Cocchi admitted that the first several weeks were overwhelming. "The day I bought those thick science books I almost fainted," she recounted. "I said to myself, "I am not going to be able to do this."

But she persevered. To comprehend each day's science lectures, Ms. Cocchi taped every lecture and went home and listened to them with a dictionary by her side. "The process took many, many hours, and I would study every night until one o'clock in the morning," she said.

Her doubts were quickly erased when she received a 98 on her first human anatomy exam. "For the first time I felt there was a chance," she said.

As the scientific terms became more familiar and studying no longer required the aid of a tape recorder, Ms. Cocchi reached out to her fellow classmates by becoming a volunteer peer-tutor in the science study hall.

"Although the tutoring was time-consuming, it was a very rewarding experience to be able to help my fellow students gain understanding in their science courses," she said. "And it was nice to be able to make a contribution toward their academic progress."

The honor student also went on to become the vice president of the science club.

Her volunteerism also extended into the community. With an interest in serving children with special needs, Ms. Cocchi volunteered at the Early Intervention Center of the Volunteers of America where she worked with this special population.

"It was an enriching experience," said Ms. Cocchi, "and it became my inspiration to pursue a career in occupational therapy."

With the scholarship, Ms. Cocchi plans on pursuing a bachelor's degree in occupational therapy at York College. The scholarship will cover full tuition as long as she maintains a 3.75 grade-point average as a CUNY undergraduate.

Ms. Cocchi knows that she wants to pursue a career in pediatrics, but her future educational goals are not that cut-and-dry.

"My original idea was that I wanted to get a college degree," said the scholarship awardee. "Now I want to eventually go on for my master's. Maybe a Ph.D. Maybe write a book. Who knows? But I like to keep an open mind."

New Campaign Celebrates Student Potential

New logo—new direction—new campaign—"it's celebration time," said Dr. Roberta Matthews, in her opening remarks to the Professional Staff on December 1.

Before she even hinted at her plans for the college, the new interim president invited the assembled to notice the "We Celebrate Potential!" space in the lobby of the E building and thanked Bill Freeland, director of Communications, for its design. Requesting the faculty and staff "to supply us with the names of alumni who should be featured," Dr. Matthews spoke of looking to change the pictures every month or so and eventually develop a "Wall of Achievement" in the C Building.

The new campaign is designed to promote and credit the many accomplishments and achievements of our institution and its students, and to create a reminder that when potential is celebrated, achievement is generated.
Preschoolers Learn What It is Like to be Blind

A question was posed to a group of preschoolers at the college’s Early Childhood Learning Center. “What does it mean when you say ‘this person is blind?’”

The 20 two-to-five-year-olds sitting on a colorful carpet were silent for several seconds when a little girl responded in a near whisper. “They cannot see.”

“That is right,” said Nektarios Mallas, a blind student at the college who asked the question. “But I am going to show you many of the things that I can do.”

During the next hour, Mr. Mallas engaged the children in a lively lesson. He showed them how he gets around with the use of a cane. How he can read books written in Braille. How he can play the piano. And how he can work toward his associate degree in computer information systems with the help of assisted technology.

“Although I cannot see,” Mr. Mallas said to the attentive audience, “there are many things that I can do by using my other senses.”

The idea of developing a disabilities awareness workshop that would sensitize the preschoolers to individual differences belongs to Jareena Ahmed, the associate director of ECLC. “There are many young children with special needs being mainstreamed into regular classrooms,” said Ms. Ahmed. “I want to teach the youngsters to be respectful of people with disabilities and not to see them as different.”

To get the project in motion, Ms. Ahmed worked with Matthew S. Joffe, director of the college’s Office for Students with Disabilities, who recommended Mr. Mallas. The Office for Students with Disabilities provides counseling, tutoring, and support services and a wide range of assisted technology to the college’s 350 students with special needs.

Mr. Mallas said that he was motivated to do the workshop because of the reactions he has observed among some children. “Actually, the problems are with the parents and not the children,” he said. He supported his claim with a story about a mother who would not allow her child to sit next to Mr. Mallas on the subway. “Get out of there, that person is blind,” he recalled the mother saying to her child.

“Small children are willing to absorb what you tell them,” he said. “Parents don’t always tell them the right thing.”

During the workshop, Mr. Mallas demonstrated to the children how he lives his life without sight.

He passed around a book written in Braille and, as the children touched the small bumps on the paper, he explained how they form words that he reads with his fingers. “This is how I read Barney stories to my daughter,” said the father of a two-and-a-half-year-old.

He then unfolded his cane. “I can get around with this,” said Mr. Mallas as he demonstrated how he uses the aid.

The children immediately recognized the computer that Mr. Mallas positioned on his lap, but when the machine recited a sentence that Mr. Mallas typed, they soon realized this was a special computer. “Because I cannot read my work on the screen,” he said, “the computer reads my type out loud.”

Another thing that Mr. Mallas can do, and do very well, is play the piano. Armed with an electronic keyboard and an arsenal of songs that every preschooler loves, the professional musician played a selection of songs while the children enthusiastically sang along.

“I hope that the children came away understanding that a blind person is capable of doing whatever he or she wants to do,” he said after the workshop was over. The 28-year-old native of Greece has never allowed his blindness, which he considers an inconvenience rather than a disability, stand in his way.

Blind at birth, Mr. Mallas was educated in the public schools in Greece. At the age of 25 he realized that his country provided little opportunities for the blind, so he decided to emigrate to the United States.

He eventually settled in Astoria with his wife and enrolled in LaGuardia in 1998, where the honor student maintains a perfect 4.0 grade point average and plans to graduate with an associate’s degree next year.

Until he completes his education and gets a job in the computer industry, Mr. Mallas works as a professional musician. He and his band perform regularly at a restaurant in Astoria.

He politely shrugs off the words of praise he constantly receives regarding the way he copes with his blindness.

“People say what you are doing is great,” said Mr. Mallas. “All I have to say is what I am trying to do is just survive. I do not think that I am doing anything special. I am just trying to feed my family, finish school, get a job and move ahead.”
Matthews’ Vision for LaGuardia is Very Clear

(Continued from page 3)

and finally,

★ to develop a timeline that integrates all these activities and makes sure the Strategic Plan and the Outcomes Assessment Plan are in place and operational as they must be before our Middle States visit.

The length of this sentence suggests both the complexity of what we need to do and the necessity of figuring out how to do it so we don’t get all tangled up in verbiage and prevented from moving forward.

As I have said, moving forward means we need to become more intentional about who we are and what we do well; the kind of intentionality I am thinking about is therefore directly linked to assessment. For example, we all know why many of our students leave the college or do not graduate. They lead such complex lives that changing hours on the job, the loss of a babysitter, the daily battle to feed one’s family often comes between their educational aspirations and their ability to achieve them. For these students, the challenge of attending college often loses to the greater challenges of daily living. We have all experienced the frustration of losing one’s best student because of circumstances beyond anybody’s control. Conversely, many of us have had the satisfaction of watching a student graduate and move on to greater glories because we intervened in some way and made the completion of that voyage possible. We also know that many of our students transfer before they graduate precisely because we have opened other alternatives to them and feel another kind of frustration because these success stories are counted among our failures.

Given what we know, and the complexity of the circumstances under which we operate, we are doubly frustrated when we are accused of not serving our students or of attempting to serve students who do not belong in college anyway. But, because of this situation, we owe it to ourselves to refine the systems we have and develop the systems we need to capture the realities of life in the community college.

We need to know what happens and why, in a much more precise and focused way, to address the criticisms that attack us at the heart of what we do and who we are. We must know how many of our students transfer before they graduate and where they transfer. We need to publicize widely what we already know: for example, that some of our students are interested in taking courses at the college but not graduating, and we need to know, when students leave us prematurely, whether they chose or were forced to do so.

As we move forward with this initiative, however, we need to understand that we will also learn that some of our students leave us and do not graduate for many of the standard reasons that students leave college; their academic needs have not been met; the work was too difficult and we did not provide the necessary support services; the work was too easy and did not demand from them what they expected from a college education; the institution placed barriers in their way by making the easy and routine, difficult and time-consuming; they did not make friends and nobody at the college reached out to them in even the simple ways that the retention literature tells us make a difference.

This knowledge will be another call to action addressed to ourselves and asking us to exhibit the same dispassionate, honest and clearheaded assessments and understandings internally which we justifiably demand from our external critics.

The commitment of colleges to find out what works or does not work has been described as “a bedside conversion to assessment when accreditation time rolls around.” That will not work anymore. If we embrace learning as a way of being, if we are a learning organization, if we focus on the “great thing” at our center that unites us all, then we have to see planning and assessment as opportunities to identify what is not working and change it and, perhaps more important, to identify what is working. We need to celebrate who we are and the truly extraordinary achievements of ourselves and of our students—the wonder that is LaGuardia Community College.

A few weeks ago I spent time talking with Zorayda Cocchi, our Belle Zeller Scholar. Zorayda emigrated from Colombia five years ago and worked as a nanny here for two years, having been told by her father that he would not waste his money educating a girl. She graduated from LaGuardia this past year as a 4.0 GPA Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) major who walked into a plum of a job and is transferring to an Occupational Therapy program. Zorayda told me, “LaGuardia gave me the right to dream and to pursue that dream.”

And that, my friends, is the “great thing” about LaGuardia.

“If we embrace learning as a way of being, we have to see planning and assessment as opportunities to identify what is and is not working.”

— Roberta Matthews, Interim President

“The great thing about LaGuardia is that it gives students ‘the right to dream and to pursue that dream.’”

— Roberta Matthews, Interim President

quoting Belle Zeller scholar Zorayda Cocchi
The College and Community Bid Farewell to President Raymond C. Bowen

While the dreary gray clouds hanging over head produced a steady rain, the atmosphere under the party tent was aglow as the college community, local politicians, friends and family came together to celebrate the accomplishments of President Raymond C. Bowen who was retiring after a decade of service.

Over 350 guests gathered under a beautifully decorated tent festooned with brightly colored balloons to praise a leader who will leave behind an enduring legacy.

In the 10 years President Bowen served as LaGuardia's second president, he has taken pride in overseeing a college that has become enriched by the diversity of its students and faculty, has served as a valuable resource to the small business community in western Queens, and has gone beyond its community boundaries to become a part of the international educational community.

"President Bowen leaves LaGuardia a much stronger institution than he found it," said Queens Borough President Claire Shulman who helped make that possible by allocating over $5 million to the college during President Bowen's tenure, "and we are grateful to him for all his work, for his commitment to LaGuardia and to the surrounding community."

In listing a few of the president's accomplishments, the borough president noted that he played a major role in the college's expansion and growth as well as in the development of the Division of Information Technology and the LaGuardia Urban Center for Economic Development. She also mentioned how he led the college into the international arena where it forged a collaboration with Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo that produced the island's first community college.

George Hamada, the college's former provost, added to the list of accomplishments. "During his stewardship," said Dr. Hamada, who is now the president of Rockland Community College, "the college expanded its reputation nationally and internationally, pioneered the direction for community colleges on the international scene, captured the leading edge of educational technology, created an intellectual climate in this institution second to none, created charter schools, substantially expanded the facilities in the structure, solidified community and political support for the institution, and truly rejoiced in the diversity of its faculty, staff, and students."

Councilman Walter McCaffrey, a strong supporter of the college and higher education, described the president as a "pioneer" who navigated the college during difficult times and a "persistent champion" for excellence and inclusion. He presented the president with a proclamation, while every sector of the college presented gifts.

After the words of praise, presents and tributes, George Sussman, vice president for Academic Affairs, said that a fitting memorial for the man who put a computer on every faculty member's desk would be the dedication of Room C-110 as the "Raymond C. Bowen Computer Study Laboratory."

"I hope that one day we'll have a plaque and a picture in the room to go with the title. Then we'll ask President-emeritus Bowen to give the fish in Chesapeake Bay a day's rest and come back."

Retirements

The college would like to extend its congratulations to several LaGuardians who have announced their retirements. We wish them all the best.

Harry Heinemann, vice president of Cooperative Education and International Programs, announced his retirement effective last October. Harry distinguished himself many times during his career at LaGuardia, which began the same year as the college. He will not leave education completely as he will continue to do consulting work.

Rick Krueger, director of Network Administration, left the college after nine years of service to begin his own consulting business.

Robert Rosa, assistant dean of Adult and Continuing Education, announced his retirement effective October, 1999. Following a distinguished 22-year career at LaGuardia, Bob has accepted a position as dean of Continuing Education at Hudson Community College in Jersey City.

Births

Alberta Colbert of Project Enable, and her husband, Jan, on September 6, 1999 of their son Christopher Jan.

Claudia Perez of the Immersion Program, and her husband, Jose, on August 3, 1999 of their daughter Brianna Jasleen.
Transfer Trends

(Continued from page 1)

Texas, Virginia, and Washington, all of which are going through dramatic policy changes.

"It is important to study each of these states because they are in the middle of policy changes that make a difference in the numbers of minority students who transfer," said Dr. Janet Lieberman, co-founder of the college’s Exploring Transfer program and special assistant to the president. "With the information collected, educators will be able to identify successful strategies for initiating reforms that will increase transfer."

While LaGuardia conducts its in-depth look at transfer programs at public institutions and interviews educators and decision-makers on attitudes and legislation that impact upon transfer programs, Vassar will delve into the private sector with the support of its matching Ford grant.

The study comes at a crucial time when educators at both the community and senior college levels must prepare students for the highly skilled workplace that demands bachelor’s degrees.

"Transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions and the ensuing attainment of a bachelor’s degree is a critical route to success for underserved students," said Dr. Lieberman. "For students, successful transfer may mean the difference between a lifetime of earning the minimum wage and the chance to climb the professional ladder to financial independence."

The college’s findings will be reported to educators and policymakers at a conference next December, and by the following summer, LaGuardia will put together a report on the nation’s state of transfer and make recommendations for policy reform.

For the past 13 years, LaGuardia and Vassar have been involved in an ambitious collaborative program that opens the eyes of community college students to the numerous transfer opportunities they have after receiving their associate degrees. Exploring Transfer does this through a summer institute at Vassar where a select group of students from LaGuardia and seven Dutchess County community colleges actually experience a rigorous undergraduate liberal arts college over a five-week period.

Since the first group of LaGuardia students embarked upon this academic adventure, about 570 students have gone through the program, and of that group, over 70 percent have gone on to four-year institutions.

"This program has proven over the years that we can successfully show students that there are boundless opportunities open to them," said Dr. Lieberman. "And it convinces them that they can overcome obstacles to fulfill their goals."

Census and Voter Registration

(Continued from page 5)

and state programs.

New York stands to lose two congressional seats if an accurate count is not taken. This translates into less representation in Washington and millions of federal dollars lost to our communities.

Another major event will occur November 7, 2000, when American voters will choose the next president. To increase voter-turnout among LaGuardia students, Interim President Roberta S. Matthews, has appointed Eneida Rivas, Office of College and Community Relations, and Irene Sosa, Office of Student Life and Development co-coordina-

utors of LaGuardia’s Census 2000 and Voter Registration Projects.

They will develop a strategy to broaden census efforts directed to specific population groups within the borough of Queens most in danger of being undercounted. They will also work in cooperation with LaGuardia faculty, staff and students to register record numbers of individuals to vote in the upcoming presidential election.

Anyone wishing to learn more about either project and how you can help may contact Ms. Rivas at extension 5058 or Ms. Sosa at extension 5196.
President Matthews Delivers a Clear Vision of LaGuardia’s Future

(Continued from Cover Story on page 1) within their particular areas and within the college as a whole. They articulated their visions for the future and presented me collectively with five inches of well-written, thoughtful, thorough and engaging prose. And, I have read it all—and will continue to refer to it. Once again, I was impressed by the quality of the people who work at LaGuardia and their commitment to the institution. Since I arrived, others have either spontaneously, or with a good deal of forethought, brought me up-to-date on the college. I invite any of you in the audience to communicate with me in the way you feel most comfortable.

No doubt, because I asked for your vision of LaGuardia, you have asked for mine. Mine is a simple vision that comes from two places: my sense of how LaGuardia has evolved and must continue to evolve in order to thrive, combined with my sense of what the college stands for and values. Let me share with you how I characterized LaGuardia and myself in my first speech during my first opening session at Marymount College three years ago. I began by recounting some trivial events that underscore how hard change can be—such as not being able to remember one’s phone extension or one’s zip code and I went on to say: “My past experience has probably prepared me well for being the new kid on the block. I come from an academic culture that is dizzyingly diverse—with students from close to one hundred different countries speaking over 100 different languages. On a smaller scale, the faculty and staff are equally diverse. Practically speaking, this means that at any given moment there was a reasonable possibility that someone in the room was being offended by a well-intentioned comment from someone else in the room. With absolutely no malice aforethought, an assigned reading, a seemingly innocent class or committee discussion, an offer to shake hands, an offhand comment, could set somebody’s teeth on edge. The initials of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, the Everyman character in James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, are HCE, and stand for “Here Comes Everybody.” That aptly describes the population at a large urban college today, and LaGuardia Community College is among the more diverse in the country. When everybody is coming to dinner, there aren’t enough rules in the world to prevent a misstep or, rather, there are so many rules in the world, that one can assume that a faux pas is inevitable. Living in these circumstances is a humbling experience. It means that I am accustomed to learning on the job and accept the possibility that something I have said or done might run counter to the culture in which I find myself at the moment. Based on my experience at LaGuardia, I assume that people of good will who want to work together will tell each other when they are stepping on each other’s toes and then focus their energies on issues of mutual concern and interest.”

As we are an institution that is dizzyingly diverse, so too, we exist in times during which the rapidity of change and the elusiveness of reality are dizzying in their own right. At the same time that one set of voices insists that we must begin planning for a massive influx of remedial students next fall, others warn that our pre-freshman summer program will be decimated because massive numbers of students will not pass the Regents and may be spending the summer in Regents prep courses in order to graduate—not at LaGuardia preparing for college. What will happen? Who knows? How do we plan for whatever happens or for both happenings? If we want to do it all, how do we conserve our energies, support each other as we accomplish different goals and yet bring it all together into a coherent whole?

Peter Vaill, in his book, Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water, claims we need to acknowledge the conditions of life in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex environment and develop the habits of mind that will allow us to become the “continual learners” we must become in order to survive and flourish in today’s world. Now, academia exists in a world of permanent white water and shares more with corporate life (whether we like it or not) than formerly. We have all resisted adopting the language of corporate America, but corporate America has adopted the language of academia.

As Vaill talks about the capacity for “continual learning” as a survival skill, so Peter Senge, author of The Fifth Discipline, asserts that successful corporations in today’s world are “learning organizations.” Learning organizations are led by those whom Senge characterizes as “designers, teachers, [and] stewards.” Senge lists the “new skills” such leaders require. They are: “...The ability:

- to build shared vision,
- to bring to the surface and challenge prevailing mental models,
- to foster more systemic patterns of thinking.

In short, leaders in learning organizations are responsible for building organizations where people are continually expanding their capabilities to shape their future—that is, leaders are responsible for learning.” (Sloan Management Review, 1990.)

So, I’ll take responsibility for creating an environment if you will join me in creating the vision. Where do we begin? In his most recent book, The Courage to Teach, Parker Palmer notes the conflict between the values and advantages of the teacher-centered classroom with those of the student-centered classroom, and proposes the alternative of a subject-centered classroom. In a subject-centered classroom, both teachers and students gather around a discipline, a significant issue to be explored, an essential skill to be learned—what Palmer calls “the great thing.”

Real learning occurs when teachers and students gather together to engage in what Palmer characterizes as “a community of...” (Continued on next page)
Palmer suggests that when things go well in a class, it is not so much that the teacher dazzles or that the students are prepared (although both are helpful) but rather that they are engaging in that conversation about things that matter.

My vision of the college, then, has less to do with the announcement of new directions or new initiatives than it does with how we engage our initiatives and activities and how well we set ourselves to chart and change directions. Few people in this theatre would disagree with the fundamental goals of the college:

- to provide access and opportunity through quality education,
- to contribute to the civic and economic development of New York City,
- to forge strategic international educational partnerships at home and around the world, and
- to use the power of technology to support and further all of the above and to keep the college moving forward in ways that place the human being in the center of the process.

These are the “great things” that sit at the center of the college, and they manifest themselves in a wide variety of assumptions, programs, and approaches, many of which are (or should be) cross-divisional in their intent and execution.

LaGuardia has always been innovative, has always sought and accepted the challenge to serve our constituencies and to change our assumptions, programs, and approaches as necessary. We are associated with innovation, with community outreach, with cooperative education, with learning communities, with aggressive grantsmanship, with forward-looking and ongoing new program development. There has been, and will continue to be spirited and healthy discussion about the scope and real purposes of the college, and it is here, in an institutional application of Parker Palmer’s characterization of the classroom as a “community of truth” (or, for that matter, Peter Senge’s characterization of “a learning organization”) that my vision of the college resides.

The key element of my vision is process. It will keep the “great things” at the center, but rests on moving from a compartmentalized and narrow conception to a cooperative, ongoing and complex discourse about important issues. There will be many voices; we will not all agree all of the time (or even some of the time); our perspectives will clash; we might offend or hurt each other. But our focus will always be on what unites us: our commitment to helping the college serve our students as best we can. And, there will always be joy and mystery in what we do.

If we are lucky, we will always dance in a ring and suppose, and the “Secret” will always be smack in the middle, revealing itself to each of us in different ways, and sometimes eluding us altogether. All our planning, assessment, meetings, memos, initiatives and professional development are really attempts to figure it all out—to do what we do best even better.

The work of the quest to know the secret and the fun of the ongoing process depend on three things (which will come as no surprise to those of you who have worked with me):

- Collaboration
  We need to work together and help each other to figure out what we need to do to best educate our students

- Communication
  We need to talk to each other and, perhaps more important, listen to each other, and

- Intentionality
  We need to be very clear and quite strategic about who we are, where we put our energies, and how we establish and achieve our goals.

I suspect that as we get our internal house in order, we will become a first-choice college once again, because we will know who we are and what we offer students and, therefore, will be able to reach out and attract those students who will understand how to use us to their best advantage.

In our new reality, demands for change are coupled with legislatures clamoring for accountability and the insistence that we prove ourselves to a doubting public. In this context, we need to chart our course and be ready to modify it as soon as the whitewater changes its direction. Planning—the kind of planning that is both smart and flexible—is necessary. Helping an institution of higher learning become a rapid-response team is probably an oxymoron, but as institutions of higher learning go, LaGuardia is in better shape to do this than other colleges. Serious attention to planning will, I believe, position us to shape our future. To maintain our edge, however, while we maintain the collective sanity of the college community, I am announcing that we will coordinate the strategic planning process, the upcoming Middle States self-study, the required development of an Outcomes Assessment Plan, and, ultimately, budget allocations.

To this end, I am asking a relatively small group of people who have been involved, in one way or another, with planning and assessment to participate in a coordinating committee that will be charged:

- to provide essential baseline definitions of all of the above so we develop a common vocabulary and can understand each other when we speak;

- to acknowledge that some of us haven’t a clue about what some or all of this means and to therefore develop a learning plan to educate us;

- to take stock of where we are—data we already have at hand or activities in which we already engage that we can fold into the process;

- to create an integrated or, at least, an interrelational process so we do not feel we are being asked to do similar or slightly different things over and over again with no sense of the relationships between them or the natural intersections that exist;

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Large Federal Grant Awarded to Queens Urban Partnership of LaGuardia

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college. QUP, which sponsors programs to increase the number of college graduates, received the largest financial award in New York State.

"These programs can make all the difference in whether a young person goes to college," said President Clinton. "These innovative programs start early, reaching out to students no later than seventh grade, staying with them all the way—from providing students with mentors who encourage them to have high hopes and high expectations for themselves, to ensuring that schools teach the classes that prepare young people for college entrance exams, to helping families figure out how to pay for college."

To ensure that the Queens youngsters receive the most well-rounded educational experience, QUP called upon members of the educational and business community to participate in its efforts. Joining QUP and the three participating middle schools—Leonardo Da Vinci, Joseph Pulitzer, and Daniel Beard—are LaGuardia, Bank Street College of Education, the Superintendent of Queens High Schools, The Queens Public Library, The Queens Child Guidance Center, and Chase Manhattan Bank. Also on board are three high schools—Flushing, John Bowne, and Newtown—that will receive a large number of the targeted students.

"Our program is based on the philosophy that 'it takes a whole village to raise a child,'" said Dr. Janet Lieberman, special assistant to the president. "The idea is to use all the other agencies in the community to support the school effort."

When the program gets off the ground in January 2000, after six months of planning, the partners will combine their talents to head programs that will enrich the children's learning experience and provide a strong support system.

To reinforce the learning in the classroom, a tutoring component will be overseen by LaGuardia. The college will be responsible for training 24 high school and college students who will be available after school to provide homework assistance and to lead academic students groups. All the work done between the tutor and student will be coordinated with the classroom teacher who will receive progress summaries.

The Queens Borough Public Library will play an active role by having a local library designate an outreach librarian to serve an intermediate school. Under this arrangement, the librarian will work with faculty to create class projects.

"The library will become an instructional partner, serving all three intermediate schools and, eventually, the three high schools," said Dr. Lieberman.

Learning will continue during the summer when school programs will be offered at all three intermediate schools. LaGuardia will also become a site for a variety of summer educational programs and the local public libraries will offer reading clubs for the youngsters.

The college will also extend its College for Children, a Saturday academic enrichment and recreational program offered throughout the year, to the children.

Early exposure to college and the world of work is another important element of the program. To open youngsters' eyes to the importance of continuing their education and pursuing a degree, QUP plans on expanding its College Bound program, a two-year-old program that has been successful in educating sixth graders on the importance of higher education. LaGuardia will also conduct college fairs and campus visits.

The job of introducing students to the world of work will go to Chase Manhattan Bank and other local businesses. To reinforce the career education that is going on in the classroom, the companies will conduct on-site tours and introduce their guests to the many career opportunities that await them.

Complementing the academic components will be a wide range of support services. One program calls for the placement of on-site social workers and additional counselors at each intermediate school. The Queens Child Guidance Center, a multi-service agency in Queens, will be responsible for the placement of these staff members.

"All the schools' counseling departments are grossly understaffed and are unable to provide the necessary guidance to its students," said Ms. Patterson. "With this additional staff, the schools will be able to better serve their special populations."

Social workers at each school will be required to identify students who may be having academic or personal problems and to work with them and their families in addressing these issues. They will also

Left to right: Arlene Kahn, Janet Lieberman and M'Shell Patterson are working on the expansive program.

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College Receives Grant to Develop Degree Program for American Sign Language Interpreters

At a time when the city is facing a shortage of interpreters for the deaf, the Office of Interpreter Education Projects at LaGuardia has been awarded a $237,000 State Education Department grant to collaborate with City College in developing the state's first bachelor's degree program for educational interpreters who work with deaf children in school settings.

The college, which has been a pioneer in interpreter education for over 12 years, will use the three-year grant to help the two institutions develop a seamless articulation program that will enable students to receive their associate degrees in deaf studies at LaGuardia and continue their baccalaureate studies in interpreting in educational settings through City College.

The program will be the third interpreter education program in the state and the first one to offer a bachelor of arts degree, according to Jo Ann Krani, director of the Office of Interpreter Education Projects. The goal is to accept the first class in September of 2001.

"With the city experiencing a severe shortage of qualified interpreters," said Ms. Krani, "this program will address the problem by providing an academically sound program that will better prepare educational interpreters to serve public school youngsters."

The program coordinator pointed out that at present, the majority of the interpreters who are providing services to the 1,000 deaf children and 2,000 hard-of-hearing students enrolled in the public schools are not certified and have little or no training.

"Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, fewer and fewer children are going to schools for the deaf and instead are going to neighborhood schools," said Rob Hills, the program coordinator. "Under this new arrangement, schools districts are responsible for providing services, however, because of the dearth of qualified interpreters, they are forced to hire people who do not have adequate credentials."

The schools, said Ms. Krani, are desper-

Census and Voter Registration Are Priorities for Queens in 2000

As we enter the new millennium, two major events will occur and affect our lives for years to come: the United States Census 2000 and Voter Registration.

The once-per-decade census, as required by the U.S. Constitution, will be taken on April 1, 2000. The census remains as important to allocating political power now as it was when the Constitution was adopted. Besides determining the number of Representatives New York State will have in Congress, it plays an integral role in determining how our state legislature is districted and how voting zones in our city will be drawn.

Information from the census is also important to local officials because it helps identify where schools and roads should be built, as well as showing population distribution. It is also crucial in determining how much money cities receive through various federal

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Queens Urban Partnership Grant

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supervise eight student mentors who will be assigned at each school. The mentors, who, like the tutors, will work after school, will provide individual attention to their charges and will serve as role models.

The counselors will help ease the work-load of the schools’ guidance counselors by coordinating an array of activities such as high school and college visits and workshops on career exploration.

For the teachers, Bank Street, a nationally recognized leader in early childhood education, and LaGuardia, will provide professional development workshops. Bank Street will also offer faculty credit and non-credit graduate education classes.

“Each of the feeder intermediate schools and high schools offer professional development,” said Dr. Arlene Kahn, director of School/College Relations, who is working on the project. “But these opportunities are too limited and fall far short of what is needed if each school’s reform agenda is to be realized.”

And there will be specially designed programs for parents. “Right now there exists minimal support services for families, many of whom are recent immigrants,” said Dr. Kahn. “Lack of this essential link between school and family means that a crisis affecting families and impacting upon children goes unnoticed and unsolved.”

She explained that the program plans on bridging the gap by having the on-site social workers and counselors establish a solid home-school linkage.

Another important aspect of the program is to educate parents on the importance of their children’s educational future.

“It is important that they become knowledgeable educational consumers,” said Ms. Patterson. “And they must understand that even though their child is only in the seventh grade it is important to begin thinking about college.”

Believing that it is imperative to begin this educational process as early as possible, the program will begin supplying parents and their seventh graders with information on colleges, and will continue supplying materials and conducting workshops throughout the five years.

Enriching the education of parents is also an important aspect of the program so LaGuardia, Bank Street, and the libraries will develop courses and workshops geared to the special needs of parents.

For QUP, which is part of a national Ford Foundation-funded program operating in 16 cities across the country, the multi-million dollar grant project is a natural outgrowth of the work it has done to increase college awareness among students in School District 25 in Queens.

“Since 1991, through its initiative, QUP has worked to facilitate communication with schools, to give teachers a stronger voice in deciding upon classroom practices, and to help parents and the community learn about strategies that improve school practices,” said Ms. Patterson. “This grant assures that this educational outreach will continue.”

Academic Affairs

Professors Marcia Glick and Arthur Lau of the Communications Arts Department conducted a workshop designed to show parents in the Family College how to effectively read to their children.
College Preps Students for High-Tech Workplace

To better prepare its predominantly minority students for the technology-driven marketplace, LaGuardia will use a $2 million United States Department of Education grant to integrate technology into all its academic programs.

The goal will be achieved through the establishment of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Technology (CETT), a resource station where faculty will get the intensive training and support needed to enable them to incorporate the use of technology into their courses.

“The majority of our students are minorities who are economically disadvantaged and have had limited exposure to technology,” said George Sussman, vice president for Academic Affairs, who noted that only 16 percent of reported LaGuardia students have access to computers compared with 80 percent of incoming students at private colleges and universities. “Through this initiative, the college will apply the newest technology to student learning and equip our students with the highly technological skills they must master for successful transfer to a four-year school or into the workplace.”

To impact the greatest number of students, the college will offer a comprehensive faculty development program that will initially target instructors who teach basic skills and introductory courses as well as those who teach freshman seminars that orient students to the college and cooperative education classes that introduce them to the workplace. By the end of the five-year funding period, college administrators believe that technology will be infused in all its academic courses and will impact all 11,000 students.

Paul Arcario, associate dean for Academic Affairs, noted that research supports the claim that computers are a vital teaching tool. “Studies show that such technology-assisted approaches can enhance learning. For example, students can visualize concepts on a computer that are difficult to create on a blackboard,” he said.

He added that the Title V project will allow faculty to take better advantage of the computer infrastructure investments and improvements made by the Information Technology Division over the past few years.

Through the center, faculty will attend workshops and one-on-one consultation sessions and will have access to professional development videotapes. Once faculty members have redesigned their courses, Vice President Sussman explained that they will be called upon to serve as mentors to those instructors who need assistance in making improvements in similar courses.

“In this manner,” he said, “the initial investment in faculty training will have a multiplier effect, as each year, faculty mentors continue to guide other faculty, both full-time and adjunct, in incorporating information technology into their teaching.”

The mentoring model will also be used among students. Technology-savvy LaGuardians will be trained to help their classmates complete their computer-based course assignments and to interact with the Internet.

“We firmly believe a program where LaGuardia students share their knowledge and assist large numbers of their peers to become independent users of this technology is a key component in establishing the broad-based use of computer technology that this proposal aims to achieve,” said Dr. Arcario.

Nursing Program Initiates New Fast-Track Curriculum

For licensed practical nurses who are interested in a career as a registered nurse, the college’s nursing program has launched a new advanced-standing pathway for these health care professionals.

The program, which was developed by Professors Rosely Octaviano and Joanne Downes, allows students with a current practical nursing license to complete the clinical phase of the college’s nursing program in 18 months and then be eligible to sit for the registered nurse licensing examination.

“This program will continue to make LaGuardia very attractive to the thousands of LPNs within New York City and surrounding areas,” said Professor Octaviano.

According to Professor Downes, the LPN candidate may complete the pre-clinical phase of the nursing program or have credits transferred in these courses. After successfully completing the requirements, including challenging exams, the student receives exemption credit for the first clinical semester of nursing.

To recruit students, the department designed a campaign that included a mass mailing to 14,000 licensed practical nurses and an open house which attracted over 100 people.

“This program proves the college’s commitment to the bigger community,” said Professor John Bihm, chairperson of Natural and Applied Science.
Communication Skills Receives Book Collection from Former Professor

The teachers and students who knew Dominic Lofaro of the Communication Skills department remember him as a dedicated teacher who enthusiastically shared his love of literature. Now the professor, who died three years ago after a long illness, will not only be remembered for that invaluable gift, but also for the extensive book collection his wife donated to the department.

The 2,100-book collection, which will serve as a rich educational resource for the college community, was officially unveiled by the department during a formal dedication ceremony last June.

At the event, faculty, friends, and family fondly remembered Professor Lofaro. His father, Dominic, was an honored guest at the ceremony. “I am deeply moved by this expression of respect and affection for my son,” he said.

“He was a very special person,” said Professor Mary Fjeldstad, one of the faculty members who attended the gathering.

In looking for the right words to describe this special man and educator, Professor Fjeldstad said that one should read the inscription on a plaque that hangs above the collection: “Dear Friend, Respected Teacher, Avid Reader.”

Professor Lofaro began his teaching career at LaGuardia in the late 1970’s as an adjunct professor in the English and reading departments. In 1981 he became a full-time faculty member and received his tenure in 1986.

“He was a wonderful teacher,” said Professor Fjeldstad, who also joined the faculty in 1981. “He could speak eloquently, loquaciously, warmly, about any piece of literature he had ever read, and make you know it and love it, too. He had a rare gift that he shared with his students.”

Professor Jose Fabara was one of those fortunate students. In 1982, he was a student in Professor Lofaro’s reading class. “He was first my teacher, then my friend and finally, my colleague. Always though,” the student-turned-professor said with a smile, “he was a gentle provocateur.”

Professor Lofaro, who blanketed the walls of his home with books, is providing the college with an eclectic collection, which ranges from religion to mystery to literary criticism.

Now a portion of his collection has found a home in the college’s reading lab in room E-114. Lining the six bookshelves is Winston Churchill’s six-volume history of World War II, The Jungle by Sinclair Lewis, works by Cheever, Updike, Bellow, Wordsworth, and Sandburg. There is an extensive collection of the works of Mark Twain, the subject of Professor Lofaro’s dissertation.

“Dominic was a treasure house of ideas, just like this collection,” said Professor Fjeldstad. “He would be happy to be remembered in this way.”
LaGuardia Teacher Joins Humanitarian Mission to Help Nicaraguans

Several months after Hurricane Mitch devastated Nicaragua, I had the privilege of playing a small part in an impressive humanitarian effort. I participated in a three-day conference in Jinotepe, where I provided training to some 50 special education teachers who came from six cities in Nicaragua.

The experience was organized by Wanda Figueroa, director of the Occupational Therapy Assistant Program at Arapahoe Community College of Colorado and a field work supervisor. The mission also included faculty from the University of Colorado and students from Colorado State University and Arapahoe.

The occupational therapy mission brought donations of clothing, food, medicine, educational materials, toys and supplies to make adapted equipment.

During the three training sessions, I presented the teachers with a host of exercises, activities, games, and therapeutic approaches that they could use in the classroom. All were designed to enhance the students’ academic performances and to better prepare them for vocational opportunities.

To further enrich the teachers’ learning experience, I supplied them with articles from occupational therapy publications and occupational therapy-related textbooks, as instructional equipment.

I also had the opportunity to consult the mission’s occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant students who were responsible for servicing special education classrooms in three cities and for making home visits with teachers assigned to the special education population. The teachers, who did not have special education degrees, generally made biweekly visits to homebound children.

Every evening professors and students would sit around a large table for a debriefing. One particular moment stands out: an occupational therapy student from Colorado State University described a wonderful family with a special needs child who she had visited that day. The family, already living in what westerners might consider inadequate housing, was being evicted. Next week’s housing was to be plastic.

One student described a visit to a home where the parents disregarded their blind child. The students described how they had brought laughter to the child’s world. When they had to leave after the two-hour visit, the child stretched out his arms to them. The students left knowing that the child would not receive any human interaction until the teacher returned in two weeks. The students said: “The only fun he had was the two hours we spent with him. It was so hard to leave him. How could he be such a happy person? Why can’t he be placed with a more loving family?”

Another student described a Down’s syndrome child abandoned by his parents shortly after birth. The child, barefoot and accompanied by his grandfather who cares for him, would walk almost an hour each way to attend school.

Also at night, the students would write in their journals, prepare therapeutic recommendations in Spanish (with the help of dictionaries) for each child seen, and make adaptive equipment to be brought to the bed-bound children at the teachers’ next visit. In one instance, a teacher had asked for something to strengthen the hands of a child. I demonstrated stress balls that a LaGuardia student had taught in an introduction to occupational therapy class and had given to me to bring to Nicaragua. They were made of balloons filled with dry rice. Fortunately, the supplies were available.

I had an opportunity to visit schools and special education classrooms in two cities, which verified what I had been told about the lack of equipment and the barren environment. Fortunately, I was able to observe two new vocational training programs, one focusing on woodworking for adolescent boys and one directed toward sewing for younger girls. Shoe shine boxes were a major focus on the woodworking projects. The girls reused plastic burlap food bags for their sewing samplers.

The mission’s accommodations were more luxurious than anticipated. We were split into two rooms furnished with eight beds each. There were two toilets and showers (cold water, single stream). The first unique birdcalls began at 4 am.

Two members of the mission team were assigned each evening to pump water through a filter to fill all our water bottles for the next day. It was a long process. Other mission participants were washing clothes outside at the concrete washing stand with a built-in wash board and drainage to the ground.

Each day as we walked to town and the almost two miles to the conference site, we were brought to the reality of the socioeconomic conditions. We passed grouped structures built of slabs of wood alongside collections of corrugated tin-roofed family quarters with outdoor cooking centers. We were passed by the many wooden wagons of all sizes, drawn by people, horses, or oxen. Some carried children to and from school.

During one of my early-morning observations, I watched young people with school bags walk into the distance down a dirt road without a structure in sight.

At the end of my stay the university students in Managua staged a sit-in that closed the road in the city and made it almost impossible for me to reach the airport for my departing flight. Fortunately, a local driver was found who was able to negotiate treacherous mountain roads, via an alternate route, that led to the airport.

The descriptions of each family’s situation are vividly imprinted in my memory. I hope that the ideas and techniques we transmitted to those working in the environment will be implemented for longer term impact.

Another expedition to Nicaragua is planned for next year. To find out how you can help, contact Wanda Figueroa-Rosario at Arapahoe Community College at (303) 797-5935.