Life as Art: Students Produce 9-11 Poetry CD

by Trish Charles

When Amanda Guerin, a sophomore physical therapy major, enrolled in English 140, Introduction to Literature, for the fall 2001 semester, she didn’t anticipate reading poetry in a Hartt School recording studio as a class project. But among the many changes that followed the events of Sept. 11, 2001, was a change in the class assignment for this introductory-level English course.

Evelyn Ch’ien, assistant professor of English, initially planned to stick to her original syllabus for the course after the attacks that shook the world. Students who had lost friends and relatives that day asked her not to open up the class for a discussion of the events. “They were too close to the issue to have a discursive reaction to it—and I was also stunned myself,” says Ch’ien. “I felt that I should teach my syllabus as much as possible until the class was ready to react in a concrete, purposive way.”

The time for discussion arrived in November, when the class of 25 students began reading the poetry that Ch’ien had selected for the course. When Ch’ien noticed that her students were not engaged by the material, she began to cast about for alternatives. Her search led her to “spoken word,” a poetry movement of the 1990s that has received a lot of attention in the youth culture, including MTV.

The term spoken word, which was given to this new, provocative style of contemporary oral poetry, had previously described the nonmusic sections in music stores and included comedy albums and recordings of plays and famous speeches. The spoken word phenomenon occurred when young poets became fascinated with the Beat Poets of the 1950s and 1960s. This renewed interest gave birth to poetry “slams” in which audience popularity determined the winner.

Ch’ien brought in two spoken-word CDs for the class and encouraged her students to bring in other examples. “One of my students, Sue Zitelli, brought in a rap about the Holocaust by [a band called] Wu Tang…. That got their attention. So, I figured, why not harness this energy for this artistic medium and… have the students write a poem on their own? Then they could understand the most important thing about poetry: it expresses and reaffirms our humanity.”

Ch’ien assigned students the task of writing a poem or song lyrics as a reaction to Sept. 11. At first, the students composed poems in small groups. Then, to Ch’ien’s delight, some students got caught up in the project and decided to go solo. Reading through all the poetry, Ch’ien felt that the class should do a spoken-word event, either a live performance or a CD. “It just seemed like a logical step after I had been making connections between the poetry of their lives—music and rap—and the poetry of past generations.”

She contacted Scott Metcalfe, director of music production and technology at The Hartt School, to discuss the feasibility of producing a poetry CD on campus. Metcalfe recommended a work-study student named Tim Becker, a senior majoring in the music production and technology program at Hartt. Tim was the recording engineer for the CD and also mixed “A Ribbon of Hope,” the last song. “Tim put a lot of energy and creativity into the recording process,” Ch’ien said.

The recording was done in Room 347 of the Alfred C. Fuller Music Center and was completed toward the end of the fall semester. Because of schedule conflicts, some students were unable to attend and read their own poems. They relied instead on their classmates to interpret the work for them. Of his poem, “911 List,” David Verleger, a senior psychology major, says, “I didn’t know it was going to turn out like it did, but I thought they did a terrific job [of interpretation], maybe even better than I could have done.”

Jesse Morgenstern, a junior majoring in music theatre, wrote the title cut on the CD, a rap poem called “A Ribbon of Hope.” In addition to his own poem and
David’s, Jesse also read “Battle for Power,” a group poem written by Amanda Guerin, Becky San Marco, Melissa Lella, and Amanda Guerin that examines the issue of revenge. Melissa, a second-year student majoring in physical therapy, expresses her pride in the final product, “We all experienced [different] emotions during the 9-11 tragedy, and that variety is shown throughout our lyrics.”

Using the potent imagery of collapsing buildings and falling bodies to describe the 9-11 events and the horrific aftermath, the 14 poems on the CD express the disbelief, shock, fear, confusion, anger, and despair felt universally. Also present here and there in the poetry is a glimmer of hope.

Asked if the project helped her cope with what happened in September, Amanda Guerin responded, “I think it was a great way to sort out the overwhelming feelings people have inside. Turning the raw emotion into creative energy is a great release. I think working together as a group also helped people come together in this tragedy.”

Debra Lavine, a sophomore majoring in early childhood education and one of the co-authors of “Anger,” agreed. “Doing the project helped me come to terms with something that struck and startled me in the biggest way. It was a great project, and I enjoyed it immensely.”

Ch’ien and the students are working with Oasis CD and Cassette Duplication in Virginia, a company that specializes in helping independent musicians get their work published. A spokesperson for Oasis said that the University of Hartford effort is the only spoken-word CD response to 9-11 of which the company is aware.

Copies of A Ribbon of Hope will be stocked in the campus bookstore this spring and may be available from amazon.com and cdbaby.com as well. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to charity. To purchase a copy of A Ribbon of Hope, please contact The Observer online at <www.hartford.edu/observer> for details.

“Larry brings a wonderful understanding of higher education and a wealth of corporate experience to this position,” Harrison said. “His experience lends itself to our mission and, specifically, to areas we are seeking to improve.”

Gavrich has had strong ties to the Greater Hartford community and a good working knowledge of the University for a number of years. A member of the University’s Board of Regents, he has also served as a trustee of Hartford College for Women (HCW) for 10 years.

“Larry was an enthusiastic, engaged participant in the discussions that eventually led to the development of Academic Express,” Harrison said. Academic Express is an accelerated program for both full- and part-time students pursuing liberal arts, legal studies, and women’s studies at HCW. The program converts the conventional 14-week semester into two seven-week terms, during which courses are offered at night and on weekends.
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Gavrich, who has been UTC’s vice president of communications since the fall of 1999, has more than 32 years of experience in corporate communications, the last 17 with UTC. He joined Otis North American Operations in 1984 as manager, editorial services, and was named director, communications, in 1986. In 1990, Gavrich was appointed vice president, communications, for Otis World Headquarters. He moved to UTC headquarters in 1993 as director, internal communications and editorial services.

Prior to joining UTC, Gavrich, who has a bachelor’s degree in English from Rutgers University, held internal communications positions at the JCPenney Company for more than nine years.

Active in the Greater Hartford community, Gavrich is an elector of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and is a member of the Arthur W. Page Society, a professional organization of chief corporate public relations officers. He is a former member of the board of the Old State House in Hartford and former board and executive committee member of the Council on Communications Management.

“I’ve had a wonderful career at UTC,” Gavrich said. Noting that UTC encourages its executives and other employees to volunteer in the community, he added, “My volunteer work with the University has been especially rewarding, and I’m looking forward to applying what I’ve learned in the private sector to my new position.”

Larry Gavrich looks forward to his new job with the University.

‘Follow Your Dream’

Wearing a University of Hartford baseball cap, Robert Ballard, the world’s best-known deep-sea explorer and discoverer of the wreck of the Titanic, urged graduates at the University’s Fall Commencement ceremony on Dec. 2, “Follow your dream. It’s clear I have been on a great adventure, yet I have many more ahead of me, and so do each of you.” Ballard’s address was filled with reminders of how important it is to follow one’s dreams.

More than 100 students received their diplomas at the Commencement ceremony in Lincoln Theater after Ballard was presented an honorary degree by Harry Jack Gray, a life regent of the University.

Ballard participated in his first underwater expedition at the age of 17. Not being allowed to lead the expedition, he learned that “great leaders are also great followers.” Having been fascinated with the sea since his childhood, Ballard’s passion for what was under water stayed with him though various careers. “You’ll go through five or six careers….eventually you will let your real passion and dreams come through,” he told the graduates. He also warned that “some people say that you should avoid failure…absolutely not! Life is about processing failure and being ready for the future.” Some of the most defining moments in his own life were failures, he added; yet just as he was in charge of his life, so are all the graduates.

With a heartfelt smile, Ballard left the crowd with one last remark: “I think of life as an active journey, but it’s your dreams that will drive you.”

Robert Ballard received an honorary doctor of science degree at the University’s Fall Commencement ceremony.

Proud Arts and Sciences graduates included (left to right): Yana Lyubovitsky, Jodiann Palmieri, Jessica Messing, Scott Omansky, and Kelly Malatesta.

Graduate Mohamed Abdelrehim with Samira, 3.
The University’s Hartford Art School hosted its 14th Annual Alexander A. Goldfarb Student Reception and Awards on Feb. 13.

The winners of the Goldfarb Purchase Award were Richard A. Orlosky, a senior in graphic design, for his mixed-media artist book titled *Names and Specifications (Beta version for the class of 2002)*, and Matt LaFleur, a junior in painting, for his pencil on wood piece titled *Kneecalf*.

Honorable mention went to freshman Megan Milford for her black-and-white photograph titled *Deep*; graduate student in photography Albert Angelbeck for his photograph titled *Primary Colors*; and to junior in sculpture Earl Procko for *Water Bucket*, a sculpture that consisted of 164 feet of rope, wood, and wax.

The awards are funded by the Alexander A. Goldfarb Endowment Trust, which sponsors the exhibition annually to recognize the talents of young artists.

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