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 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!”

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.
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

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.