

Judging at Sundance

Much of **Martha Farah's** career has been dedicated to understanding the mechanisms of vision, memory and other processes in the human brain. A professor of psychology and director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, she has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and several teaching and research awards. Now she can add film festival juror to her impressive CV.

Farah was one of five science-minded academics and film aficionados to decide the Alfred P. Sloan Prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival. The prize is a \$20,000 cash award for films that focus on science or technology as a theme or depict a scientist, engineer or mathematician as a major character.

Several of the nominated films dealt with neuroscience themes.

"That our mental lives come down to the function of a little three-pound organ is one of the more astonishing ideas to have come out of science," she says, "and it is certainly worthy of contemplation and exploration by the artists and storytellers of our culture. There have recently been some excellent films in this vein, for example

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind."

This year's Sloan Prize-winning film, *House of Sand*, deals not with neuroscience but with geology, astronomy and physics. It is the story of three generations of women living in a hut in the sand dunes of Maranhao, Brazil. It depicts the environmental consequences of shifting desert sands and recalls the 1919 solar eclipse that brought an international team of scientists to the region in order to prove Einstein's general theory of relativity. Spanning 60 years, the film inconspicuously charts the introduction of such technological advances as the automobile, airplane, rocket ship and tape recorder.

Although *House of Sand* wasn't her first choice to win the Sloan Prize, Farah says she thoroughly enjoyed her time



James E. Abbott

Martha Farah



Lisa Geoffrey

Kissing the College Goodbye

Graduates from the College of Arts and Sciences Class of 2006 were treated to an unconventional graduation address from the featured speaker, alumna **Gloria Allred, CW'63**. Allred is a leading feminist who has won many honors for her pioneering legal work on behalf of women's rights. She invited her daughter, **Lisa Bloom**, an anchor for Court TV, to interview her at the podium in lieu of a traditional speech.

at Sundance. "Unfortunately, I'm such a nerd that I didn't recognize a lot of the movie stars," she admits. "This nice guy named Terrence Howard came over and chatted with me at a party, like a totally regular guy, and I had no idea who he was. I got home and saw he starred in *Hustle and Flow* and was nominated for an Academy Award. Very cool!"

The Book in America

In the dark-wood, book-lined Lea Library on Van Pelt's sixth floor, a group of 30 to 40 people gathered every other week in the spring to talk about — what else? — books. Humanities scholars, librarians and business experts came from New York, Texas and elsewhere to explore for seven weeks "The Book in America: Economic Aspects of the Material Text." The seminar looked at changes in book production, distribution, sales and more from their British roots to current trends and future directions.

The course stemmed from a research project that **Daniel Raff**, an associate professor of management in Wharton, had undertaken on changes in the marketing

of books due to the rise of superstores like Borders and competition from online dealers like Amazon.com. He was looking to scholars from the library and the School of Arts and Sciences to provide historical background and to help expose the business side of the book trade.

"That meshed with what has become a kind of cottage industry at Penn," observes **Daniel Traister**, a rare book librarian and one of the organizers of the seminar along with English professor **Peter Stallybrass**, among others. Stallybrass has long led a seminar on book history on Penn's campus, and many courses and programs in English, history, classics, art history and modern foreign languages delve into the subject of the book, Traister says.

"The seminar was lively and vibrant," Raff adds, "a wonderful example of cross-disciplinary, cross-school conversations at Penn." Traister describes the changes that have overtaken books in America in terms of a Dickens novel: "It's as if *Oliver Twist* shows up and says, 'Please, sir, may I have some more?' and people say, 'Yeah!'"

Dean's Forum Visitors

As supervisor of gifted education for the Lower Merion School District in Pennsylvania, **Ellen Just Braffman, C'77, GEd'77, Gr'00**, knows how to inspire greatness. As a Penn alumna, she also knows that one of the best ways to expose her young charges to leading ideas is through the SAS Dean's Forum.

Braffman began the field trips in 2004, when she brought 25 students to hear David McCullough discuss leadership. In the weeks leading up to the event, her students read excerpts from McCullough's most recent book. "They also did research on what other people said about leadership," Braffman says, "and wrote essays about the leadership of John Kerry and George W. Bush, who were campaigning at the time."

Forty students — including members of Lower Merion's advanced-placement and honors physics classes — attended the 2005 Dean's Forum, where string theorist Brian Greene explained how space and time intersect. In March, about 15 students from the district's AP philosophy class, theory-of-knowledge class and philosophy club heard from eminent philosopher **Harry G. Frankfurt**. In his presentation,

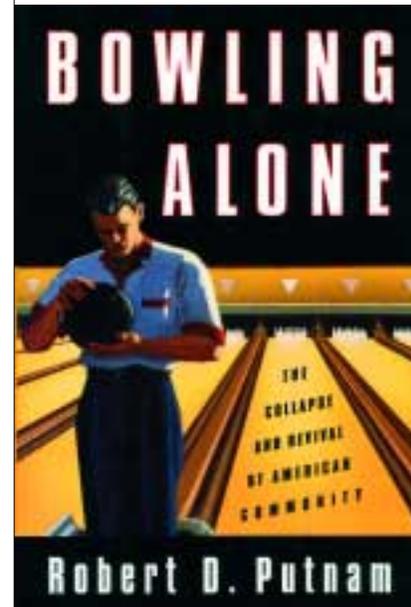
"On Bulls**t," Frankfurt discussed why people have become so adept at misrepresenting themselves and how it frays the fabric of society.

In preparation for the day, Braffman's high schoolers read Frankfurt's book *On Bullshit*, discussed its contents and formulated questions for the speaker. "We use the forum as a vehicle to enrich the larger learning experience," Braffman says. "After we return, it's a matter of continuing the dialogue in class."

Community in Crisis

Is the United States becoming a nation of social isolationists? **Robert Putnam** seems to think so. The Harvard professor argues that civil society is breaking down as Americans become more disconnected from their families, neighbors, communities and the nation itself. Putnam, the best-selling author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, made his case in February at the 2006 Goldstone Forum.

Throughout much of the 20th century, a majority of Americans spent their leisure time being part of civic or social organizations such as the Rotary Club or sports



groups. But over the past 25 years, attendance at club meetings has dropped 25 percent, the amount of time families spend eating together has decreased 33 percent and having friends over has fallen 45 percent, says Putnam, who calls for increasing social activism and promoting citizenship as a way to reverse these trends.

The decline of civic engagement in the United States that Putnam charted in *Bowling Alone* has worried a number of politicians and commentators. His ideas have been the focus of seminars hosted by President Bill Clinton at Camp David and British Prime Minister Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street. Putnam also founded the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, a program that attempts to bring together leading practitioners and thinkers to develop broadscale ideas to fortify civic connectedness in America.



Ellen Just Braffman (right) and her students

Lisa Godfrey