The Mind’s Eye

Juggling the perceptions of philosophers and scientists, Gary Hatfield looks long and hard at how we see.
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DEAN’S COLUMN

In December, President Amy Gutmann announced the appointment of College dean Rebecca Bushnell as the new dean of the School of Arts and Sciences. She succeeded outgoing dean Sam Preston on January 1. A gifted educator and distinguished scholar of English literature, Bushnell came to Penn in 1982 and has served as the school’s associate dean of arts and letters and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. We caught up with her in December to ask about her new job.

Q. What does it mean to you that you’ve been named dean of Arts and Sciences?

A. Well, it’s a huge responsibility. It means that I will have an opportunity to shape the academic future of the school.

Q. Why is that something you’re excited about?

A. I came into this line of work because of intellectual curiosity, a love of learning. And of course that love of learning is at the core of the School of Arts and Sciences. As dean, I get to be right where the action is. I’m looking forward to meeting more of the faculty and working with departments to bring the most illustrious scholars and best teachers to Penn. Students come here for these brilliant faculty, and the students and faculty are why I love being at Penn.

Q. Do you plan to continue teaching?

A. Yes, probably freshman seminars. Increased contact with students has been a wonderful part of my job as dean of the college. I don’t want to give that up. It’s important that we find ways to give students access to the dean, so they understand that the dean’s office is open to faculty and students alike.

Q. What do you see as the challenges and opportunities ahead?

A. We would like to increase the faculty size, which will be a significant financial challenge. This will mean redoubling our efforts to create endowed chairs. Many of those faculty work and teach in historic buildings that are desperately in need of repair. So another challenge is funding a very ambitious plan to renovate our facilities.

The opportunities have to do with enacting our new president’s Penn Compact. I am excited about her concept of integrated knowledge. Creating cross-school faculty appointments and academic programs with other schools at the university will make Penn distinctive. The president has also cited the need to link Penn with the community, and the School of Arts and Sciences has always been a leader in Penn’s academically based community service programs. Finally, the school is going to be out in front opening up a Penn education to the best students regardless of their ability to pay.

Q. What do you think is the most important quality in a dean?

A. Any dean has to be curious and open to all areas of knowledge. The dean also has to be a good listener, able to learn from others and then put things into action. But intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness are critical – and a lot of patience. And stamina.

Q. Here’s a trick question. What illusions do you have going into this job?

A. I watched Sam Preston do this job for seven years, so I don’t have a lot of illusions. I know it’s demanding. I’m doing it because I like a challenge and because I care about the School of Arts and Sciences. I’ve given my entire professional life to it.

Q. What do you think is the fun part of academic administration?

A. One of the great pleasures of this job is that I get out a lot and meet all sorts of interesting people – faculty, alumni, parents. I talk to everyone, and I can get the big picture of Penn. It’s never boring because I’m always seeing some new side of the school and the university.
Chinese Friendship

Alan MacDiarmid knows a thing or two about energy. In fact, he seems to have an unlimited supply. Over five decades at Penn, the Blanchard Professor of Chemistry has conducted groundbreaking research, won the Nobel Prize, established institutes on two continents and seen his laboratory named a historic site by the American Chemical Society.

In September, MacDiarmid’s efforts to produce renewable energy earned him the Friendship Award, China’s highest decoration for foreign experts. His research involves using organic plastics—a field he pioneered—as the basis for new energy sources. Other aspects include creating power from residual biological materials and developing hydrogen-based fuels.

MacDiarmid conducted the experiments at Jilin University in China, where he is a member of the chemistry faculty and chairman of the Alan G. MacDiarmid Institute. He is the first foreigner to have a Chinese institute named for him. The other MacDiarmid Institute is in his native New Zealand.

Curriculum Advances

Four years after the pilot curriculum began offering students a new way to craft their Penn educations, the Committee on Undergraduate Education is investigating how the pilot can inform a new general education curriculum. The committee conducted three forums during the fall semester, two for faculty and one for students, asking them to weigh in on possible facets of a new general requirement.

“There’s been a tremendous consideration of the process by both faculty and students,” says College of Arts and Sciences dean Dennis DeTurck, G’78, Gr’80. DeTurck chaired the committee before accepting the deanship in December. “The discussions have been very productive and civilized. People are really pulling together to make the very best curriculum for the new century.”

The committee’s next step is to continue the ongoing discussions and then create a single proposal for a new general education curriculum. “The faculty has heard a lot of points on which we all can agree and some points that will require us to compromise on some deeply held positions,” DeTurck says. When complete, the plan will be voted on at a regular SAS faculty meeting. For more information, go to www.sas.upenn.edu/faculty/curriculum_review/.

Alumni Writers

Lovers of the written word experienced a special treat on Homecoming Weekend last fall. For the second year, a cross section of Penn novelists, poets, screenwriters and journalists came together for Penn in Print. The daylong series of events celebrated the diversity of Penn authors across generations and disciplines.

Five SAS alumni contributed their talents to a Celebration of Alumni Writers at the Kelly Writers House. Poet Deborah Burnham, G’76, Gr’89, read from her book Anna and the Steel Mill. Fiction writer Kerry Sherin Wright, C’87, gave the audience a taste of her novel-in-progress. Nonfiction writer Stefan Fatsis, C’85, shared some passages from Word Freak, his acclaimed 2001 account of the world of professional Scrabble. Courtney Zoffness, C’00, read a short story.

“The Penn campus always—between the lines—encouraged writing and the writerly life,” said Robert Shepard, C’83, G’83, a literary agent who emceed the event. The idea behind a Celebration of Alumni Writers and other Penn in Print events is to shift what was once between the lines to the top line.

—BLAKE MARTIN
Pass the Buck

Peter Peterson has spent most of his life pursuing monetary balance. As an international economic advisor for President Nixon, he negotiated a comprehensive trade agreement with the Soviet Union. Now chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations and a grandfather of nine, Peterson says the economic minds in Washington are creating insurmountable debt for future generations. He shared his views with the Penn community in November at the 2004 Granoff Forum.

Peterson says three trends are threatening to bankrupt America: the escalating cost of the war on terrorism, our increasing reliance on foreign capital to prop up the national economy and rapid aging throughout the Western world. He called on Washington leaders to face the financial ramifications of the nation’s skyrocketing debt.

“The question is not, Are we better off than we were four years ago? The real question is, Are our children going to be better off because of what we do today?” he told the audience. “We are quietly slipping our own children the check for our free lunch.”

A Voice for Voters

Students from the Fels Institute of Government spent Election Day listening for squeaks in the wheels of democracy. Huddled around scores of computers at the National Constitution Center, earphones wrapped snugly over their heads, they listened to phone messages left by people who had trouble casting votes. By the end of the day, more than 100,000 people had called 1-866-MYVOTE1 to report problems.

The students were a vital link in the MyVote1 Project, co-sponsored by Fels. It was the first nationwide attempt to track and analyze election-day glitches. Callers gave their location and described the obstacles they experienced. More than 150 students working in shifts from 5:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. culled data that was then parsed by analysts and broadcast over MSNBC.

“The goal here is really valiant – giving people a voice,” said College senior Christopher Copeland after listening to a Pittsburgh man explain how he was denied a provisional ballot. “People shouldn’t have anything stopping them from voting.”

Preliminary analysis revealed that Election Day was marred in many areas by voter harassment, unreachable officials and poll obstruction. Next, Fels scholars will use the data from MyVote1 to summarize the state of voting in America.

“Science and mathematics pose unique challenges for teachers, and the Penn Science Teacher Institute will provide them with the tools they need to engage students and improve science literacy,” says Hai-Lung Dai, the Hirschmann-Makineni Professor of Chemistry, who will be director of the institute.
Barcode of Life
When taxonomists want to identify an animal, they look for unique features that differentiate one species from another. Those classification systems work fine for telling pigeons from penguins, but for some closely related species, wing color and beak shape are not enough. In 1775, traditional taxonomists first described Astraptes fulgerator, a blue-and-brown butterfly with a white band on each forewing. In 2004, Dan Janzen, the Thomas E. and Louise G. DiMaura Endowed Term Chair in Conservation Biology (together with taxonomist John Burns at the Smithsonian and evolutionary biologist Paul Herbert at the University of Guelph) discovered that this butterfly is really 10 distinct species. There had long been doubts that A. fulgerator was a single species. Although the adults look similar, the caterpillars have different color patterns and prefer different food plants. The scientists used a new technology that reads DNA sequences like a barcode, focusing on a string of 645 genetic units in the cytochrome c oxidase subunit I gene, mitochondrial DNA possessed by all animals. Analysis of 484 specimens revealed a variety of DNA barcodes within A. fulgerator, indicating it was really a complex of hidden species. Janzen and colleagues published their findings in the “Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.” The researchers concluded that significant differences in the DNA sequence implied a long evolutionary separation among the 10 species. “Barcoding is a tremendous tool,” Janzen says. “Given the vast range – from Texas to Argentina – of the supposed A. fulgerator single species, it doesn’t take much imagination to realize that there are probably a great many more hidden species out there.”

Reading for Symbolism
Those who look to the culture we consume for big ideas, philosophical or mystical, likely claim our oldest intellectual ancestry in the Romantic period. But Peter Struck, an assistant professor of classical studies, holds a different view. “To the extent that we look at fiction or poetry as a source of knowledge about the basic structures of the world and the place of humans in it … we are borrowing from the ancient allegorists.” Struck’s recent book, Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts, re-envisions these ancient writers. His view isn’t just new to general audiences, who may never have heard of the late-Roman writer Proclus, an interpreter of Homer. The book also represents a change for classicists, who generally haven't granted the allegorists a place within the tradition of literary criticism and thought of them as “foisting their own views onto the text.” Tracing these misunderstood figures, Struck examines a millennium’s worth of texts – from early Greek literature to the Neoplatonists of Late Antiquity. The allegorists, Struck says, “really do push and push to see what they can find inside of Homer. They want to see everything they can within those limits.” Whether they stand at the edge of their texts or beyond it, he adds, is open to case-by-case judgment. More interesting to examine is why they thought their ideas were legitimate. “A case study of these very enthusiastic interpreters gives us a way of raising very broad questions about interpretation in general.”

—EILEEN FISHER
Sociology and the City

Philadelphia’s Reading Terminal Market is an ideal spot to grab a quick lunch or snag some Amish produce. But when Elijah Anderson, the Charles and William L. Day Distinguished Professor of Social Sciences, began visiting the terminal, he saw more than just a bazaar of eclectic restaurants, tchotchke vendors and food kiosks. To him, the space was a curious incubator of urban phenomena, racially, ethnically and socially diverse. “In a city that we suppose is so riven with race problems,” he says, “I was surprised to find so much comity and goodwill there.” From the strangers that would ask him for the score of 76ers games to the “white man with white-supremacist friends [who] revealed his own feelings about race and diversity,” Anderson was amazed by how much people let their guard down. In “The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science” (vol. 595, no. 1) Anderson explains how places like the terminal form “cosmopolitan canopies,” quasi-public spaces where people approach strangers to talk, joke or even share stories. In his research, Anderson has documented other breeds of cosmopolitan canopies – from upscale Philadelphia haunts like Rittenhouse Square and jazz club Zanzibar Blue, to multicultural environs like off-track betting parlors and hospital waiting rooms. The goal, he says, is to form a kind of “sociological theory of life in urban culture,” an extension of his groundbreaking inner-city ethnographies, Code of the Street (1999) and A Place on the Corner (1981). Like W.E.B. DuBois, Anderson doesn’t just want to study the African American community inside neighborhood enclaves; he wants to see how other races and ethnicities impact African Americans outside the inner city.

—TED MANN

Our Story

Emeritus professor James Davis states up front the stark ambition of his latest scholarship, The Human Story: Our History from the Stone Age to Today. He writes, “This book tells how ancient wandering peoples settled down, and how they founded cities, conquered neighbors, formed religions, found out who they were and where among the stars they lived, did some good and many wrongs, thrived, and journeyed into space.” All that in just 466 pages. Davis retired from the history department in 1994 after 34 years of teaching at Penn. His research has specialized in the social history of early modern Europe with an emphasis on Venice. “I had written scholarly books before, which had reached small audiences,” he explains. “I wanted to reach a lot of people for a change.” Needless to say, his compact summary of “our history,” from stone tools to cloning, leaves out a few facts. “The secret of writing the history of the world,” he contends, “is to focus very hard on the really big topics and to be willing to leave things out.” An online reviewer praised the book’s readable prose and the author’s mastery of the past, noting that “Davis gazes over eons like the rest of us look back on last week.” Davis comes clean on the “slant” of his work in the book’s third sentence: “In spite of all we hear and say, the world has been improving for a good long time.” There is a dark hint, though, in the narrative’s final sentence, which ponders how the human story might turn out: “If any species does destroy us, it will surely be our own.” But in Davis’ telling, there is always more light than darkness. A poetic epilogue sums up his summation of history: “So far so good.”
PHILOSOPHER GARY HATFIELD PURSUES A LIFELONG LOVE AFFAIR WITH SIGHT
THIS IS WHAT’S HAPPENING RIGHT NOW.

Light is bouncing off the page and entering your eyes, creating inverted shapes on your retinas. The shapes trigger chemical reactions in rod and cone cells, which send electrical impulses carried on optic nerves to the back of your brain. The impulses pass through the optic chiasma, with half from each eye entering each brain hemisphere. They collect in lateral geniculate nuclei – relay stations in each hemisphere – before shooting into your visual cortex.

And then … consciousness. You “see” the printed page.

If it seems like a step near the end of the process is missing, you’re right. Scientists have yet to grasp fully how neurons tripping inside the darkness of our brains can create the experience of vivid reds and brilliant blues, not to mention light, depth and motion.

“The very fact that you can open your eyes and see things is amazing,” says Gary Hatfield, the Adam Seybert Professor in Moral and Intellectual Philosophy. “But there’s a gap between the brain process and the experience itself. At present, we don’t have any real clue about how to bridge it.”

Hatfield is one of the most comprehensive thinkers regarding theories of vision and assorted philosophical streams of thought, such as philosophy of science and philosophy of psychology. He taught at Harvard and Johns Hopkins before arriving 18 years ago at Penn, where he co-founded the university’s Visual Studies Program. He is affiliated in some way with every program, center, study group and institute on campus that wrestles with the issues of human perception.

“In the philosophy department, he is the person to study this with,” says former student Morgan Wallhagen, Gr’04, who earned his doctoral degree last May and now teaches philosophy to Penn undergraduates. He says the opportunity to study with Hatfield was the deciding factor in his decision to come to Penn.

BIRTH OF A QUESTION

The disconnect between biological processes and conscious experience – known as the mind-body problem – is the missing link for cognitive scientists, perception researchers and philosophers such as Hatfield. “It’s a question for everyone who thinks in a scientific manner about the origin of living things,” he says from a couch in his Logan Hall office, surrounded by books stacked near to the ceiling.

It is also a question that has occupied his thoughts from an early age. Hatfield first took an interest in sight as a young boy growing up near Wichita, Kansas. His mother introduced him to the visual media through her painting and sculpting, while his father, a former biology teacher turned school principal, fostered a love of science in his preschool-aged son.

By the time he reached elementary school, Hatfield was hooked on the science of seeing. “My father brought home The Book of Knowledge, and I got completely absorbed in the process, including the relation between the brain and visual experience,” he recalls.

When the time came for his second-grade class to give presentations on one of the five senses, he learned firsthand the inherent problem of explaining visual perception. “One of the members of the class asked me a
question about that. After I had finished the presentation, he asked, ‘But how does it really work? How does the brain really make us see?’ And there wasn’t anything else I could say.”

So he began learning as much as possible about seeing and sense perception. Hatfield filled his high school electives with art classes and majored in history of art and psychology as an undergraduate. After receiving a doctoral degree from the University of Wisconsin, conferred jointly in philosophy, psychology and history of science, he was ready to investigate the mind-body problem.

What he encountered, however, was a fractured scholarly community that often shunned interdisciplinary collaboration. Philosophers approached the issue by exploring consciousness while brain scientists examined the phenomenon by tracking neural pathways. Communication between the two sides was virtually nonexistent.

For much of the 20th century, natural scientists followed the tenets of behaviorism, which seeks to explain humans without paying attention to mental events such as seeing the color red or psychological processes like getting angry. Because mental events were thought to be subjective, they were disregarded. “Most neuroscientists were uncomfortable with using a mentalist vocabulary to describe what the brain does,” Hatfield says. “That consciousness wasn’t talked about for a period of years was a matter of wishful thinking.” The mind-body problem was, essentially, swept under the rug.

A NEW TERMINOLOGY

By the 1990s, some neuroscientists were sensing that a strictly behaviorist approach was not sufficient to answer their questions about the human mind. They could not reconcile buzzing molecules inside the brain with human awareness. They began to consider philosophical perspectives and gradually became interested in how theories of consciousness relate to their ideas about advanced brain processes.

“Consciousness is quite a difficult thing to analyze, and philosophers have been working on the description of consciousness for quite a long time,” Hatfield explains. “Neuroscientists realized that some of what philosophers had to say was useful.” For this cross-disciplinary hand-holding to prosper, however, it would need philosophers who understood the framework and language of neuroscience. Hatfield’s grasp of science and psychology facilitated this sharing of ideas.

“Professor Hatfield believes that philosophy should draw upon whatever body of knowledge that it can, whatever areas of inquiry might be relevant,” Wallhagen says. “He’s not dogmatic in the way that some philosophers can be. He thinks that work in the philosophy of the mind should be sensitive to the latest results in the relevant sciences.”

Today, Hatfield continues to foster the exchange of ideas between science and philosophy. He and Edward Pugh, an ophthalmology professor in the School of Medicine, recently finished a paper that seeks to create some common ground for scientists to discuss issues of consciousness. The paper focuses on qualia – mental states that are linked to sense and emotional perception. Running fingers over sandpaper, smelling a skunk, feeling a sharp pain and seeing bright purple are all examples of qualia.

The paper is an attempt to convince philosophers and working scientists that qualia have a place in nature and can be studied through the methods of natural science, contrary to the doctrine of behaviorism. Since scientists are often unsure about how to put consciousness into the scheme of nature, he and Pugh try to debunk the assumptions that have caused neuroscientists to fear qualitative data.

“Now, I don’t think that psychologists or neuroscientists have all the answers to my questions any more than I have all the answers that might arise from some of their concepts,” he says. “But I think we can both

“There’s a gap between the brain process and the experience itself. At present, we don’t have any real clue about how to bridge it.”
get a little further insight into the things we're thinking about through this interchange.”

The ability to encourage dialogue is an aspect that Hatfield also brings to his teaching. “One of the things he does in the classroom, which is very difficult, is to engage the students in conversation so they are doing some of the work in class,” Wallhagen says. “Since he’s open to different approaches, he encourages them to follow their instincts, even if it’s a little unpopular.”

Whether people will ever develop a complete understanding of how they experience the world around them remains a topic of scholarly debate. For his part, Hatfield maintains that communication between philosophers and scientists will only further the creation of new knowledge about the human brain, an aspiration that his second-grade self would surely appreciate.

“I know a lot more now about how the brain works,” Hatfield says. “But the issue of how the brain really makes us see, in the sense of how does it produce conscious experience, remains a mystery. If you believe that life evolved from the primal ooze, then we must ask how consciousness came into that mix. It’s a fundamental question.”

The seeds of Penn’s Visual Studies Program were planted more than five years ago when professors Gary Hatfield and Renata Holod organized a faculty group to discuss the many facets of seeing. The group included scholars from all walks of Penn’s academic life — philosophers, art historians, fine arts professors and computer science experts, among others. Although diverse, each member had a connection to the visual world.

“In that seminar we read works on the history of visual theory and the history of psychology. We discussed how it would be nice to have something that could be a bridge between the arts and sciences and the fine arts,” Hatfield remembers. “And from that came a faculty interest in visual studies.”

The benefits of such a program were clear; in today’s increasingly visual society, people are exposed to hundreds of graphic messages each day. Students must not only recognize and categorize images but also understand how they are interpreted on a scientific and philosophical level. That notion was the source of a comprehensive visual studies curriculum that is now in bloom. The program includes aspects of philosophy, psychology and neuroscience in addition to fine arts and art history.

“These topics are integrated into a major that’s built around seeing or producing things that are to be seen,” says Hatfield, one of the co-founders. Visual studies majors can choose from three concentrations: one favors scientific and philosophical interpretations of the visual world, another focuses on the history of visual arts, and a third deals with creating original works of art.

“While there are other Visual Studies Programs, they tend to be different than the one that we’ve produced,” he continues. “The inclusion of philosophy and science is something of a unique Penn characteristic to the program.”

The Visual Studies Program celebrated its second anniversary this past January. What began as a handful of students interested in learning about vision and visual artifacts is now one of the university’s fastest-growing majors.
‘Sky Captain’s’ Highest-Profile Helper Talks About
Turning Passion into Cinematic Practice

Producer Jon Avnet (center) on the set of "Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow" with actors Jude Law (left) and Angelina Jolie
Jon Avnet, C’71, removes his baseball cap and stretches one arm along the sofa. Looking around the room, he pulls a word out of the air: “Footprints.” “Where we place our footprints now,” he says, “will determine the path we’re on in 10 years.” The soft-spoken Hollywood mogul is talking about Penn’s future as a leader in cinema culture, but the statement could be a motto for his own journey. It’s a career that is by his own admission improbable, and one that has developed his capacity to be tough and pragmatic in order to nurture the things he believes in.

It began at Penn, where a TA in an undergraduate writing course told him the images in some poems he’d written were fresh and striking – that he showed talent. “That validation came at a crucial time for me. Like a lot of kids, I was self-critical and full of doubts. But I began to think, ‘Maybe, just maybe, I can do this – I can create something.’”

He moved on to Sarah Lawrence College, where he studied theater and film, doing everything from hanging lights to directing. His mentor there was Wilford Leach, who also ran the now legendary La MaMa ETC, an experimental theater club on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. “Stuff that we would do at college served as workshops for La MaMa,” he recalls. For someone interested in film, that experience was especially useful, since La MaMa’s performances were multimedia events.

Avnet remembers his own efforts during this time as a series of disappointments. “In my own mind, they were failures, and I yearned to get to something that wasn’t totally embarrassing.” He persisted. “What motivated me, pure and simple, was that I loved film. I loved what it could say, and how it could move people.”

“In a psychology class, I read R.D. Laing’s case study of a woman, very disturbed and actively suicidal, who saw a movie that I love called ‘La Strada,’ by Fellini. When she heard Richard Basehart’s speech to Giulietta Masina, who plays an abused woman – it’s almost a silly speech, about every pebble having a purpose – this very disturbed woman responded by feeling that maybe she had value too. When I read that story, I thought, ‘My God, if a film can give someone hope – save a life or motivate a life – maybe that’s a worthwhile profession.’”

While still an undergraduate, Avnet convinced family and friends to invest in his first serious short. “Confusion’s Circle” introduced a young unknown named Richard Gere. Well received on the festival circuit, the movie earned Avnet a directing fellowship at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles.

At AFI he earned money by shooting celebrity stills and later by reading scripts for Mike Medavoy at United Artists. “It was a great way in,” he recalls, “because I got to see professional scripts – part of the writer’s learning curve.”

Before leaving AFI, he took a job with a producer team. The first project he worked on was the 1973 Bruce Lee vehicle, “Enter the Dragon.” “They said to me, ‘Come … pay some dues, and then we’ll give you a directing job,’ because they were doing these low-budget movies. Diligent puppy that I was, I jumped at the opportunity. But after two and a half years, when the time came for me to direct my movie, they said the budgets had gone up and they couldn’t make it happen.

“At that point I made a decision, a poor man’s version of Scarlett O’Hara: I’m never again going to put myself under other people’s control. I would take my limited production experience and try to develop projects as a producer so that I could build some credibility. Then, when I’d done that, I’d direct more or less on my own terms.”

Looking back, Avnet smiles. “Now that plan is as whimsical as it is practical. It was very unlikely to

AVNET DEFINES A PRODUCER AS THE HIGHEST-PROFILE HELPER ON A FILM.
happen, and it worked out exactly that way. I gave myself about 18 months to try it before I'd have to get a job again. Fortunately, my wife was working at the time.

So I partnered with a guy named Steve Tisch, whom I'd worked with on a film called 'Outlaw Blues' that our company had produced, and together we invested about $20,000 in four projects and tried to get them made."

Avnet defines a producer as the highest-profile helper on a film. "It's kind of a miracle each time a movie gets finished," he says. "It's so complicated. The principal skill a producer needs is to be a really good problem solver. It takes a lot of attention to detail and a kind of relentlessness. And then there's the law of inertia: nothing moves until it's acted upon by an outside force. That force is often the producer's will."

He cultivated relentlessness. Tisch/Avnet productions succeeded in making some films, and he didn't need to look for a job. Then, in 1983, they brought out "Risky Business," which made Tom Cruise a star and rewarded investors with a $4.2 million opening weekend.

Avnet recalls that the director, Paul Brickman, had wanted to shoot a scene in the restaurant on the 97th floor of Chicago's Hancock Building. "So I went up and tried to get permission, and the guy who ran the restaurant there said no. So I said, 'Don't say no, say maybe.' Think about it. I'll make it worth your while – and not just in terms of the payment; I know a lot of people.' He said no. So I said, 'Don't say no, say maybe.' We went around like that four or five times until he finally said, 'Listen, you're being a real pain, Avnet. You're not going to shoot here.' So I called up a few friends and found out who owned the building. And I discovered that someone on the board of directors was friendly with Steve's [Tisch] family, so I got him on the phone, and he said, 'Oh yeah, you can shoot there.' So I said, 'Well, be nice to the guy; he was just trying to do his job.' Then I get a call from the restaurant guy, who said, 'Anything you want.' That's a producer's job: finding a way to get him to say yes."

"Risky Business" was followed quickly by NBC's TV movie "The Burning Bed." The drama brought unprecedented attention to the plight of battered women, reaching more viewers than any previous movie on the network. Nearly 100,000 women, Avnet estimates, called a special hotline to seek help. "That," he says, "was about as satisfying as it gets."

So at 34, 13 years out of college, Avnet took stock. He had gained movie-making experience, taken financial risks, learned to bring films in on budget and gained a reputation as a writer's producer – somebody who could help sharpen a script and get it produced. He had his platform; it was time to write and direct his own films.

Avnet and Tisch dissolved their partnership; in 1986 Avnet teamed up with Jordan Kerner. The next year he began work on a project that would see his own creative vision rewarded, the 1991 release "Fried Green Tomatoes." None of the studios where he pitched the project responded to Fannie Flagg's novel or to the script. "I knew they wouldn't; it was just too odd. ... So I had to go the independent route. In order to get my first movie as a director made, I had to use all the producing skills I'd developed when I was paying my dues."

The movie was a surprise box-office hit, inaugurating a genre of women's ensemble stories. Jessica Tandy was nominated for an Academy Award – as was the screenplay. Avnet's relentlessness had paid off.

"Things had worked out extremely well for me. I had created a name for myself, I'd been involved with projects that had affected the cultural landscape, I'd been all over the world – some amazing things. So in the mid 1990s, I made a conscious decision to help some young filmmakers – just as people like Tom Pollack and David Geffen had taken a chance on me. Then about seven years ago, my associate Marsha Oglesby showed me this six-minute pilot of Kerry Conran's."

That six-minute movie, the result of years of Conran's obsessive labor on his Macintosh computer, would become, with Avnet's help, "Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow."

Not only did Avnet buy a building and create, in effect, his own studio to realize Conran's dream of a movie whose actors

Above: producer Jon Avnet (left) and director Kerry Conran

“Nothing moves until it’s acted upon by an outside force. That force is the nurturing of talent is a critical part of a university education.”

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would perform in a digitally created retro-fantasy world, but he sold A-list stars Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow and Angelina Jolie on the project. During development, he shielded the unworldly Conran from studio executives who would have homogenized his vision and then sold domestic distribution rights for the finished picture to Paramount.

Avnet is as proud of Conran’s successful transition to cowriter and director as he is about having produced a milestone in cinema technology. “In the end, it comes down to the story – whether people care about what happens to the characters,” he says. “I think we made a good movie.”

Avnet’s writing, producing and directing schedule is as busy as ever, but he continues to give back as a member of the SAS Board of Overseers, as an adviser and industry link to Penn’s Cinema Studies Program, and as a regular guest at the Kelly Writers House. “The nurturing of talent is a critical part of a university education,” he insists. “Exposure to people who are doing creative work at a high level is really important. In a very structured place, you need something a little less structured – something that pushes you to go beyond rote work to original thinking. That’s what I hope I, and the people I work with, can contribute to Penn.”

Randall Couch last wrote for the magazine in the spring 2004 issue.
IS THE NEXT BIG THING IN MASS MEDIA ALREADY HAPPENING AT THE GROCERY STORE?
Fifty years after Ginsberg’s paean to poetry and peaches, Arts and Sciences alumnus Joseph Turow, C’72, ASC’73, Gr’76, the Robert Lewis Shayon Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication, tells his students that if they want to understand culture, they have to go to the supermarket. “Look at the mats on the floor, the signs on the shelves, the labels on the products.”

Marketers not only appeal to the customer, he says, they have invented who they think the customer is, based on warehouses of data collected on all of us. It may not be poetry, but there is a lot of “shopping for images” going on in the consumer profiles that marketers are putting together. "Look at the mats on the floor, the signs on the shelves, the labels on the products.”

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Turow has been teaching Mass Media and Society for 30 years – at Penn since 1986, after a decade at Purdue – but he says there’s a school of thought that claims “mass media” and “mass communication” are anachronistic terms. “Over the last 100 years, scholars have taken ‘mass communication’ to mean the sending of messages to large numbers of people – dispersed, diverse and anonymous audiences.

… With cable and the Internet, we have smaller audiences who are not anonymous to the senders of the messages. When you go to a Web site, people know who you are.”

That’s the subject of his 10th book, tentatively titled Favored Americans: Marketing Discrimination in the Digital Age.

The customization of information and access has made convenience a commodity for anyone plugged in, but Turow argues that it’s a two-way street. Not only do “the media come into our homes, but they also take away information about us.” And, he adds, it’s information we willingly give away.

Say, for instance, your favorite credit card offers you a 20 percent discount when you log on to the company’s Web site before making a purchase. Cool, you think, I can save money buying the things I would normally buy. What many people don’t do, Turow says, is read the privacy agreement.

“I’ve read quite a few privacy policies, and they’re not designed to be readable,” he reports. “There are good reasons to read these policies. Not all sites are scrupulous. They may include things that you don’t want, like downloading spyware, which follows you everywhere on the Web.” Still, that discount is appealing, so you click the agree button. Now when you log on, every search and purchase is tracked. This kind of consumer behavior allows companies to collect information on the individual and on his or her buying patterns and socioeconomic status.

At 54, Turow is tall and lean with boyish brown hair and black academic spectacles. Talking with him is a mixed lesson in history, capitalism, culture and trivia. His office is decorated with movie posters of “Gone with the Wind” and “Naked Gun,” original Tom Swift books, a 1950s Olivetti typewriter (like the one he took to camp in the Catskills to write fiction for the weekly camp paper), and a 1920s vacuum-tube radio.
“Marketers haven’t figured out what to do with all these data. In 10 years, they will.”

His father emigrated from Lithuania in 1947 and settled in Flatbush, N.Y. He won a TV set in 1950, the year of Turow’s birth. Turow grew up in the television age – mid-century in a post-war world set on defining the American dream. He is the perfect cultural critic for mass media, which he points out, has constructed the very idea of our world.

“I was supposed to be a lawyer,” he says, “but I wasn’t interested.” As an English major at Penn, he started reading the magazine “Advertising Age.” It was the Vietnam era, and a professor criticized his pro-establishment interests. An American civilization course he took drew connections for him between culture and media, and that started him questioning cultural values and the way the American media have interpreted – and invented – them. “The 20th century was built on marketing,” he says.

One of his first books was Entertainment, Education and the Hard Sell: Three Decades of Network Children’s Television. He’s become a de facto expert on the I’m-not-a-doctor-but-I-play-one-on-television phenomenon. His book Playing Doctor is about the relationship of the medical system and prime-time television, and he has written numerous articles on television’s presentation of health care. The multimedia CD he produced, called “Prime Time Doctors: Why Should You Care?” was distributed to 40,000 medical students by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Having ended up at Albertson’s, the online grocery store, after a stop at Sesame Street and the office of Marcus Welby M.D. may seem like a stretch, but not for a media hound like Turow. And it is the grocery store, be it an online or real-time one, where today’s media products converge as advertisers target shoppers with sales or coupons based on what they think the customer wants or might buy.

“Audiences don’t exist, they’re constructed,” Turow contends. “You have TV programs reaching 18-to-49-year-olds because that’s what advertisers are looking for.” To Turow, mass communication is important as an idea because it highlights the industrialized production and distribution of messages through technology. With computer-driven mass customization, these communication industries can now influence small groups, even individuals, as efficiently as they have manipulated large populations. “Niche markets are simply a way to allow media to present what they think the public wants,” he says. “Today’s mass media offer interactivity in a way that was never before possible.”

Consider the Shopping Buddy, an IBM product that assists shoppers in grocery purchases. A cart-mounted computer into which shoppers scan their customer card, Shopping Buddy anticipates and accommodates individual needs, distributing coupons based on past purchases, remembering preferences and even recommending what to buy. This is the juncture of marketing, culture and media – all targeted at the individual consumer. It is the information that Shopping Buddy “knows,” recorded into the store’s checkout database, that engages Turow’s interest. Shopping is at the heart of his current research as he develops a national survey that will investigate people’s understanding of how businesses use perks to collect information and then deploy it to further shape buyers’ behavior. He says, “the more marketers know about people, the more they can sell you. … The typical customer thinks, ‘It’s terrific,’ and ‘Why not?’”

Here’s why not. Turow’s main concern is that media outlets will use the data to customize not just purchases and perks but even the news, entertainment and advertisements you will see.

Computer-aided shopping, will yield the newest weapon that marketers can use in the war to separate customers from their cash.
“Most people have no idea about what the transfer from the home to the supermarket to media sources will be like,” Turow says. “We’ll see a huge growth of digital television, digital phones, digital shopping carts and even paper that can change electronically based on what media firms and advertisers want to send.”

Individuals will be surrounded by personalized messages drawn from what companies know about them. “On the one hand, that might be great because somebody else is offering us choices that we don’t have to think about,” he says. “On the other hand, somebody is thinking for us, and we’re not paying attention to what that means. Much of the world each of us will see will be increasingly guided by visions of us that companies wanting to sell things to us create.”

Those companies don’t tell us what they know or what their profiles of us are. “How can we be sure we like or agree with them? How will we know that the materials we get are worth more than the ones our neighbors – with different profiles – receive? Will they get better prices or discounts than us because companies think better of them?”

A recent “New York Times” story (“What They Know About You,” 11/14/04) reported that Wal-Mart maintains 460 terabytes of customer data in its computers, more than twice the digitized information on the Internet. “Marketers haven’t figured out what to do with all these data,” says Turow. “In 10 years, they will.”

He predicts that in the future when you turn on your TV, “the news you get will be different from the news your neighbor gets, based on your personal media consumption, including shopping habits. But it won’t be an invasion of privacy. Rather, people will try to prove to marketers that they are worthy of special treatment by giving up lots of personal information and allowing businesses to track their behaviors. This will mark a fundamental change in the relationship between consumers and marketers. It hasn’t happened yet, but it’s emerging.”

It’s not yet clear exactly what we’re giving away in exchange for perks. “I’m not saying it’s all dark and terrible,” Turow comments. “But the digital approach to favoritism and discrimination is changing 100 years of marketing and media. … What will its social implications be?”

Gigi Marino is the editor of “Bucknell World” and a freelance writer.
Sophomore Rob MacNeill looks at public housing in the United States and sees an exercise in failure. For more than 70 years, efforts to provide safe, affordable homes for the disadvantaged have produced dreary rows of barrack-like structures and unimaginative high rises. MacNeill believes that the poor deserve better.

“Public housing is not working in this country,” says the architecture major. “It’s hardly ever worked. So why don’t we focus on something different, maybe rethink the entire process?”

He finds hope in a back-to-basics approach that focuses on architecture’s most fundamental concept – the primitive hut. It is the mythological basis of all architecture, representing the first time a human shunned caves and other natural shelters in favor of building a dwelling. “I wanted to take [the concept of] the primitive hut and make it tangible,” he says, “so we could look at it instead of just thinking about it.”

For MacNeill, the hut’s nearest modern equivalent is the tent city. Created as a way to protest the lack of affordable housing, he says, tent cities also solve the problem of homelessness on a small scale by creating shelter for the downtrodden. Most are temporary encampments on empty lots. They often are located next to major thoroughfares and feature eye-catching signs.

A College Alumni Society Undergraduate Research Grant and funding from the Benjamin Franklin Scholars program allowed MacNeill to study tent cities last summer in Jersey City and Brooklyn. He traveled with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, a protest group that set up “Bushvilles” in the weeks before the Republican National Convention to show disapproval of the administration’s policies.

“The purpose of tent cities is to visualize the plight of the poor, who have to live in a primitive way because they don’t have housing.”

“A lot of the housing in this city is not working,” MacNeill says. “It’s not pretty, and it’s not safe. So why don’t we look at housing for the poor in a way that’s different? Why don’t we take the primitive hut and make it tangible?”

He found support for his ideas from what he observed in tent cities. “I wanted to be able to construct a measured drawing of each dwelling and quantify its relationship to the environment around it, so people can understand and learn from them.”

MacNeill hopes his experience will provide the foundation for an exploration of public housing alternatives. Some tent cities that were designed for protest have evolved into permanent communities, such as Dignity Village in Portland, Ore., and Dome City in Los Angeles. He also points to architects outside the United States who advocate more primitive ways of building that still are very hospitable.

“Hassan Fathy in Egypt is building with mud brick instead of concrete, and mud brick is cheap; it’s basically free,” MacNeill says. “Public housing is not beautiful. But the structures they are building very cheaply in Egypt are beautiful to look at, very modern and probably wonderful to live in. Why can’t we approach public housing here in the same way – without assumptions?”

—JOSEPH MCLAUGHLIN
Last summer I went to Al Fashir, Darfur, to visit my family in Sudan. It was my third trip home since I came to Penn in 1987, when I began my doctoral studies in folklore and folklife. I spent 11 years without being able to see my family due to the political situation in my home country.

In the past, whenever there was news of casualties in the civil war in southern Sudan, my American friends would ask about my family. I assured them my family was just fine and that the war was “far away” from home. This assurance changed suddenly in April 2003, when an opposition group attacked the army installation in my hometown. I experienced this in real time while speaking to family members over the phone with the sound of bullets and explosions in the background.

My trip to Darfur came days after visits to the region by the U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell. It was a time when news about Darfur began to dominate reports on Africa. This was also a time of chaos and confusion, not only for the outside world trying to understand the Darfur crisis but also for the people caught in the middle of a struggle between a military insurgency and the Sudanese government.

This war started in February 2003 when a newly formed Darfuri opposition group rose up against what it sees as the region’s lack of economic development, political participation and wealth sharing. The insurgents also objected to the non-neutrality of the government in local conflicts.

The main misconception that I have tried to correct is the depiction of the crisis as an ethnic or racial conflict. This war is government-sponsored violence committed by the national army and ethnically based conscripts from some Arab militias, the Janjaweed. The targets of the violence are non-Arab inhabitants of Darfur, who are being forced to flee their homes. The government has used this strategy for many years to fight an insurgency in southern Sudan without criticism from the international community. It is now doing the same in Darfur, but this time the world is watching.

During my visit, I witnessed the global response to the humanitarian disaster. Al Fashir airport received an average of 18 airplanes a day during July and August. We should not forget the reasons for the international community’s engagement as compared to the response to the Rwanda genocide. Early reports of atrocities by U.N. officials and NGO representatives in Darfur have mobilized governments and organizations to help those in distress. This has also helped people move beyond the portrayal of the conflict as one of Arabs against Africans.

While I was in Al Fashir, there was sporadic fighting in the countryside. Since I have returned to campus, the deserted villages of the displaced were occupied briefly by the opposition forces, which were later expelled by the government army. I still call my family regularly. Amid the entire crisis, they tell me – philosophically – that they are just fine.

—ALI B. ALI-DINAR

Ali B. Ali-Dinar, Gr’95, obtained his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Khartoum. Since 1994, he has worked as outreach director for Penn’s African Studies Center. For more information on the Darfur situation, visit http://www.darfurinfo.org/.
CAN YOU DIG IT?

ANTHROPOLOGY CLASS EXCAVATES NEW JERSEY SITE
From inside the hole he’d been digging, senior Ryan McGee handed a rusted “artifact” up to Ben Pykles. “Looks like a fish hook,” observed Pykles, a doctoral student and one of the field assistants overseeing the excavation. He turned the relic over in his hand beneath a yellowing maple tree that spread above a dozen undergraduates digging in three perfectly squared, precisely straight-sided holes, which they called “units.”

“I think it’s a bent piece of wire,” McGee countered as Pykles handed it up to anthropology professor Robert Schuyler. An associate curator at the University Museum, Schuyler was standing on top of a dirt pile shaking bucketfuls of earth through a screen to sift out more archaeological finds. “It’s a piece of wire,” he pronounced. Everyone turned back to work, scraping with square-edge spades, carrying buckets of dirt to the screeners or measuring the depth of a unit with string, level and measuring tape. The corroded wire was dropped unceremoniously into a brown paper bag, labeled with a marker to identify where the contents had been discovered: Vineland, N.J., Site 1, Excavation Unit 27, Level 5, October 22, 2004.

The dig is part of Schuyler’s long-term research undertaking, the South Jersey Project. It’s also the classroom for his ANTH 219 course. Every Friday and Saturday in the fall, Schuyler loads two vans with undergraduates and a few grad students for a day of digging and sifting in a hunt for “cultural deposits,” the refuse dumped in backyard trash pits of a now-demolished house. The home had been built in the 1870s and occupied for 50 years by Stuart Morris and his wife, Margaret. Their daughter, Helen, grew up there. The class has uncovered porcelain fragments from the face of her broken doll.

Romantic notions of archaeology get quickly tempered by dirt-under-the-nails lessons in digging. Pykles teaches the class how to excavate flat-bottom pits – one 10-centimeter level at a time – and to keep the walls square. “You’re not born knowing how to do it,” he said. “You have to know when to dig softly and when to take big bites.” Whether digging up the ruins of an ancient civilization or the backyard of a Victorian home, the techniques are pretty much the same. “You can’t really understand archaeology, if you don’t know how it’s done,” explained Sarah Chesney, a senior anthropology major.

In the spring and summer, Schuyler shifts gears and gathers his anthropology classes indoors in museum laboratories. Those students clean the artifacts and then dig up as much information about each one as they can find – what it is, when it was made, what company made it, where it was sold, how much it cost. The pile of facts they excavate fills in the details of life in the Morris household, right down to the cuts of meat the family ate, derived from cast-off bones the field class dug up. These up-close-and-personal glimpses of one family’s life will be linked with information from future excavations, along with archival research and oral histories, to piece together the broader picture of growth and decline and change in Vineland, since its founding in 1861. “The South Jersey Project is my primary research project,” Schuyler offered. “It’s not an exercise we created for the students. They’re participating in an actual archaeological process – and all the practical problems that come with it.”

Mostly, it’s grubbing on hands and knees to uncover broken bones, bent wire and other bits of rubbish. “I still get excited about finding rusty nails,” admitted senior Emily Lanza, another anthropology major. It was near the end of the day, and she sat on the ground with a few of the other ditch diggers taking a candy-corn break. “The artifacts define the day,” she added, and often lead to on-the-spot mini-lectures or group discussions on material culture. “Oh, man! Oh, man!” Sarah Green called from her pit. “I got writing!”

Words on an artifact – a brand or manufacturer name, for instance – are often clues to a trove of information. A date can help fix the age of a level and the items recovered from that depth. Green, another senior, leapt from the unit where she’d been burrowing with a trowel beneath a big root. The class, all with soiled knees, crowded round as she wiped clean a blue-hued disk of glass with raised lettering that said, “Trade Mark Mason’s Improved, Registered May 23, 1871.”

“Instead of reading about other people’s finds,” remarked Lanza, “we’re actually doing the finding.”

The South Jersey Project is sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the anthropology department and the Vineland Historical and Antiquarian Society.

—PETER NICHOLS
New Name for Bennett
When Bennett Hall emerges from its renovation this fall, it will bear the name Fisher-Bennett Hall in recognition of a leadership gift from Richard L. Fisher, C’63, G’67. It contributes to a $21 million plan to renovate the 81-year-old building, which has been home to Penn’s College for Women, the English department and several humanities programs. The renovation will add a lecture hall, undergraduate study center and seminar rooms; refurbish classrooms; house the Cinema Studies Program; and offer teaching and rehearsal space for the music department.

“Bennett Hall was my home at Penn,” says Fisher. “As an English major and graduate student, it was in this building that I learned about myself and the world. Later, when I taught in Bennett Hall, I was able to share this knowledge with my students. Today’s faculty and students deserve the best environment for their own work.”

Fisher, a senior partner of the New York real estate development firm Fisher Brothers, earned a bachelor’s degree with honors and completed coursework for a doctorate. Before turning to real estate, he was a teaching fellow in the department and wrote for “The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin” and “Philadelphia Magazine.” He is a former trustee and SAS overseer whose gifts include the Richard L. Fisher Professorship in English.

PARTNERS Friends Indeed
As the only postdoctoral research institution devoted to all of Jewish civilization’s historical and cultural manifestations, the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies unites international scholars to explore a research theme from diverse viewpoints. This spirit of collaboration also extends to the center’s volunteers.

The relationship Ione Apfelbaum Strauss, CW’54, enjoys with CAJS as an adult learner, board member and chair since 2003 is a prime example. She recalls her first visit in 1994. “It was the passion and zeal of David Ruderman, who had just taken over as director of the center, that hooked me. He spoke of his dream of bringing first-rate scholars of all religions, nationalities and disciplines to Penn for a year of research. He wanted to establish a ‘learning community’… the only one of its kind in the world.”

Early on, Ruderman and the board faced many challenges, including linking to campus from 30 blocks away, building a relationship with the Jewish Studies Program and raising funds. They recruited volunteers, stabilized the finances and reached out to Penn and the community. Strauss attributes their success to Ruderman’s “unbelievable energy.” She says, “He goes all over the world lecturing and talking about the center. People are drawn to his ideas. Without him there would be no center.”

Ruderman, however, credits her. “It was a struggle for the first several years,” he says. “Anytime I wanted to quit, Ione encouraged me to keep going. The payoff is the incredible relationship we’ve developed. … As long as I’m involved with the center, I hope she’ll be there too.”

Ruderman, the Joseph Meyerhoff Professor of Modern Jewish History, values the board’s involvement in CAJS’s academic life. Members study with the fellows for two days each year and attend lectures and other activities. Strauss, who’s been a university trustee, SAS overseer and alumni society president, calls CAJS her “main priority at Penn.” She closely follows the fellows’ research and has taken part in educational trips to European sites of Jewish significance. She says CAJS has “enormous positive ramifications for the world” and hopes more people will get involved.

CAJS’s new friends program offers salons, lectures, courses, film screenings and a book club for Philadelphia-area residents. For information, visit http://www.cjs.upenn.edu/ or contact Elsie Stern at 215-238-1290 or erstern@sas.upenn.edu.
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Until recently, state regulations prevented Penn from accepting gift annuities from residents of some states. We can now write gift annuities in almost every state, including New York, New Jersey and California.

For information contact Janine Ehsani at 800-223-8236 or planned_giving@ben.dev.upenn.edu.

Rodin Fellowships

SAS overseer Raymond K. F. Ch’ien, Gr’78, Par’02, has committed $1 million to establish four graduate fellowships to honor President Emerita Judith Rodin, CW’66. Ch’ien says he endowed the fellowships to ensure “generations of Penn graduate students appreciate Dr. Rodin’s legacy of service, scholarship and commitment to learning.” The fellowships are for distinguished doctoral students in the social sciences who come from developing countries and are dedicated to nation building.

Named fellowship gifts like Ch’ien’s are key to a new university-wide effort to strengthen graduate education, which President Amy Gutmann says is “essential for recruiting and retaining the very best graduate students and extraordinary faculty members from around the world.” Gutmann recently announced an 11 percent increase in graduate stipends for the upcoming academic year, and she has affirmed her commitment to improving financial aid for all Penn students.

In addition to creating named fellowships, which require a minimum gift of $100,000, alumni and friends can make a contribution at any level to the Graduate Fellowship Fund, which provides tuition, research and travel support for SAS graduate students. To learn more, contact Jody Brookman at 215-898-5262 or jody@sas.upenn.edu.

Ch’ien, who completed his doctorate in economics at Penn, is the executive chairman of Chinadotcom Corporation, chairman of the MTR Corporation Ltd., chairman of the Independent Commission Against Corruption’s Advisory Committee on Corruption and chairman of the Hong Kong/Japan Business Co-operation Committee.

His wife, Hwee Leng Whang, G’75, and daughter, Zhong Jun Kay Ch’ien, W’02, L’05, are also Penn alumni.

Raymond Ch’ien (far left) meets the inaugural Rodin Fellows: (from left) Rui Che, Gr’07, Thuy Nguyen, Gr’08, Jorge Gallardo-Garcia, Gr’06, and Fernando Riosmena, Gr’05.
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The Society of Arts and Sciences recognizes individuals who have enhanced the excellence of the School of Arts and Sciences by giving $100,000 or more over the last five years. Its members embody the spirit of the school with their dedication to achieving and maintaining distinction in the liberal arts. They demonstrate a unique awareness of the importance of balancing tradition and innovation in higher education and champion both in equal measure. Their vision informs our pursuit of excellence, and their generous support moves us forward.

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George A. Weiss, W’65, parent
Charles K. Williams II, Gr’78, Hon’97
We know that the amount of CO2 going into the atmosphere is increasing. We know that the physical chemistry of CO2 gas means that the more we pump into the atmosphere, the warmer it’s going to get. ... And we know that all of this becomes detectable starting around 1850, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution when the burning of fossil fuel became more prevalent.

Andréa Grottoli is cataloging the knowledge base that shores up the “overwhelming consensus in the scientific community” that global warming is a growing threat. Grottoli is an assistant professor in the Department of Earth and Environmental Science and the principal investigator in the Marine Biogeochemistry Lab. She knows all this because her ongoing research is adding to the mounting pile of evidence that scientists find so convincing. “There is no other time in the last 400,000 years that we know of,” she states, “when the rate of increase in CO2 in the atmosphere has been greater than it has been in the last century.”

With both hands, she lifts a piece of evidence from the drawer of a laboratory cabinet. It’s a chalk-white bar of calcium carbonate. She drilled it with a hollow bit from a coral head beneath nine feet of water near the Palau islands in the Pacific. Corals build up a skeleton of calcium carbonate, one layer at a time, like the annual growth rings in a tree. For researchers like Grottoli who know what to look for – and have the patience to shave a two-foot coral core into thousands of slices – the bands of skeletal matter can yield information on climate going back some 400 years.

“When I talk about climate,” Grottoli explains, “it’s not just air temperature. It’s an ocean-atmosphere coupled system.” Earth is largely an interactive, air-water entity, despite being named for terra firma. And animals that live in the world’s oceans. Grottoli looks for those signal traces in the skeletons of corals and sclerosponges. Sclerosponges are slow growing filter feeders whose skeletons also accrete layers of calcium carbonate. She takes a mushroom-size specimen from a jar. “Everything marine stinks,” she apologizes. “They smell like wet dog or low tide.” By studying carbon isotopes in the strata of bone-matter in these creatures, some of which can grow for centuries, Grottoli can reconstruct the history of carbon dioxide buildup in the ocean.

In her most recent work, she looks at the ratios of carbon-13 to carbon-12 in sclerosponges, which are known to parallel the carbon isotopic composition of seawater. “Fossil fuel has very little carbon-13, and it has lots of carbon-12,” she explains. “As we burn more fuel, the carbon dioxide gets taken up by the ocean. So you have a dynamic exchange – and an isotopic exchange as well. The ratio of carbon-13 to carbon-12 in the ocean starts to go down, and it turns out, the ratio of carbon-13 to carbon-12 in sclerosponges goes down too.” Scientists have measured the decrease in the carbon-isotope ratio in seawater since 1990. Grottoli’s preliminary findings suggest that isotopic analysis of sclerosponges can extend that data back by another 50 years or more. “It’s an evolving science,” she says, “but the slope dramatically changes as soon as we start having the combustion engine.”

Grottoli’s research encompasses a range of other studies, all related to climate change arising from the global interaction of oceans, atmosphere and human activity. “It’s the same reason why I think we should all recycle and why we should all drive fuel-efficient cars,” she says of her research interests. “It’s a sense of responsibility for the planet and our children and our future.”

—PETER NICHOLS
I creaked open the metal door to the Toronto Blue Jays clubhouse as if I had happened upon Al Capone’s hideout. I was in the bowels of Yankee Stadium, age 23 and on my first assignment to cover a Major League Baseball game. I had every reason to think that multimillionaire ballplayers greeted rookie writers as warmly as they did hanging curveballs.

I looked upon the two dozen men in various states of undress and felt like Admiral Stockdale – Who am I? Why am I here? – but mustered up the gumption to approach Joe Carter, the Toronto slugger who was busily putting on his uniform. He was an enormous man, with a side-of-beef neck, who could surely squish me between his thumb and forefinger. I held my notebook down near my waist and moved forward slowly when he spotted me and struck.

“Hi, I’m Joe Carter,” he smiled, turning to offer his hand. “How ya doin’?”

After picking up my pad, on the carpet next to my jaw, I proceeded to have one of the more pleasant conversations – about baseball or anything else – of my life. And to be honest, they’ve never really stopped.

Having covered professional baseball for 15 years now, ever since I graduated from Penn, I’m dismayed by the disparity between the public’s perception of players and my own experience. Most fans, generally fed by the press rather than firsthand encounters, would describe the average ballplayer as a brooding, illiterate millionaire who has no idea how lucky he is. After walking into hundreds of locker rooms, asking for and conducting thousands of interviews, my image couldn’t be more different.

There’s Pedro Martinez, recalling his days learning English on the buses of the Pioneer League. There’s Nomar Garciaparra, remembering how he cherished the glove his dad bought him. Talking probability with Greg Maddux, literature with Scott Rolen. Sure, Barry Bonds has been nasty, but at other times he’s been quite thoughtful and engaging. Whatever the often sanctimonious press would have you believe, I have found roughly the same percentage of jerk ballplayers as there are jerk stockbrokers, jerk plumbers and, well, jerk sportswriters. In fact, I’ve seen far more outright rudeness from media folks toward athletes than the other way around. Makes me recall a wonderful Gloria Steinem crack – “Being a writer keeps me from believing everything I read.”

When I tell people of these overwhelmingly pleasant experiences, they are less heartened than, in an odd way, disappointed. They prefer to confirm their personal impression of today’s athletes as being so less laudable than those of the past. This is particularly true in baseball, the most historic and nostalgic of sports. Most enterprises look ahead as their train travels down the timeline; baseball sits backward, looking at where it once was. This is, of course, part of its enduring charm. The cost is how misrepresented the old days become. Sorry, folks, but Ebbets Field was, in fact, a decomposing dump. Ted Williams and even Joe DiMaggio could be just as surly as Barry Bonds. Willie Mays played stickball with kids only a few times and far less than players today do youth clinics. I get a chuckle out of all those selective eulogies; people who complain about how great the old days were never seem to bitch about air conditioning.

When it comes to the personalities of baseball players, my consistent experience has been that if you treat them with the same respect you’d ask for yourself, you’ll find them pretty darned normal – usually cordial, occasionally grumpy but altogether average folks. Rich, yes, but as welcome to the responsibility that brings as most rich folks you’ll find.

My guess is that many of you would have preferred this story if at that first day up in Yankee Stadium, Joe Carter would have bitten my head off, refused my interview and stormed off in a snit. Please don’t be disappointed. I wasn’t and haven’t been since.

Alan Schwarz, C’90, is the senior writer of “Baseball America” magazine, a regular contributor to the Sunday “New York Times” and the author of The Numbers Game: Baseball’s Lifelong Fascination with Statistics.
Penn Arts & Sciences Magazine is published by SAS External Affairs.

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Physicist & String Theorist
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