Construction detours were no hindrance to the vibrant spirit on campus May 20, as 1,340 members of the Class of 2001 gathered with family, friends, faculty, staff, alumni, and administrators for the University's 44th annual Commencement ceremonies.

Welcoming all those assembled under the brilliantly blue sky of a perfect spring day, President Walter Harrison noted that the construction “symbolizes the excitement and change that characterize the University these days, a spirit that this class exemplifies.”

Much of the construction involves a major reconfiguration of the road system, but the centerpiece is the University of Hartford Magnet School, rising on the east end of the campus, a source of particular pride for Harrison. While many individuals are responsible for helping to make the school a reality, he said, “Today I want to single out one of them, one of the people we recognize today with an honorary degree, Lieutenant Governor Jodi Rell.” Harrison offered special thanks to Rell “on behalf of the entire University of Hartford community and generations of Hartford-area youth who will benefit from the school.”

In her remarks, Rell had some advice for the Class of 2001. “Get a life! Don’t be so consumed with climbing the ladder, making money, and acquiring things that you fail to enjoy life. Keep throwing that Frisbee. Keep cranking the music. Enjoy your life!”

The graduates also heard advice from honorary degree recipients Michael P. Price, executive director of Goodspeed Musicals (formerly Goodspeed Opera House), and Cuban-born playwright María Irene Fornés.

“Think beyond the horizon, let yourself go, have an unquenchable desire to learn, coupled with the ability to venture in adventure,” said Price, who has accepted two Tony Awards for the Goodspeed during his 33 years at its helm.
Fornés, the recipient of nine Obie Awards for excellence in off-Broadway theater, reminded the graduates that they must be true to themselves. She said she hoped to “inject in all of you, who are now going into a world that is hard and demanding, not to forget the things you have learned here—the things that have to do with honesty and knowledge and being true to yourself. Always think of the importance of your own spirit.”

It is the spirit of the Class of 2001 that he will most remember, President Harrison said. “It is a spirit exemplified, for me, by the excellence of Channel 2, WSAM radio, and The Informer [all student-run media]. It is the spirit exemplified by this year’s Goldfarb Student Art Exhibition and this year’s production of Kiss Me Kate, especially Jonathan Hack’s wonderful voice.

“I will remember this class for the spirit of our athletic teams, especially Marisa Vino and the volleyball team; and Courtney Coursall, Kumari Gongaju, and the track and cross-country teams. These teams got little press coverage, but their spirit always made me proud.


“It is a spirit captured by snow days during the winter and a beautifully sunny and pleasant Spring Fling.

“And it is the spirit exemplified by Joe Olzacki, a graduate student earning his doctorate in educational leadership today—the first person in history to earn four degrees from the University of Hartford. Congratulations, Joe.”

No one exemplifies the spirit of this class more than Mary Kurtz, Harrison said, noting her years at the University as an active leader, in her sorority, during Orientation, as a student regent, and as an officer and president of the Student Government Association. “She advocates for students, suggests and implements important changes, and supports her colleagues and friends.”

President Harrison told the Class of 2001 that it was entering two rich traditions: “the tradition of university graduates, a tradition that traces its roots all the way back to the Middle Ages, as exemplified by these gowns that we wear. And you enter the tradition of the University of Hartford, exemplified for you today by Jan Laraia ’66 on behalf of our alumni; by the John G. Lee Medal, which pays tribute to those men and women whose foresight led to the founding of our University; and by the seal of the University, which graces the front of your commencement gowns. Today and henceforth, this seal marks you as a graduate of the University of Hartford. May you always be proud of that.”

“I know we will always be proud of you.”

“Let yourself go” was part of the message from Michael Price of Goodspeed Musicals.

“Always think of the importance of your own spirit.”
In the fall of 1997, my freshman year, I didn't know how much I would learn from this place....

I thought I came to the University of Hartford to get a degree in education and a teaching certificate. I saw my time at the University as a mandated step between high school and my plans for the rest of my life. I was anxious to get on with those plans because I did not understand why I was here. The poet T. S. Eliot once wrote, "What you thought you came for is only a shell, a husk of meaning from which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled, if at all." It is only now, when my purpose for coming to this place has been fulfilled, that I am beginning to grasp its meaning.

Learning was indeed our purpose here. We learned information in classes, and for that we must thank our professors. We learned to be independent and responsible for ourselves. For these skills we must thank the staff and administrators that helped us along the way. Finally, we learned the concepts of relationships. For this understanding we must thank our friends. They taught us in the Commons at lunch, and in Gengras between classes. They inspired us on the stair machine at the gym, and in the Village during Spring Fling. The friend who showed me that being different from everyone else is better than being the same, the friend who showed me how to laugh when I really wanted to cry, and the many friends who opened me up to new interests and possibilities each taught me a valuable lesson that I will treasure for the rest of my life. I thank each of you now....

For each of us who is graduating today, the degree we have earned means something different. Ultimately, however, there is a part of this moment that we hold in common. Our purpose at the University of Hartford has been fulfilled. What we thought we came for has proven, as T. S. Eliot said, to be only a "shell." That shell is now filled with all of the lessons we have learned in our time here. I wish each of you luck, as your purpose breaks free and explodes into new possibilities and husks of meaning.
ncement 2001

Sara '73 and Eric Litsky '73 congratulate their son, Jonathan.

The Hartt Commencement Band

Tina Gay
MARY KURTZ, a leader on the campus and in the community, has achieved a grade point average of 3.87 for her four years at the University. Recipient of the Belle K. Ribicoff Prize, she was active in student government since her freshman year and served as a senator, student regent, executive vice president, and president of the Student Government Association. She was a member of the Presidential Search Committee that recommended Walter Harrison as University president. As a student leader, she worked to establish the annual Hunt for Howie and School Spirit Week. She became involved with Summer Orientation for new students as a Red Cap and later served as assistant director of development for Orientation. She assisted in a number of community drives to raise funds for such projects as AIDS Project Hartford, the Hartford AIDS Walk, and the Walk for Juvenile Diabetes.

MARK E. PETER, the John G. Martin Scholar, is graduating summa cum laude. He has extended his search for learning beyond the University, attending programs at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, the American University in Paris, and the Institut d’Etudes Français at Bryn Mawr College during three summers. At the University’s Undergraduate Research Colloquia in 2000 and 2001, Peter presented honors research on American philosopher C. S. Peirce. He has been a student fellow of the Humanities Center of the College of Arts and Sciences and co-president of an informal French club. As a Martin Scholarship winner, he will study philosophy and French at Hertford College, Oxford. His interest in language is both practical and theoretical. His mentor and thesis advisor, Associate Professor of Philosophy Marcia Moen, says Peter “has the capacity to make substantial contributions as a scholar and writer.”

SHARON SHTEKLER was selected to receive the newly established John G. Lee Medal, which will be awarded annually to a graduating senior from Greater Hartford, in recognition of her outstanding academic performance and her record of community service. Shtekler emigrated from Israel at an early age and became aware of the need for language proficiency. Her professors of French and German describe her as a gifted linguist. She won a number of awards in the English Department’s annual writing contest, is a member of the Honors Student Organization, and a recipient of Regents’ Honor Awards for 2000 and 2001. On campus, she has been a volunteer tutor of French and German. Outside the University, she has volunteered in the Valentines for Veterans program and other activities for the elderly. She is a believer in the idea that everyone can make a difference and that “even the results of such small efforts could genuinely light the world.”

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES—Hartford College for Women graduates Martha Dawkins (left) and Robin Chacon (right) flank Miriam Butterworth, an honorary trustee of the College and the wife of the late Oliver Butterworth, who taught English at HCW for about 40 years. Dawkins and Chacon were selected to deliver the “student perspectives” at HCW’s Commencement. Dawkins read a poem that she had written about her experiences at HCW, and Chacon delivered an emotional tribute to the College. “HCW fosters a contagious enthusiasm for learning and getting a degree,” Chacon said. “I came to get an education in paralegal studies. I am leaving with that and so much more.”
RALPH M. ALOISI, professor of biology and health sciences in the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions, was presented the Roy E. Larsen Award for Excellence in Teaching. During his 23 years at the University, Aloisi has had a profound impact on thousands of students and colleagues as well as on the University’s programs and curricula. He was instrumental in the development of the All-University Curriculum (AUC) and played a critical role in the creation of each of the University’s health professions programs. Aloisi developed an AUC course called Epidemics and AIDS, which is believed to have been the first interdisciplinary undergraduate course on AIDS in the country, and he is considered to be a leading expert on undergraduate AIDS curricula.

YVONNE JEHENSON, professor of modern languages and literary and cultural studies in the College of Arts and Sciences, received the James E. and Frances W. Bent Award for Scholarly and/or Artistic Creativity. Recognized internationally for her scholarly work on Cervantes, Jehenson has been invited to participate in numerous conferences around the world. In fact, Jehenson recently won a highly competitive Rockefeller Foundation grant to conduct research on Cervantes at the Villa Serbelloni Center in Bellagio, Italy, a think tank for international scholars. Jehenson played a key role in shaping the Department of International Languages and Cultures and restructured the University’s foreign language programs to emphasize cultural studies and an interdisciplinary focus.

RICHARD H. LUGLI, associate professor of government in Hillyer College, was presented the Oscar and Shoshana Trachtenberg Award for Service to the University. For more than three decades, Lugli has played an integral role in the life of Hillyer College and its students, having left his imprint on virtually every aspect of the school. Lugli's many significant contributions to Hillyer include the development of the legislative internship program and the College's Summerterm programs, including the Pre-College Summer Institute for incoming freshmen. Lugli also has worked tirelessly on behalf of the University as a whole. He has served the University in a number of capacities, including chair and vice chair of the Faculty Senate, member of the Board of Regents, and active participant on a variety of committees.

DONALD G. SUKOSKY, professor of sociology in Hillyer College, received the Donald W. Davis All-University Curriculum Award. Sukosky is one of the founders of the All-University Curriculum (AUC), the University’s nationally recognized program of interdisciplinary courses. He has taught in the AUC every semester since 1987 and is known for his articulate and passionate support of interdisciplinary education. Sukosky was the co-creator of one of the mainstays of the AUC program, a course called The Adult Journey: A Search for Meaning. Students consistently express tremendous enthusiasm for Sukosky’s AUC classes, rating him among the top interdisciplinary faculty at the University. Students praise Sukosky for encouraging them to express their ideas, respecting their viewpoints, and teaching them to bring new perspectives to life’s “big questions.”

STUART SCHAR, who is retiring after 15 years as dean of the Hartford Art School, is the 2001 recipient of the University Medal for Distinguished Service. Schar is the longest-serving of the University’s current deans. The Hartford Art School has thrived under Schar’s leadership, becoming one of the top art schools in the country. During Schar’s administration, undergraduate enrollment at the Art School increased by more than 25 percent, and the School significantly expanded both its program offerings and its facilities. In addition, the Art School’s endowment has more than doubled under Schar’s leadership, and he played a key role in the creation of several prestigious endowed programs. Schar also served as acting dean of The Hartt School from July 1989 to August 1990, and he has been the University’s associate vice president for the arts for the past 11 years.
Students at Parish High School in eastern Connecticut who are used to calling one of their favorite teachers “Mister O” may now address him as “Doctor O” when they return in the fall.

Joe Olzacki, who already had three degrees—two bachelor’s and a master’s—from the University, received his fourth—a doctorate of educational leadership—at this year’s Commencement. He was one of those whom President Harrison described that day as exemplifying the spirit of the Class of 2001.

As director of performing arts for Parish Hill High School in the Connecticut district that covers the towns of Chaplin, Scotland, and Hampden, Olzacki has been putting to good use what he learned while pursuing his doctoral degree at the University’s College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions. What became clear, though, in a conversation with him during a visit to the high school, is that he is also applying much of what he learned in The Hartt School and the College of Arts and Sciences as well.

He receives high praise from both his principal, Art Breault, and Regional District 11 Superintendent of Schools Edward R. Harris, for pushing and cajoling his students to be the best that they can be.

Olzacki’s strong focus on his students is an inspiration for everyone in the school system, says Harris. During Olzacki’s four years at Parish Hill, the number of students involved in performing groups has grown to about 200—some 75 percent of the school population. This breaks down to 40 in the band, 65 in chorus, and 13 in the select choral group, Orpheum. He turns no student away and views even those with the greatest behavioral problems as just another challenge to be met.

Superintendent Harris has also been impressed with Olzacki’s ability to integrate the different disciplines in the school. Parish Hill’s concluding concert this June, called “Earth Sounds,” was the culmination of a semester of environmental study throughout the school curriculum involving science, math, history, art, technology, English, and music faculty. A planned highlight was a whale watch excursion for the entire high school. Unfortunately, after a month without any inclement weather, the day of the whale watch arrived, and along with it, torrential rains. The event was cancelled, but it remains a good example of Olzacki’s bent for thinking big, even in a school district with little wealth.

Carole Schmitt, a 1976 graduate of the College of Arts and Sciences, has been volunteering in the Parish Hill music department because she has been so impressed with Olzacki’s energy, enthusiasm, and sheer determination. When the government of Barbados invited the music department to perform two years ago, Schmitt recalled, the district could not fund the trip. The students, organized by Olzacki, raised the $37,000 needed...
through such means as bake sales, a bottle-and-can drive and a community-wide lasagna dinner. The community response was extraordinary, said Schmitt, who paid for the group’s matching T-shirts.

Elizabeth Wilson, first selectman for the town of Scotland, has high praise for Olzacki’s efforts in involving the community with Parish Hill events. “He’s brought the community together,” she says. “We’re really quite in awe of how Joe has been able to do that.”

Attendance at the school’s concerts has quadrupled in the past four years. In addition, students from the high school regularly perform in area churches, nursing homes, and shopping malls. Olzacki also started a marching band that has become a welcome part of holiday celebrations in the towns.

Mallory Iffland, a member of Orpheum, says, “Mister O’s expectations are very high. He’s a perfectionist,” but the group this year is the “best ever,” she says. Mallory is particularly pleased that people in the community now recognize her from attending the school’s concerts. “When we go out with our posters, people say, ‘Oh, you’re from the school group,’ and they’re happy to put them up.”

Olzacki becomes visibly emotional when he talks about the difference that the University and its faculty, in particular, have made in his life.

He uses his favorite Goethe quote to speak for him: If you treat an individual as he is, he will stay as he is. But if you treat an individual the way he ought to be, he will become what he ought to be and could be.

That quote describes Olzacki’s educational experience at the University of Hartford, and it guides him in all that he is doing at Parish Hill High School. —DS

The Genuine Article

by Peter K. Breit

Joe and I met more than 20 years ago in my class in American Foreign Policy. The Soviet Union still existed, and while much of the energy of the Cold War had dissipated, one tended to think in terms of an eternal hostility between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

One day, Joe questioned this assumption. From then on he had my attention and I had his. Whether his doubts stemmed from an insight superior to most, reflected an almost instinctive need to question, or were a mischievous impulse to be contrary, I was delighted that a challenge to the orthodoxy of the day came from a student. To this day, I am not sure which of these might have been the reason for his challenge. But of one thing I am certain.

Joe Olzacki is indefatigable in his pursuits. Among these will always be the quest for excellence, his own and others’.

Recently, I saw and heard how this quest could be realized. Joe had trained his chorus of high school students to sing an anthem for peace following a lecture on the Holocaust, to which he had invited me. The pleasure in hearing this lay not only in the splendid music made by these young men and women but also, if not more, in observing the obvious (one might say palpable) pleasure they had in their singing and in following Joe’s leadership. They wanted to please him. Therein is the core of Joe Olzacki’s sense of education: he leads with unique fervor and force. This quality is repaid by those he leads.

Now, Joe is hard to hinder and impossible to ignore. If it is not his generous size that is imposing, it is his ability to surround one with arguments, opinions, urgings, and persistence. But there is more than this. His views deserve careful attention. Joe is intelligent and he is industrious. If we, his instructors, find him a stalwart champion of something, it is amusing to speculate on students who might think it possible to resist him.

Dr. Joe’s enthusiasm is one against which there is probably no antidote; nor should we seek one. The enthusiasm remains contagious. As an example, let me draw from his merry contributions to my retirement bash. Joe started the festivities with a congratulatory cable from the Albanian government. Why Albania? We had better let Joe explain that. As though this were not enough, Joe had somehow cajoled the Vatican into sending greetings as well. I mean, for what more can a skeptical Jew ask?

There are, no doubt, numberless other examples of Joe’s ability to bring intellectual pleasure to others. Assuredly, some will think him a bit much occasionally. And he is. But, when so much sham is treated as though it were sacred, I, for one, am delighted and relieved: Joe is real. His boundless energy and his constant striving for what is good cannot be fabricated. Take him or leave him: he is the genuine article. And how many such are there? Even if there were multitudes, Joe would be sui generis.

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