He sat in his saffron robes, bare arm gesturing, cross legged in the enormous chair in his stocking feet and answered the question: “Your Holiness, is there a population problem in the world, and if so, what should we do about it? Without skipping a beat the Dalai Lama answered, “Yes, there is a serious overpopulation problem. The solution: have more monks!”

This is a momentous year for UB. It is the 25th anniversary of the current Honors Program. Starting in 1981 with an entering class of 20 students, the program has grown steadily, and this fall we had the largest class ever, a freshman class of almost 300. Now, with a total of 1,000 Honors students, UB has one of the largest and most successful programs in the country. Our alumni are spread across the globe. Several from our first classes are featured in this issue of Honors Today.

But that isn’t all the news as our front cover suggests. The University had the honor of hosting His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama for three days in September. His visit was arranged and coordinated by Dr. Stephen Dunnett, Vice Provost for International Education, William Regan, Director of the Office of Special Events and James “Beau” Willis, Chief of Staff in the Office of the President. Regan said that the Dalai Lama’s visit “has the parameter of size, duration, complexity, planning, and participation that dwarf almost every other event at the University.” Dunnett added, “The closest analogy would be a visit by the Pope.”

The Dalai Lama’s visit was entitled as promoting “Peace Across Borders through Education” and culminated with a “Day of Learning” including a program at the UB football stadium, filled to capacity with 30,000 participants. Other activities preceded the “Day of Learning.” Tibetan monks from the Drepung Loseling Monastery performed an evening of “Sacred Music, Sacred Dance,” which included their renowned multiphonic chanting and a pirouetting acrobatic lion. The Dalai Lama held special audiences with students and faculty; attended a luncheon for dignitaries; conducted an interfaith program; received an honorary degree, and a gift of a Buffalo sculpture to boot. This extraordinary visit captured the interest and hearts of the Buffalo and Niagara community amid enormously positive press coverage for UB. It has been a good year indeed.

KIPP HERREID & JOSIE CAPUANA
Academic Director and Administrative Director
From the Editor:
My daughter Makena and I showed our support for the UB Bulls by attending this season’s final game! For some history on UB’s mascot, see page 9.

Behind the Scenes
Three Days with His Holiness
the 14th Dalai Lama
Jeannette Ludwig
Romance Languages and Literatures

Therapy for the Soul
PAGE 6
Darren Vogt
Honors Scholar, Class of 2001

Carrying on the Work of a Congressman
PAGE 7
Peter Rizzo
Advanced Honors Scholar, Class of 2007

Meal Fit for a Queen
PAGE 7
Brian Danielak
Distinguished Honors Scholar, Class of 2007

Singing Whales: A Kayak Expedition
PAGE 8
Rachael Rubin
Honors Scholar, Class of 2006

Sheldon Berlow:
Opening Students’ Minds
PAGE 10
Jessica (Seabury) Dudek
Honors Scholar, Class of 1994
Assistant Administrative Director, Honors Program

Acta Bioinformatica
PAGE 13
Hanif Khalak
Honors Scholar, Class of 1990

Keeping My Name
PAGE 14
Catherine Tufariello
Honors Scholar, Class of 1985

Alumni Updates
PAGE 16
What They’re Doing Now
The semester could not have had a more auspicious beginning. In a first-of-its-kind visit, His Holiness the Dalai Lama spent three days in late September at the University at Buffalo. Known world-wide as the 1989 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, His Holiness is the spiritual and political leader of some 6 million Tibetans, though he has lived in exile in northcentral India for the past half-century. And you found out, along with the rest of Western New York, that he is a profoundly charismatic, wise, and intellectually curious man, intensely engaged with life itself.

What you might not know is that he is now 72 years old, and just a little under five feet seven inches tall. You might not know that before his address to 30,000 people in the stadium on the Tuesday afternoon of his visit, he spent the morning in private talks with Chinese students from the University, and an open session with interested faculty. At noon that same day he relished his princess steak and...
salmon at the Presidentially-hosted University luncheon, where he reported having slept very soundly the night before. “I am the king of sleep,” he announced.

Yeah, right. A man who, on a typical day, wakes at 3:30 am to pray, meditate, and perform prostrations before a morning walk at 5:30. He listens to BBC News during breakfast and continues prayers, meditation, and textual study until late morning. After lunch he carries out official business, including meetings with visitors. As a Buddhist monk he takes no evening meal, content to have a little tea before another two hours of prayer and meditation. OK, so if he retires at 8:30 pm he would get seven hours of sleep. Maybe that’s why he’s so energetic, despite a few recent bouts of ill-health.

But there’s more you probably don’t know. For instance, he has difficulty sitting in a narrow western-style chair for long periods of time, so the University had at least three different chairs for various venues, each large enough to accommodate his more traditional cross-legged posture. That he freaked out the security guys by deciding to walk the corridors of Alumni Arena to the Interfaith Service on Monday afternoon, rather than being whisked to the dais in a special vehicle. That an aide unfurled his monk’s cape, or kesa, to cover his shoulders before we left for the service. “I have my uniform, too,” he chuckled.

His Holiness is understood to be the personification (more properly, a reincarnated bodhisattva) of compassion, “the 74th in a lineage that can be traced back to a Brahmin boy who lived in the time of Buddha.” One might think that means he’s old-fashioned or out-of-touch. But not so. He has always had a keen interest in science. In the past few years he’s worked with neuroscientists to chart the precise changes in brain function during different forms of meditation. In the faculty dialogue he underscored the importance of taking care of the environment, and spoke freely of the “big bang.” His signature closing for the stadium speech – “If you think this [is] much nonsense, then forget it. No problem.” – is no idle comment. At its root Buddhism is empirical; it invites you to try it out, keep it if it fits and discard it if it’s not useful.

The Dalai Lama is also a pragmatist:

In the Interfaith Service he cited economic disparities as a form of injustice world wide, a theme he returned to in the dialogue with faculty. But, he pointed out, it’s possible to be too generous, even at the corporate level. “Too much dana (‘giving’) and a company can not give to others or keep [itself] alive.”

Most touchingly, His Holiness is one of the most visually acute human beings I’ve ever met, no doubt a result of the intense visualization meditation training he has practiced as part of his religious life. As co-chairs of the Planning Committee for the Interfaith Service, Father Pat Keleher and I were given the honor of being the first to shake his hand and welcome him to the UB campus itself. His Holiness then made the round of several dozen (pretty nervous and over-awed) dignitaries, faculty, and students, shaking hands and smiling...
The Dalai Lama continued

greeting. When he came to me he said, “We have already met.” He picked out the face of someone seated in the audience, a person who had earlier asked him a question from the microphone, in the crowd of 200 faculty members. He obviously enjoyed playing back in his mind the appearance of a young Tibetan, an exiled student in jeans and “strange hair.” “Hee-hee-hee.” Could it have been a mohawk? It seemed so. But His Holiness also understands sweet sorrow, as the young man had tears in his eyes for his lost country.

Finally, and not unimportantly, His Holiness began the discussion with the faculty with the words “You have every right to put any question. I have [the] right to say, ‘I don’t know.” And it is just this openness, this willingness to explore together that marks his lifetime of leadership and enquiry. “Don’t know” mind is the gateway to learning; it is how we find things out.

When the real nuts-and-bolts planning for his visit got underway a year and half ago it all seemed surreal, almost impossible to take in. Then it began to take on form and a life of its own. So much work for just one “simple monk,” one “same human being, just like you.” Security, menus (he tries to keep to a vegetarian diet at home, but it is difficult abroad and his physicians have encouraged him to “get more protein”), timing, protocol, security, scheduling, decorations, weather (there was a “sun plan,” a “rain plan,” and a “lightning plan” for the stadium event), parking, flowers, program design, security, guest lists, private time, transportation, crowd control, plus more protocol and more security. It all went smoothly because of total commitment on the part of many – often unsung – heros. People who worked at each of the events over the three days were inordinately generous, with time, with expertise, and with “warmheartedness.” From caterers and ushers, to media-savvy technicians hired to record
the proceedings at every location, each individual expended the utmost to make the entire experience something we could all be proud of. “There are no bit players” goes the theatre adage, one that acknowledges a deep Buddhist truth: that each person is (already) connected to the whole. At every level – from the President’s office to parking officials – UB proved itself fit for the task. We were all privileged to be part of this historic encounter. The Tibetans call him kundun ‘[the] presence.’ Indeed.
My friends don’t understand why any- one my age would go to bed early on a Friday night to get up and run 18 miles early in the morning. They don’t work with sick people all day long. I guess it’s no coincidence that since graduating in 2001 and becoming a physical therapist, I have also become somewhat of a “weekend warrior.” Last year I completed my first Ironman Triathlon. Last week I participated in my first adventure race, and in November I’ll be running the NYC marathon. I feel fortunate to go to work every day with constant reminders all around me about how precious life is.

When thinking about writing this piece, my first idea was to show what good work we physical therapists do with the recipient of a new titanium knee. How amazing it is that they may go back to playing golf every day. The truth is, those types of patients represent only a small portion of what I do, and that those are the feel-good stories which are actually far and few between here. Out of the 566 beds at Monroe Community Hospital, only 36 are dedicated to rehabilitation. The rest of the beds are for long term care “residents,” rather than “patients.” Being a resident means that you have lost the ability to fully care for yourself, and now must rely on a certain amount of assistance from others. I’ve decided to tell you the story of a resident, rather than a patient. The reason is because that first guy is probably teeing off right now, while the second will never step on a fairway again. The truth however, is that I have no idea what it’s like to be a resident because I go home at 4:00 p.m. every day. Instead, I’ve asked Pat to tell you what her day is like. Pat thinks I want to write an essay on how I can’t help but notice a hint of pride in her voice and I smile. “Basically I’ve accepted what I can’t change; it could be worse. Look at the P-ward (pediatric), and it makes you thankful for what you’ve got. I enjoy each day as much as I can, and there are many good people here at MCH to brighten my day.” I want to thank Pat for being so candid during our talk, and allowing me to tell her story.

During the adventure race last week, my team became frustrated after being lost in the woods, in the rain, for half of the 12-hour race. As the leader of my team, I wanted to give them some inspiration. I told them the story of my newest patient at the hospital, a young man close in age to myself, who is fighting a spinal cord tumor which has left him without the use of his legs. At that point I think we all got a different perspective about our situation. Suddenly, we weren’t in last place in a race, we were four people hiking in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains. We decided there was no place we’d rather be.

My job is to teach my patients, but more often than not, they end up teaching me more than I could ever teach them.
Meal Fit for a Queen

The Queen was coming to Oxford (where I was studying abroad during the 2005-2006 academic year). She was scheduled to visit my college, Christ Church, and to have lunch in its famous dining hall. A small number of seats were reserved for undergraduates, and a lottery was held to determine who would be fortunate enough to dine in the presence of Her Royal Highness.

I scribbled my name on the lottery list, not believing for a second that I'd make it. Fortune, however, smiled upon me, and I was lucky enough to receive a ticket.

The day of the event saw the streets of Oxford nearly choked with anxious onlookers. On every sidewalk, obedient subjects jockeyed for the best view. It humbled me to think that some Britons go their entire lives without ever seeing The Queen in person, but I was about to share a meal with her.

When it came time for lunch, The Queen entered a hall full to capacity with admirers, myself included. And, she was so close! If I made any sudden movements I would have tripped England’s National Treasure as she took her seat.

The menu, which was of The Queen’s own choosing, was wondrous. It was filled with dishes like herb-crusted spring lamb, potatoes dauphinoise, and mango tart.

As The Queen has a particular fondness for drama, lunch was followed by a performance from Macbeth on the High Table of the dining hall. It was the first time I had been treated to Shakespeare after dessert, and one that I shall never forget.
Do you remember when you were little and you thought it would be really cool to work near the ocean and play with dolphins, but then as you got older, you realized it would probably never happen? Well that is what I thought, until a little less than a year ago when I was presented with the opportunity to do research on the ocean with humpback whales (close enough)!

Over the past two years, as a member of Dr. Mercado’s lab in the psychology department, I had the opportunity to participate in research in the areas of cognitive psychology and behavioral neuroscience. I trained rats on auditory discrimination tasks, helped prepare and slice rat brain tissue, and recorded and analyzed evoked potentials from humans performing an auditory discrimination task. Oh, and did I forget to mention that I went out on a kayak and recorded humpback whales singing? Yes, whales! You may think to yourself, “I have never seen any whales at UB. Where are they, Lake LaSalle?” Unfortunately, it is true that there are no whales at UB and we certainly are not close to the ocean, but that’s no reason to forgo studying them at UB!

In the beginning of the Fall 2005 semester, I asked Dr. Mercado if I could sign up for independent study credit with him. I knew that some of his graduate students had planned a research project in Puerto Rico to analyze various components of humpback whale song, and I was hoping to tag along. Dr. Mercado suggested I apply for the Honors Program Research and Creative Activities Fund and run my own experiment in conjunction with the research team in Puerto Rico. I thought it was a great idea and immediately began brainstorming, with Dr. Mercado’s help, about what I could do.

Since his graduate students were going to be analyzing components of humpback whale song as a function of distance, I decided to test how computer-generated sounds, reflecting components of the whale song, traveled underwater by recording the sounds at known distances. One of the problems his research team faced was that the initial location of the whale generating the sounds was unknown and had to be estimated. We were hopeful that my research would provide certain algorithms that would more precisely determine the distance the whale songs had traveled. After submitting the research and budget proposal to the Honor’s Research Committee, I was left to anxiously await their decision. Fortunately, they approved my proposal; yet I still had to convince them (as well as my family) that it was indeed safe to kayak in the middle of the ocean and record singing whales. After including some additional safety measures and repeated assurances that I would be okay, I was off to Puerto Rico to study whale songs.

I arrived at the Aguadilla airport sometime around 4 o’clock in the morning, and quickly went to bed. When I woke up, I couldn’t believe my eyes. I was surrounded by palms trees and our cottage was situated on ocean front property. Although I was ready to go, not all of my equipment had arrived and I was forced to lie out on the beach and relax. Once my equipment arrived, I realized there was a slight problem. The mini-disk player was intact, but the underwater speaker and amplifier system necessary to produce the sounds was not assembled! After a few emails to Dr. Mercado and careful inspection of what I did not have, I realized I needed to get to the local Radio Shack to pick up a few supplies. Finally, everything was set. I had all the equipment connected and working properly. Now, it was time to kayak.

The first day on the water proved to be difficult, as I had not anticipated seasick-
ness would apply to kayakers. From then on I prepared for each day with a dose of anti-motion sickness tablets. The data collection, however, went smoothly. Most days the conditions were very conducive to our research. The speaker-amplifier system played the sounds from the boat, while I kayaked to various distances away from the boat and recorded my sounds using a hydrophone.

Once we returned to Buffalo and the fun of field work was over, it was time to analyze the data. The graduate students in Dr. Mercado’s lab used my recordings of computer-generated sounds that traveled known distances to help train their neural networks. The neural networks served as a model for information processing in the whale’s brain. Thus, we were able to establish several mechanisms whereby listening humpback whales could determine the distance to singing whales, as well as other sounds in their environment. Furthermore, the findings suggested that evolutionary adaptations to environmental conditions may strongly constrain auditory distance perception in whales. The article has recently been submitted for publication, and I am a coauthor.

This research project was definitely one of my best experiences, and for that I am thankful to the Honors Program for such an amazing opportunity. I learned a great deal about writing research grants, collecting field data, analyzing data, and writing and submitting journal articles. Now, studying at the University of Illinois to obtain my Ph.D. in Psychology in the Brain and Cognition Division, I feel prepared with the skills necessary for future graduate study.

Evolution of a Mascot

In this issue as we celebrate 25 years of Honors and historic moments like the visit from the Dalai Lama, we would be remiss if we didn’t also acknowledge another cornerstone of UB history…that’s right - UB’s faithful mascot, Victor E. Bull. UB’s Mascot hasn’t always been the 6 foot-plus furry blue Buffalo we all know and love today. In fact, the original mascots were quite different.

The first unofficial mascot at UB was given to the students by two alumni in honor of the first Homecoming game in 1934. Affectionately dubbed “Boscoe” by the students, the 175-pound bison head hung for many years over the Norton Union (now Harriman Hall) candy counter. Today Boscoe’s whereabouts are sadly unknown.

In 1957, the University acquired a live mascot when producer Mike Todd and his wife, actress Elizabeth Taylor presented the school with a black angus bull named “Buster.” The presentation was one part of Taylor and Todd’s four day visit with mayor, Steven Pankow to help celebrate Buffalo’s 125th anniversary.

In 1997, the UB Athletics department adopted a new mascot, Victor E. Bull. Victoria S. Bull (“Vicki”), UB’s first female mascot, was introduced a few years later in 2001. (Courtesy of the University Archives, State University of New York at Buffalo.)

As UB has changed and evolved over the years, so have the symbols that students and alumni have come to recognize as “true blue”, namely one tall furry blue Buffalo…

Please visit the online exhibit “Student Life at UB”: http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/archives/students/index.htm

Photo by Nancy Parisi

Rachael sets out on her expedition!
Sitting in on the honors seminar Conversations through the Disciplines, it soon becomes clear that instructor Sheldon Berlow has achieved the goal emblazoned across his course description: to get students to open their minds and think outside of the box. The honors scholars are seated comfortably at tables in a rectangular formation, and in front of each is a placard (think United Nations) with their full name in large capital letters. Though this is the last class of the semester, these name plates have been in place since day one, and they, along with a class photo sheet compiled and distributed by Berlow, have facilitated a ready communication amongst the students. At the conclusion of two students‘ final team presentation, Berlow turns the floor over to the class, and one by one each class member asks questions or responds to the presentation. The dialogue of the students is both respectful and easy, and they seem neither inhibited nor reluctant to speak. Their ability to synthesize information, to make insightful connections between today’s presentation and issues from other fields or classes is particularly impressive. During a break in the three hour class Berlow notes, “They have come a long way. The students in this course come from many different majors and years, but they have established an excellent dynamic.”

That dynamic is largely due to Berlow himself. As the students speak, he listens attentively, occasionally interjecting to connect new information to previous concepts covered in class, or to place it within a larger context. Berlow is clearly interested in what the students have to say, and encourages them to talk to each other. Near the end of the class, as he is winding the seminar down for the semester, he tells them that he hopes that they take from these presentations a theme of openness—to change and to new things—and the knowledge that “you can do whatever you want to do.”

Berlow’s comfort level in the classroom belies the fact that teaching is one of his more recent pursuits. The founder and past Chairman of Berlow Real Estate, a commercial/industrial brokerage firm, he has enjoyed success in the business world for over 30 years. In addition to his financial acumen, Berlow is also an active member of the community, particularly in the fields of arts and education. In the seminar description posted on the Honors Program website Berlow explains that his “overriding interest has been with the ways risk-taking in the arts serves to open the mind to new thinking. He carried this out primarily by being “audience”, including listening to, seeing, hearing, encouraging, and critiquing efforts in the contemporary arts and related fields.”
Berlow's role in the Buffalo art scene has not been limited to spectatorship. Some of his many affiliations over the years include: Director and Trustee of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Chairman and Board of Advisors of the American Contemporary Theater, Trustee of the Martin House Restoration Committee (a Frank Lloyd Wright house), and founder of Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center. He has been equally active in Western New York schools, serving as Trustee of the Park School of Buffalo, Trustee of Calasancius School, Trustee of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, President of the Advisory Board for Media Study Buffalo, and Director and President of the Friends of UB’s School of Architecture and Environmental Design.

Berlow’s close ties to the university ultimately launched his teaching endeavors. A few years ago, then Senior Vice President Robert Wagner, a close friend of Berlow’s, suggested that the businessman teach a course. Initially Berlow was hesitant, but Wagner persisted with the idea, eventually convincing his friend that his activities and interests perfectly suited him for teaching. Berlow’s only condition was that he work with bright, well-motivated students, and so Wagner immediately introduced him to Drs. Josephine Capuana and Clyde Herreid, Directors of UB’s Honors Program. Herreid recalls their first luncheon meeting with Berlow: “He was dressed impeccably, decked out as any top notch executive should be—which of course he was. As the meal wore on it was clear that Sheldon knew a lot of folks in the art world. So, it wasn’t long before it dawned on us that he might give a really interesting seminar. When we threw the idea out to him, he seemed pleased that he might be able to share some of his knowledge and joy of the arts and its connections to the sciences with students.”

The directors then put Berlow in touch with Catherine Norgren, Associate Professor of Theatre and Dance and a veteran seminar instructor, who helped him with the nuts and bolts of designing a course. Although preparing course descriptions and syllabi were new to Berlow, he did have a longstanding vision for the course. He recalls a moment years ago, when he was judging student designs for the School of Architecture and became particularly intrigued by the use of light and voids in one student’s project. He praised the project and asked the student if he had been at all influenced by John Cage. Much to Berlow’s astonishment and disappointment, the student had never heard of the composer. Berlow says, “That really stuck with me, and when I went to design the course, I decided that I had a personal agenda, and that was to open students’ eyes to other things in the world that could affect them. Whatever a student’s basic field of interest is, whether it is the arts or sciences, he or she must also draw from other disciplines to be the best in their line of work.”

Once he began teaching, Berlow soon realized that he had to open honors students’ minds not only to new ideas, but to new methodologies. At the outset he informs the students that this class will be unlike any other. What is most unsettling for many grade-conscious honors scholars is the fact that Berlow cannot tell them along the way what their grade will be. “The course has no tests, no midterm marks, and few graded papers. Instead, Berlow tells them, “The whole thing depends upon you tuning in and participating in what is going on.” Attendance and active participation are required, as well as reading the three or four assigned books and assorted eclectic articles Berlow chooses to “open up their heads.” Students pair off—ideally with someone they don’t know and with a student from outside of their discipline— to work on the seminar’s large research project/presentation, which focuses on a selected person from a list compiled by Berlow. This semester’s list included musician and artist Yoko Ono, philosopher and skeptic Paul Kurtz, John Cage, biologist and scholar Evelyn Fox Keller, and physicist Richard Feynman, all chosen because, according to Berlow, “their ideas and works stimulate and broaden student thinking in multiple directions.” Not only are students asked to do a complete study of the person’s background, motivation, and the impact of their works, but they must also articulate what they learned from researching the person and what they took from the project personally.

The students’ in-class experience is enhanced by Berlow’s wealth of personal connections in...
Whatever a student’s basic field of interest is, whether it is the arts or sciences, he or she must also draw from other disciplines to be the best in their line of work.

Sheldon Berlow continued

the artistic community. He will often invite guest speakers to class and in the three semesters the course has been offered cultural figures such as video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka, former Buffalo News arts critic and current Director of the George Eastman House Anthony Bannon, and Peter Dow, a local businessman and new science instruction innovator and educator have spoken to Berlow’s students. This past semester students took a tour of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery led by its Director, Louis Grachos, another friend of Berlow’s. Afterwards Grachos, as was the case with most out of town lecturers, joined the students for dinner and discussion in Berlow’s Buffalo home. These unique lectures give students the opportunity to go beyond typical textbook learning and engage with contemporary artists and academics on a more personal level. For instance, Berlow says, “Louis didn’t just give the museum tour thing, he told them how he got into it, what appealed to him in art, and what the pictures said to him when he viewed them.”

Despite the seminar’s small size of 15 students, Berlow also has an undergraduate teaching assistant. The TA acts as a liaison between the instructor and the students, helps to plan and organize the class, and also participates in and facilitates the discussions. Senior Honors Scholar Matthew Sommer took Berlow’s course as a freshman and has been his TA for the past two years. He now views Berlow as a mentor and a friend. Sommer says, “I was lucky to fall into his course the first year, and I had such a wonderfully fulfilling experience that I wanted to be a part of it again. Sheldon fosters openness in his classroom; he insists that students’ thoughts matter and that the class is also a learning experience for him. This attitude allows for dialogue and exchange as opposed to lecture and rote learning. After my one semester as a student I felt comfortable enough to call him at his home and ask if I could be his TA.”

Students work as a team on a class project.

Probably Berlow’s biggest challenge is to encourage that exchange. In addition to the placards and the class photos, Berlow tailors his initial activities to get the students comfortable talking to each other, eventually getting them to debate and even disagree. He finds that near mid-semester the students become more like a group, and by the end of the course they are comfortable listening to and expressing varied viewpoints. Berlow says he is gratified to see that most students are “getting it” and his final written evaluations confirm his assessment. Berlow says, “I get everything from, ‘I am glad that I stuck with the course, I came skeptical and it was better than I thought’ to ‘This absolutely changed my life and I know that I don’t have to go into the career my father told me I had to.’”

These sentiments are echoed by Honors sophomore Robyn Steinberg, who took the seminar in Spring 2006. She says, “The professor challenged students to think outside the box and to use methods of thinking that were not ordinary, which I have to admit at times was very frustrating. However, I am happy that I stayed in the class, because it helped me to realize other ways of approaching situations and introduced me to new concepts and people.” Sommer agrees, and adds that the course has been central to his college education: “The class encourages students to be creative, independent learners, seeking their own interests and their own original thoughts. That idea has encouraged me to branch out beyond traditional classroom learning and actively pursue internships, research, study abroad, and even the teaching assistant position.”

Everyone enjoys an informal dinner at the Berlow home.

“The class encourages students to be creative, independent learners, seeking their own interests and their own original thoughts.”
GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Exactly 20 years ago this Fall, I entered the UB Honors Program, as a freshman engineering student. I graduated 4 years later magna cum laude with a B.S. in Aerospace Engineering. Those years were much more than applied math, mechanics, gas dynamics, and finite elements. It was a heady, adventurous and fascinating period for me, one in which I was, really for the first time, challenged intellectually and personally to redefine my expectations of the world and myself.

Even more than the thought-provoking honors curriculum, it was the mentorship, friendship, all-night study and conversation, ski and road trips, and new hellos and goodbyes every year. There are too many dear friends and mentors to thank to list here, but I hope they can know how valuable they have been to me.

BREAKING INTO BIOCOMPUTING

After graduating from UB, I briefly continued on my trajectory in the aerospace field, with an NSF fellowship at a world-class program in engineering mechanics at the University of Texas at Austin. Things did not go quite so predictably from there (they never really have), but to make a long story short, I decided to change direction toward a field with an explicitly humanitarian mission - biomedicine. It was pretty much a 9g turn that eventually brought me back to Buffalo where I finished an M.S. in mechanical engineering in 1994. I did my thesis in computational biophysics working with Herbert Hauptman’s lab at the Hauptman-Woodward Institute (HWI), then Buffalo Medical Foundation.

This really broke me gently into the field of biotechnology, since biophysics is really more physics than biology. So, my engineering training was immediately useful and the phenomenological issues were familiar, clearing the way to a path which I’ve traveled for 12 years and rarely looked back. Along the way, there have been numerous intriguing opportunities to apply engineering systems modeling and numerical approaches to many aspects of molecular, cell, tissue, organism, and population physiology.

MOLECULAR DENSITY

Once I had some familiarity with biomedical literature, I began to explore more aspects of biomedicine, particularly neuroscience. In 1994, I obtained a position providing computational support to neuroimaging research at the Buffalo VA Hospital on Bailey Avenue, with Dr. Alan Lockwood, in a joint research appointment at the Nuclear Medicine Department at UB Medical School. It was a valuable experience with a great bunch of folks, studying patterns of brain activity for different behavior using statistical image processing of clinical PET scans. I spent a year following this up in fellowship doing basic research in biologically-inspired neural networks, applied to image recognition, through George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

In 1997, I came across an advertisement for a position in the burgeoning new field of genomics at The Institute for Genomic Research (TIGR) with Craig Venter, who would eventually found Celera and beat NIH in sequencing the human genome. The sequencing and analysis of the entire DNA of organisms presented a fascinating opportunity to propose actual “systems-level” models for biology. My experience there ranged from software engineering to statistical modeling, and really helped to fill out my insight into molecular basis of biological phenomena.

Observing the surge of industrial R&D investment in the late 1990s in genomic medicine, I joined Avalon Pharmaceuticals in Maryland, an early-stage cancer drug discovery start-up with less than 30 employees. Over the course of 4 years, we managed to obtain $100 million in funding and spent most of it doing a prodigious amount of cutting edge drug discovery work. As Senior Bioinformatics Scientist, I cut my teeth on almost all aspects of computing applied to the biopharmaceutical field, and found the start-up environment to be immensely rewarding, even though the options didn’t quite work out dot-com style.

An opportunity last fall to join the industry leading Novartis Institutes for Biomedical Research brought me to Boston, Massachusetts where I currently reside. I can literally walk to 5 world-class universities, including Harvard and MIT and regularly attend their seminars, all the while being a part of field-breaking cancer drug development. After 10 years, bioinformatics continues to evolve in its scope and importance in biotechnology, so I continue to study the science to deepen my understanding of the underlying discipline.

CODA

It’s been quite a ride, and I’m looking forward to many breaking episodes to come. The main thing I still have left to do might be to complete a Ph.D., in applied statistics or biomedical engineering.

Many engineering students would do well to take electives in biomedical subjects - not survey classes which touch on many topics, but seminal core classes like biochemistry, genetics, or immunology. I have similar advice for bioscience majors - try to learn statistics of hypothesis testing, even if only to gauge papers and presentations. I’m not guaranteeing that you’ll like it, just that you’ll be ahead of many others who usually have difficulty “crossing over” later.

Collaboration across a number of disciplines is happening more frequently and taking center stage in many new areas of research. An early appreciation for and training in interdisciplinary studies is a great way of staking a claim in what really is becoming the Biotech Century.

Hanif hard at work!
Some of my friends at Sweet Home High School in Amherst, NY were surprised when I decided to attend UB. Bound for Ivy League universities or small colleges with stellar reputations, they had expected me to leave Buffalo for bigger and better things. Why was I staying? There was a brand-new Honors Program at UB, I would explain, and I could attend not only tuition-free but with a few hundred dollars left over. In 1981, believe it or not, $1,000 per semester more than covered both tuition and books.

In truth, though, I was ambivalent about my choice. The Honors Program sounded good on paper, but my nineteen classmates and I in the first cohort had little idea what to expect. I wondered if I would be better off striking out on my own, rather than attending the university where my father had taught organic chemistry since I was an infant. But three younger sisters were coming up close behind me, and I knew how helpful the Honors Scholarship would be to my parents. (Eventually all of my sisters would join me as Honors Program graduates.) By choosing UB, I saved my parents a bundle of money but, by majoring in English, getting a Ph.D., and becoming a poet, ensured that I would never make much money myself.

Sometimes one does well by doing good: at UB I would have the best teachers and mentors of my life. I studied European fiction with Joe Fradin, Shakespeare with Richard Fly, Chaucer with Mili Clark, Romantic poetry with Carol Jacobs, popular literature with Leslie Fiedler, the Bible as Literature with Diane Christian, classical mythology and ancient Greek with John Peradotto. I enjoyed Kipp Herreid’s Evolutionary Biology course so much that I toyed briefly with the idea of a double major, spending the summer after my sophomore year running fiddler crabs on miniature treadmills in his lab and examining their chromatophores.

My first day in the lab, Dr. Herreid tested my mettle by inviting me to hold one of the giant South American cockroaches, swarming with tiny mites, that he kept on the counter in large glass jars. Wanting to prove that female English majors could be tough, I steeled myself and did it—only to learn from a male biology major friend that he, similarly challenged, wouldn’t go near the things. Though I didn’t last long as a lab assistant, one of “my” crabs did earn that summer’s record for the longest run, as, for hours, I prodded it with a plastic ruler to keep its legs from catching in the belt and dropping off. Urged to aerobic extremes without even the hope of Olympic glory, the Phidippides of fiddler crabs expired overnight. My scientific appetite thus quenched, I scuttled back to the English Department.
Poetry remained my special passion, and there I found a mentor and, eventually, a friend in Carl Dennis, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2002. As a junior I took his graduate seminar in American poetry, and in addition he met with me regularly to discuss my own poems. During one summer he invited me to his house in downtown Buffalo, and patiently went over my latest drafts while we sat in the backyard. The weather was perfect, clear and not too hot, and the breeze carried a scent of mint from his herb garden. I remember that conversation as one of the highlights of my college years. Throughout my career at UB my professors were extraordinarily generous with their time, sometimes inviting whole classes to their homes, and I got to know several of them as friends. Here indeed was the small college experience in the midst of a large research university that the Honors Program had promised to provide.

In the spring of my senior year I was the first UB student to be awarded a Mellon Fellowship in the Humanities for graduate study. I went off to Cornell with high hopes, but as a doctoral student I began to flounder. The dominance of post-structuralist and other literary theories at Cornell in the mid-1980s came as a shock. Despite UB’s cutting-edge reputation, I had gravitated to professors with fairly traditional approaches to literature, at least with undergraduates. Soon I lost confidence and rarely spoke in seminars. I also stopped writing poetry—for eight years. During that time I stayed in touch with Carl Dennis and Joseph (“Uncle Joe”) Fradin, who encouraged me to persevere. Ultimately I did attain the Ph.D., in a traumatic year during which my first marriage was simultaneously dissolving. Within a few months of being awarded my degree, I began writing poems again—a sequence of twenty sonnets, meditating on the experience of separation and divorce.

The twelve years since I came back, full circle, to reclaim my identity as a writer of poems have been full of surprises. During that time I’ve remarried, had a daughter, made five cross-country moves, and taught at universities in the Northeast, the South, and the Midwest. My husband Jeremy, like me, a Cornell Ph.D., unable to find a tenure-track position as a humanities professor, decided on law as a second career. He graduated from NYU School of Law and practiced at a firm in New York for several years—he was on his way to his office on the 54th floor of 1 World Trade Center when the planes hit on September 11, 2001—before becoming an assistant professor of law at Valparaiso University. I’m now the Associate Director for Communications at the Project on Civic Reflection, a nonprofit funded by Lilly Endowment and housed at Valparaiso University. It’s a job I love, one that lets me use my writing and teaching skills in a new way.

Our daughter Sophia Rose, conceived after years of infertility, was the best surprise of all for Jeremy and me. During the pregnancy I pictured my daughter-to-be as a petite, shy, brown-eyed brunette. Instead, she turned out to be a robust, fiesty baby with blue eyes and bright red hair. In the months after 9/11, as I carried her on the subway or the streets of Brooklyn, she beamed at anyone who looked her way. When strangers smiled back, saying how good it was to see new life, I felt I was giving them a gift just by having her with me. That baby has grown into an inquisitive, gregarious kindergartner with a spirited and sunny outlook on life. I still look at her and marvel that she’s mine. She is everything I could never have dreamed of.

If the unexpected twists and turns in the rest of my life have been mixed, some joyful and others painful, my life as a writer has been more fulfilling than I could have foreseen at twenty-two. In the late 1990s I began attending literary conferences and receiving acceptance from literary journals like Poetry and The Hudson Review. In 2001 I published two poetry chapbooks, and my work began appearing in anthologies. In 2004 my first full-length collection, Keeping My Name, was published by Texas Tech University Press after winning their annual first-book contest. Keeping My Name was one of three books selected as a 2004 “Editor’s Choice” in poetry by Booklist, the American Library Association magazine, and in 2005 it was one of five finalists for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in poetry.

Most exciting of all, in the winter of 2006 I learned that Keeping My Name had won the Poets’ Prize, awarded annually since 1988 for the best book of verse by an American. As its name implies, the twenty judges are themselves poets and contribute their own money for the prize. The award ceremony was held this past May at the Roerich Museum in New York, where I had attended similar celebrations of other poets’ work in the past. To stand on the other side of the podium, where poets like Adrienne Rich and Wendell Berry had received the prize before me, was an indescribable feeling.

The book’s publication has altered my life in ways I couldn’t have predicted. Growing up in a large family in a small house, I longed for solitude and privacy, even tacking up old sheets in a corner of our unfinished basement to form what my father dubbed “Cathy’s confessional.” I withdrew there with my notebooks, rarely showing what I had written to anyone. But publishing my poems, decades later, drew me out into the world. I now travel regularly to give readings, visit college classes, give interviews, and discuss poetry on a public radio show in Valparaiso.

An upcoming reading I look forward to with special pleasure will be my first reading in Buffalo, to be held in March at the Burchfield-Penney Art Center. It was in Buffalo that I fell in love with poetry, wrote my first poems, and studied the great tradition of poetry in English at UB, with professors who conveyed their love of it in every class. I truly can’t wait to come back.

“Throughout my career at UB my professors were extraordinarily generous with their time, sometimes inviting whole classes to their homes, and I got to know several of them as friends.”
1988

RANDI WEINSTEIN
Randi is currently living in Tucson, AZ with her husband, John Hartman, their sons, Johnny (3yrs.) and Nathan (1yr.), and their dog Astro. She is a professor in the Physiology Department at the University of Arizona and teaches in the College of Medicine. She is also an infertility consultant.

1991

FRED GRECO
After spending the past 10 years as a corporate attorney, Fred recently began a new career as a Presbyterian Pastor. He relocated to Katy, Texas to be the Senior Pastor of Christ Church, a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America. He and his wife Deb and have four children: Peter (8yrs.), Daniel (7yrs.), Paul (5yrs.) and Abigail (2yrs).

KEN PIZZUCO
Ken is currently living outside Cincinnati, OH working for Multi-Color Corp as Director of Purchasing.

1992

STEVE HELMS
Steve is currently the Controller of Perry’s Ice Cream in Akron, NY.

1994

NATHAN FLOWER
Nathan is currently teaching acting at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, Undergraduate Drama. He earned his MFA in Acting from Rutgers University professional actor training program and has been acting and teaching regionally and nationally since then. He and his wife Missy have a son, Lowden (3yrs.), and a daughter, Addie (almost 2yrs.).

1996

LISA RAPAPORT
Lisa just moved back East from California to take a job as a national medicine/science reporter for Bloomberg in NY.

2000

MICHAEL PROWATZKE
Michael is attending Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania, pursuing a Master’s Degree in biology with a concentration in ecology and environmental biology.

2002

CARRIE BETH WICKS
Having toured on the Broadway National Tour of The Music Man as Zaneeta Shinn and as dance captain on the Broadway National Tour of 42nd Street, Carrie Beth has returned home to Buffalo. She was married last August to Kevin Leary and is currently pursuing her Master’s degree in Arts Management at UB. She is also working as a graduate assistant for the Arts Management Program and as Director of Marketing for Alleyway Theatre in downtown Buffalo, NY.

2003

SARA CENTER
Sara received her Master’s Degree in English from the University of Minnesota.

2004

VIKAS DUA
Vikas is currently working at Moog in East Aurora, NY in flight simulation. He completed a Master’s Degree in Engineering from UB in September and is getting ready to apply for his MBA.

LISA MUROWSKI
Lisa is completing a Master’s Degree in geography at University of California, Santa Barbara this fall and is continuing on for her Ph.D. Her thesis is on specifying optimal road improvements to improve accessibility to health care in rural, developing areas.
2005

CATHERINE GOERSS
Catherine recently began her studies at Duke University School of Law.

JAWAAD SHERIFF
Jawaad is pursuing a Ph.D. in Biomedical Engineering at SUNY Stony Brook. His research foci are blood platelet response to fluid shear stresses and the development of an analytical model to study “vulnerable plaque.”

Marriages

On June 24th, 2006 SARA CENTER (2003) and TURNER GUTMANN (2003) were married in Duluth, MN.

KRISTEN BEUCHI married Chuck Rosenburg on July 29, 2006!

PAMELA WICKHAM married Mark C. Pallett, an Englishman she met while studying abroad during her third year at UB, on April 29, 2006.

Births

DAVID (2001) and TAMARA (CHENEZ) HILMEY (2001) welcomed a son, Xavier Russell, on December 11, 2005!

BEMINA (ATANACIO) ROHDE (1998) and her husband welcomed their second child and first son, Sean Michael on May 27, 2006!

SHOSHANA (TOBIAS) BAZINI (2002) and her husband welcomed a baby boy into their family in September!

Attention Alumni in the Delaware, Maryland, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC area! We will be hosting an Honors Alumni Reunion Brunch in Washington, DC on Saturday, April 21, 2007. More information to follow in February. We hope to see you there!

GUESS WHO?

It’s The Assad Brothers!

John (UBHP entering class of 1981) has been on the faculty of Harvard Medical School for ten years, where he is currently an Associate Professor of Neurobiology.

Christopher (“Chips”; UBHP 1982) is a Senior Member of the Technical Staff specializing in robotics at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.

Andy (UBHP 1983) was until recently on the technical staff of the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and is now tending his cabin/farm in the woods along the Sangamon River in Illinois.

All three brothers still bleed Buffalo blue...

From left to right: Chips, John (with daughter Elena), and Andy.