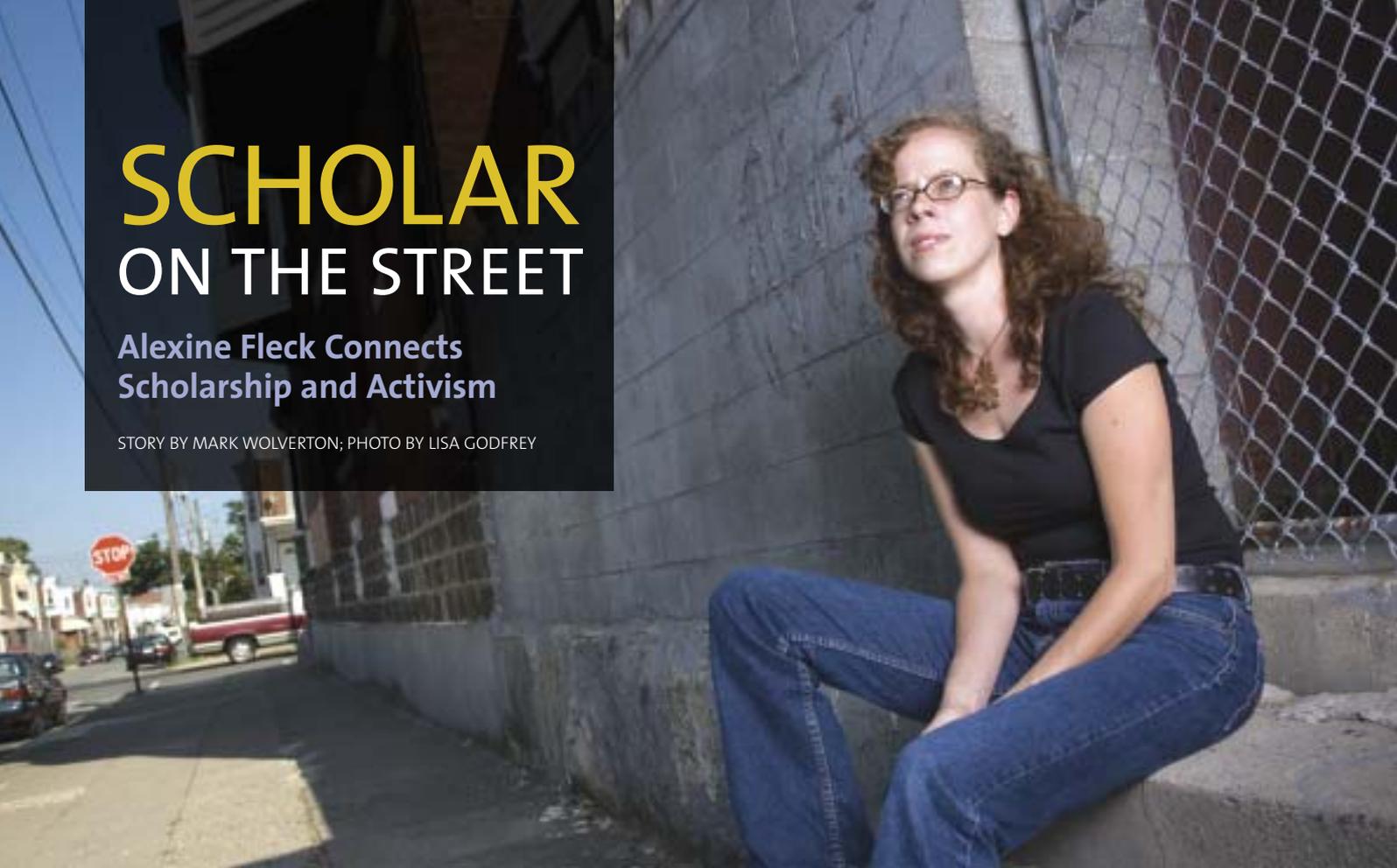


SCHOLAR ON THE STREET

Alexine Fleck Connects Scholarship and Activism

STORY BY MARK WOLVERTON; PHOTO BY LISA GODFREY



“EVEN IF MY STUDENTS DON’T FOCUS EXPLICITLY ON HIV PREVENTION OR DRUG USE, I TRY TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO THINK ABOUT THEMSELVES AS CITIZENS OF AN INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY WITH AN OBLIGATION TO THE WORLD.”

In some parts of Philadelphia, Alexine Fleck, GEd’95, Gr’07, is still known as the Condom Lady. To the stray cats she saves from the rough streets of West Philadelphia, she’s a rescuer. To her students at a suburban community college, she’s just Professor Fleck.

They’re all good descriptions, yet none fully captures the multifaceted essence of this newly minted Ph.D. But whichever side of Fleck you examine, you’ll find a striking combination of activist and scholar, someone with an abiding passion for being involved.

While working on her English doctorate at Penn, that passion led Fleck to the philosophy of harm reduction — a nonjudgmental approach to public health that concentrates on helping drug users

and prostitutes whose lifestyles put them at risk. “That made sense to me,” says Fleck, “so I started volunteering for the local syringe exchange, which is Prevention Point Philadelphia.”

Prevention Point is an alternative to the all-or-nothing War on Drugs. Fleck joined volunteers working the neighborhoods of North Philadelphia, collecting used syringes in a medical sharps container and passing out sterile ones. The work aims to stem the spread of HIV and hepatitis from shared needles.

It was a personal mission for her. “I lost two very good friends in high school to things that really should and could have been prevented,” she says. “I looked back, and I think harm reduction would have been a really good

thing to have for them. I also realized how easy it is to slip through the cracks when you don’t have all the advantages.”

It wasn’t long before her volunteer work intersected with academic life. An ethnographer collecting data on HIV-risk communities for Penn’s Center for Studies of Addiction hired Fleck to gather information on the street. Aside from exchanging syringes, Fleck and some colleagues started passing out condoms to street walkers and directing them to a nearby van, where they could get help by signing up for HIV-prevention studies.

Some people might be intimidated at the prospect of getting up close and personal with the denizens of Philadelphia’s underside, but not Fleck. Even when she walked into a drug bust

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her first day on the streets and found herself surrounded by armed police. “So my first experience was actually seeing a gun pointed in my direction,” she laughs. Later, she saw an addict staggering through a vacant lot and vomiting as he searched for his next fix. It was a rude introduction to the realities of the drug culture, but Fleck adapted. “I never really felt afraid, and it was very rare that I even felt apprehensive.”

Which is not to say that she was unaware of being out of place. “An earnest and nosy white girl with glasses from the university” is how she describes herself. “People would look at us, and we’d say, ‘Hey, we’re the Condom Ladies. Do you guys want some condoms? We made it very clear that anything in our bag they wanted, they could have. So there was no reason to take anything.”

The Condom Ladies were not only accepted but sometimes even protected by the locals. Fleck remembers, “One time a young guy wanted a particular condom, and he reached into my bag. The other guys on the block were like, ‘You leave! You do not do that to the Condom Lady.’ And they made him go stand on another street corner.”

Inevitably, Fleck found herself becoming attached to some of the regulars as she got to know them and the difficult truths of their lives. When funding for the ethnography project dried up, Fleck lost her job, but she still returned to the neighborhoods and kept passing out condoms and clean syringes.

Her doctoral dissertation, “The Low and the Lost: Ethics, Expertise, and Drug-Use Memoirs,” examines the voices of the dispossessed. The research looks at how “narratives

of addiction” have been shaped from the cocaine scare of the 1880s to the present. It’s an unusual topic for an English degree, seemingly more suited to a social-science program, but the dissertation committee accepted the project on the first round. “I was like a kid, testing how far I could go,” she recalls.

Fleck’s study applies literary and ethnographic analysis to the memoirs of drug users, respecting the authors as legitimate voices who relate experiences from an “expert” viewpoint. “How can one write an authentic, truthful, reliable memoir about an experience always already presumed to be inauthentic, untrue, unreliable?” she asks. Answering such a question through the lens of harm reduction as it intersects with literary theory, says Fleck, “is both ethical and necessary and can reveal blind spots in previous scholarship — literary and otherwise.”

In her dissertation, she closely reads the memoirs of a 19th-century opium addict and a 1980s crack user, among others, and considers questions of personal and societal responsibility. Her approach breaks down traditional stereotypes of drug users as helpless victims, pathological addicts, irresponsible derelicts and poster children for the recovery movement. She sorts out the truth and falsehood in all those standpoints and traces back how they serve ideological and political agendas.

Fleck was awarded her doctorate over the summer and now teaches at a community college. She considered becoming professionally involved in harm-reduction work but concedes, “I’m starting to realize that the thing I love most right now is

teaching.” In its own way, she says, teaching is a form of harm reduction for the future.

Fleck tries to incorporate the basic tenet of harm reduction into her own life. “I think, ‘What is the actual thing we need to fix?’ and then you just fix it. When you stop feeling like you have to figure out what your stand is on something, it’s very freeing. I’m not judging: I’m just trying to solve problems.”

For Fleck, harm reduction extends to animals too. She began rescuing the stray cats she encountered on the streets, finding them homes in the Penn community. She joined a local cat-rescue group, CityKitties.org, and is now vice president. Aside from the five cats in her West Philly home, she keeps a horse at a suburban cooperative farm. “I have hens too,” she says, and raises them at her house. “I give them food and leftover table scraps. They lay eggs, and I eat the eggs.” Having chickens didn’t hurt

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her academic career either. “I would always bring my committee members eggs,” she laughs.

Some of her students have followed her example, becoming involved in harm reduction and other volunteer work. “I don’t really get how activism and scholarship don’t connect,” she says. “Even if my students don’t focus explicitly on HIV prevention or drug use, I try to encourage them to think about themselves as citizens of an intellectual community with an obligation to the world.” ■

Mark Wolverton is a freelance writer and author living in Bryn Mawr, Pa.