Challenging the Stigma of Mental Illness
by Barbara Steinberger

Learning to live with a mental illness is difficult enough, but many people with that diagnosis face the additional challenges of discrimination and even hostility from a poorly informed public, says Otto Wahl, the new director of the University’s Graduate Institute of Professional Psychology (GIPP).

Wahl has devoted much of his career as a psychologist and educator to fighting the stigma and discrimination that often accompany mental illness. He is known nationally for his research on the subject and for his efforts to change the way mental illness is portrayed in the media.

Among his many initiatives at GIPP, Wahl is working with six doctoral students to research how mental illness is depicted in children’s television. The study is being funded by a $205,000 grant from the National Institute of Mental Health.

Wahl became director of GIPP in August 2003, following a 25-year career at George Mason University in Virginia, where he was a professor of psychology and director of clinical training. He came to the University of Hartford with a distinguished reputation and a great deal of energy and enthusiasm for GIPP’s mission of training students in community settings.

“One of the things that attracted me to this program was its emphasis on civic engagement and community involvement, especially with underserved populations,” Wahl says.

GIPP is located on Woodland Street in Hartford, across from Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center. Approximately 30 to 40 students graduate from the institute each year with a Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) in Clinical Psychology. Psy.D. programs like the one at GIPP prepare students to be practitioners in clinical and community settings, while Ph.D. programs in psychology are better suited for those who want to do research or teach in higher education.

In many ways, the institute exemplifies the University’s goal of active involvement in the community. The Psy.D. program has a strong practicum component, in which students work under supervision at mental health clinics, human service agencies, hospitals, prisons, and other organizations throughout the region.

Currently, GIPP is affiliated with more than 70 different agencies and organizations, with an emphasis on those that work with underserved populations. For example, GIPP is currently involved with the Village for Families and Children in Hartford, a partnership in which doctoral students are working with victims of child sexual abuse.

Wahl’s strongest area of interest is public perceptions of mental illness. “The public has generally unfavorable attitudes and beliefs about people with mental illnesses. Those attitudes create a nonsupportive and even hostile environment and can make people reluctant to seek treatment,” he says. Many of those misconceptions are fueled by the way mental illness is portrayed in television, movies, advertising, and other forms of mass media, he adds.


Among his many professional affiliations, Wahl serves on the advisory board for the Rosalynn Carter Fellowship for Mental Health Journalism, a program designed to educate journalists about mental illness and support journalistic projects on mental health issues.

In his latest research project, Wahl and six GIPP students are examining 270 hours of children’s television programming to see what children are being taught about mental illness. The project is a follow-up to a smaller study of children’s films that Wahl conducted at George Mason University.

Author of The Hours Spends Time on Campus
by Kati Liss ’04

Drawing a full house of professors, students, readers, writers, and even moviegoers, Pulitzer Prize–winning author Michael Cunningham was on campus in December as a speaker in the English department’s
CAMPUS NEWS

Michael Cunningham signs a copy of The Hours for Regent Dick Cardin ’62 and his wife, Lucy. Cardin sponsors the reading series.

Cardin Reading Series. He is best known for his novel, The Hours, which was published in 1999 and adapted into an Oscar-winning film in 2002 starring Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep, and Julianne Moore.

Cunningham addressed the challenges of writing and talked about his own struggle at almost every point while writing The Hours. There was always an eclipsing fear that the novel wasn’t really anything special, he confided. The inspiration and encouragement of friends and family helped to assuage his doubt and proved to be justified. In 1999, The Hours won both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award, which annually recognizes the best work of fiction by an American author.

In describing his work, Cunningham said he sees writing as an individual journey, destination unknown. “[I] never know where it’s going [or] how it is going to end.”

Like The Hours, Cunningham’s other novels—Flesh and Blood and A Home at the End of the World—take on the complicated issues of familial social structures, gender, and sexuality. The author has been praised for his ability to write successfully from a woman’s point of view. According to Cunningham, he is “genderless” when he writes, which gives him the uncanny ability to present a variety of perspectives from an array of characters. The Hours tells the stories of three different women living in different decades but connected though the novel Mrs. Dalloway, by Virginia Woolf.

Why Mrs. Dalloway, set in upper-class society in England after World War I? Woolf’s “epic story of everyday life,” as he describes it, was Cunningham’s inspiration for The Hours and the first great book he ever read. At age 15, in an attempt to be “less stupid,” he said, he cast aside his guitar and entered a library. He checked out Mrs. Dalloway, and although he was unable to fully absorb the narrative, he was able to see the density and complexity that, to him, were reflective of music. He compared the rhythm of the book’s narrative to the music of Jimi Hendrix, and the capture of a first book to the energy of a first kiss. His response to the novel catapulted him into the literary world, first as a reader and later as a writer.

Currently, Cunningham is writing a book of three novellas—a horror story, a thriller, and a science fiction piece. This is quite a change for him, but he said he wants to write something different. “Everyone is going to hate it… but that is okay,” he said with a smile. Upon hearing that he had won the Pulitzer Prize, his first reactions were, “Now I’m screwed!” and “Where can I go now?” But after further contemplation, he rationalized that readers and critics tend to be angry at authors who continue to write after completing something great. So, “if everyone is going to hate [it]…I’m free to write whatever I want.”

Cunningham acknowledged that writing is a difficult process. He disagreed with those who say that writing cannot be taught and that a real writer just writes. Writing is an individual process, but it is also a learning experience, Cunningham said. Without help from others and knowledge of the mechanics of writing, many novels might never be published. He encouraged would-be writers to “figure out the best way for you to get it done.”

The Cardin Reading Series, established in 2001, is named for its sponsor, University alumnus and regent Richard Cardin ’62. ■

Kati Liss, an English major in the College of Arts and Sciences, is an Observer intern.

Fighting for Human Rights at Home

“You have a responsibility to become involved citizens and to fight for what you feel is right,” Michael Posner, executive director of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, told graduates at the University’s Fall Commencement ceremony in December.

Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, a new, lower standard for civil liberties has been established in the United States, Posner said. As a result, government information is not always accessible to the public, but much personal information about each of our lives is available to the government.

“Our country has a long and proud history of civil liberties,” said Posner. But this country, which once set the

Continued on page 8
Human Rights from page 7

lead. He urged graduates to speak out on the need to preserve our hard-won individual liberties.

Parents and friends of the graduates braved a foot of freshly fallen snow outside to watch as approximately 100 students received their degrees in Lincoln Theater. The Fall Commencement ceremony is designed for students who have completed the course work for their degrees but are unable to attend the University’s traditional Commencement in May.

Posner, who was given an honorary Doctor of Laws during the ceremony, has been involved in proposing and campaigning for the first U.S. law providing for political asylum, a provision added to the Refugee Act of 1980. He also proposed, drafted, and campaigned for the Torture Victim Protection Act, a federal statute that was signed into law in 1992.

Patient Gets a Boost from Ambulatory Suspension System

In June 2003, Bill Habicht of Glastonbury had brain surgery to remove a tumor and was unable to walk without assistance. In a copy of the fall 2003 Observer sent to his son, Jeff Habicht ’77, Bill read about the Ambulatory Suspension System designed by University of Hartford engineering students and faculty. This device helps patients learn to walk again after experiencing strokes or other injuries.

Curious to find out if he could try out the system, the elder Habicht called Devdas Shetty, director of the Engineering Applications Center in the University’s College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture. Shetty invited him to the College, and on Dec. 4, Habicht, 84, became the first patient to use the Ambulatory Suspension System.

“Bill was so thrilled that he could really get off the chair and walk around. [His wife] said it has boosted his morale,” said Shetty. It was the first day since his surgery that Habicht had been able to move around without a walker.

The Ambulatory Suspension System project began in 2000, when Avital Fast, chair of the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine at the Montefiore Medical Center/Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City approached Shetty about building such a device. Fast was determined to find a way to reduce the risk of falling for patients who were unstable on their feet.

In the spring of 2000, graduate student John Zera created a device that used tracks on the ceiling and a harness. Patients strapped into the harness could move forward, backward, or at 90-degree angles. If a patient lost balance, the harness provided instant support. Since then, several groups of students have made improvements to the apparatus.

Shetty expects to deliver a prototype to the Montefiore Medical Center for patient testing in 2004. Next year, a new prototype of the Ambulatory Suspension System will be built for the Bronx Albert Einstein Hospital of Medicine.

How Now, Browns’ Cows?

Two painted cows from the West Hartford CowParade were on display for two months this winter on the University campus before being rounded up and taken to Hartford’s Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts for a gala auction.

Moople Syrup Cow, sponsored by Guida’s Milk and Ice Cream, and Strolling Through an Apple Orchard.

Hartford Art School seniors Bonnie Wetzel and Thad Froio hanging out with a cow named “Strolling Through an Apple Orchard.”

Proceeds from each of the 61 cows in CowParade will benefit the Connecticut Children’s Medical Center and additional nonprofit groups designated by the sponsors of each cow. Savings Bank of Manchester has designated the Hartford Art School as a beneficiary from the sale of Strolling Through an Apple Orchard. A total of $378,000 was raised at the gala with additional sales expected from an online silent auction.

CowParade, described as a public art exhibit, invites artists in host cities to paint the cows, which are sponsored by local businesses and individuals. The cows are then displayed
Jeff Bagwell ’90 signs an autograph for Justin Wilson as his brother, Nicholas, and father, Dana Wilson, look on. Bagwell was honored at the 2004 Hot Stove Dinner.

Former Hawk Jeff Bagwell Honored

“I wouldn’t be where I am today without the University of Hartford,” Houston Astro Jeff Bagwell ’90 said, as he saw his number 27 retired and a locker filled with memorabilia dedicated in his honor at the 2004 Hot Stove Dinner in January.

“I came here just hoping to play well enough to get a shot to play professionally. I never really thought about playing in the big leagues until much later. A lot of people in this room are directly responsible for my success, and I will never forget that.”

At Hartford, Bagwell played third base for the Hawks from 1987 to 1989. He left as the program’s all-time leader in batting average (.413), RBI (126), and home runs (31). His career batting average was a New England collegiate record. He was also a two-time American Baseball Coaches Association (ABCA) All-American and Eastern College Athletic Conference New England Player of the Year (1988, 1989).

Now, the Houston Astros’ first baseman is well on his way to a Hall of Fame career. He is a lifetime .300 hitter and is among baseball’s all-time leading home run hitters (419, 32nd) and RBI leaders (1,421, 53rd). This past season, his 13th, Bagwell hit .278 with 39 home runs and 100 RBI. It marked the sixth time in his career that he had at least 39 home runs, and the eighth time he has driven in 100 or more runs. He received the inaugural Darryl Kile Award from the Houston chapter of the Baseball Writers Association of America last February and was named American Legion Alumni of the Year in May.

Also attending “A Celebration of Hartford Baseball” was Hartford baseball alumnus Gary LaRocque ('75), assistant general manager and director of baseball operations for the New York Mets. LaRocque played shortstop for the Hawks from 1972 to 1975 and was named an ABCA All-American and an All-New England selection in 1974 by the New England Intercollegiate Baseball Association.

Special Olympics Coming to Campus

More than 1,400 athletes, as well as their families and coaches, will converge on the University of Hartford campus May 22 for the 2004 Special Olympics Regional Games.

For that day, the University will become a mini–Olympic Village. The event will feature opening and closing ceremonies, including the lighting of the Olympic Flame; contests in aquatics, soccer, track and field, tennis, wheelchair events, pentathlon, and adaptive sports; and arts-and-crafts activities at the “Olympic Town.”

Irwin Nussbaum, associate vice president for Student Life, is the University coordinator for the Special Olympics Regional Games, working closely with officials from Connecticut Special Olympics. For more information, or if you would like to volunteer, contact Irwin Nussbaum at 860.768.5026 or nussbaum@hartford.edu.

Confronting Low Levels of Literacy

Forty-one percent of the adults in the city of Hartford operate at the lowest level of literacy. Seventy-three percent of those adults—approximately 71,000 people—are in one of the two lowest literacy levels out of five recognized by literacy groups.

Those figures, from a report of the National Institute for Literacy, reflect a broader meaning of literacy that goes beyond earlier definitions referring solely to the ability to read. The more comprehensive definition of literacy, approved by the U.S. Congress in the 1991 National Literacy Act, refers to an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English; to compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society; to achieve one’s goals; and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.

National and state literacy organizations in the United States have identified Level 3 proficiency as a minimum standard for success in today’s labor markets. The 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey, conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, measured literacy using performance across a wide array of tasks that reflect...
the types of reading materials and literacy demands that adults encounter daily.

The University’s Hartford College for Women and Saint Joseph College in West Hartford are particularly concerned about gender issues as they relate to literacy. With the aid of a grant from the Hartford Consortium for Higher Education, HCW and Saint Joseph’s convened faculty from area colleges and universities and representatives from a number of services-providing agencies at a conference called Women and Literacy.

Noreen Channels, retired professor of sociology at Trinity College and chair of the City of Hartford Task Force on Adult Literacy, outlined the negative impact that low literacy can have on one’s self-determination, personal efficacy, self-confidence and self-worth, and on the ability to make informed consumer decisions, civic involvement, and relationships with colleagues and one’s own children.

“This raises issue for us [in higher education] as literacy services providers,” according to Channels. “We should select literacy as an explicit institutional commitment.” Universities and colleges should partner with the Greater Hartford Literacy Council in tackling Hartford’s low literacy levels, she said.

Educational attainment, proficiency in English, race and ethnicity, and status in the labor force are all contribute to marginal levels of literacy.

Kerry Beckford ’85, ’87, ’98, adjunct faculty member in the Department of Rhetoric, Language, and Culture, discussed the barriers confronting women in the diverse ethnic groups of Hartford—West Indians, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans. Cultural communication and ethnic identity are the focus of Beckford’s research and the subject of her master’s thesis.

Members of ethnic groups find that they must engage in codeswitching, which Beckford described as modifying speech in order to converse across social boundaries. An example is an African American who uses standard English in the workplace but in her own home or neighborhood speaks “Black English.” Historically, ethnic groups have been expected to adjust to the communication styles of the dominant group. “Ethnic communication is viewed as language deficiency or as communicative incompetence,” Beckford said, so ethnic women have used codeswitching as an expression of dual identity within their own ethnic group and among the dominant group. Recent research, however, indicates a growing reluctance to codeswitch, as members of ethnic groups increasingly prefer to use their own communication style in all settings as symbol of ethnic pride and identity, she said.

If the cultural context of communication is not considered, efforts to increase literacy awareness among multilingual women will be stalled, according to Beckford. “It is important for educational institutions and workplaces to acknowledge a woman’s multilingualism while encouraging multiple definitions of communicative competence.”

Bill Yousman ’99, instructor in the School of Communication, is concerned about the increasing necessity for media literacy. Studies find that far more people in this country are watching television between 8 and 11 p.m. on any given night than doing anything else. According to Yousman, television has become the central storyteller in our culture, and we assume no one has to be taught how to watch it.

Yousman played excerpts from a typical night’s television viewing to show the not-so-subtle and often conflicting messages that, he said, are sold to women, among them:

- thin is beautiful but make sure you consume the unhealthy, fat-filled fast food that is being hawked;
- spending money is the key to happiness;
- material possessions can be the solution to all problems.

Media literacy must become a priority, and preschool is not too early to start, Yousman said. A recent study in Connecticut found that 25 percent of children in grades K–2 and 33 percent in grades 3–5 were still up watching television at 11 o’clock at night.

In a time of increasingly concentrated media empires that control our time and attention, Yousman said, we must be aware of the messages that are being sold to us and be able to analyze and evaluate them before we accept them.

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Women’s Basketball on the Web!

Follow the University of Hartford women’s basketball team as it enjoys its most successful season in school history.

Listen to games live, at no charge, from anywhere in the world. Just log on to www.uh.org and click on “Webcast.”

The Hawks have staged one of the greatest year-to-year turnarounds in the history of collegiate women’s basketball, receiving their first-ever votes in the Associated Press national poll while enjoying a school-record nine-game winning streak during December and January.
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WWUH
Celebrating 35 Years on the Air

WWUH (91.3 FM), the University of Hartford’s public radio station, celebrated its 35th anniversary in November 2003. The station broadcasts throughout the Greater Hartford area and around the world via the Internet. It offers a wide variety of programming in a noncommercial format and opportunities for students to gather vital skills for future careers in broadcasting. Both student and nonstudent volunteers are the backbone of the station.

Although the radio station was launched in July 1968, it wasn’t until November of that year that it was dedicated to Louis K. Roth, a humanitarian who funded WWUH. The anniversary celebration drew many former staff members to The 1877 Club, where they honored the longevity and quality of the station’s 35 years.

Red Caps Reunite to Honor Founder

A new scholarship fund honors a much-beloved, former staff member of the University’s Office of Student Affairs. Although she retired more than 20 years ago, Theresa Tracy is still remembered fondly by alumni who came to know her as a friend and confidante.

One alumni who has particular respect and admiration for Tracy is Mark Vining ’82. In 1995 he was instrumental in naming Tracy an honorary alumna of the University. During Fall Weekend ’03, he announced the Theresa Tracy Orientation Red Cap Endowment Fund.

First working in the Admission office and then moving on to Student Affairs, Tracy created or coordinated a host of programs during her time at the University. Among them are the International Student Association, the Commuter Association, Peer Tutoring, and the Women’s Center. Her most prominent accomplishment, however, was development of the Orientation program and its popular Red Caps.

Mark Vining ’82 looks on as Theresa Tracy addresses the Red Caps reunion.

Alumni all remember being greeted with warmth and friendship when they first arrived on campus by the exuberant Red Caps. The endowment fund will serve students who have volunteered as Red Caps and need financial assistance in order to continue their education.

Tracy was on hand for the announcement of the endowment in her honor at a reunion of former Orientation leaders and Red Caps during Fall Weekend.

Tracy reminded the alumni of her maxim: “Go out into the world, give, and do the best you can.” Although retired, she regularly volunteers at an elementary school near her home.

Contributions to the Tracy Scholarship Endowment Fund will also be counted toward the University’s $175 million Campaign of Commitment goal.

Winners of Purchase Awards in the 16th Annual Alexander A. Goldfarb Exhibition were Emily Theodoseau, a senior in ceramics, for her sculpture titled This Isn’t a Horse’s Stable; and Corry Kanzenberg, a senior in art history, for her painting titled Llamas. 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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