



St. John's College

聖約翰學院

Spring 2011

newsletter



Faculty profile

Senior Fellow embodies intercultural understanding

Those with a connection to St. John's College understand that it is a place where multiculturalism, connectivity and compassion are celebrated. Within this unique and heralded environment, we note the special contributions of Senior Fellow, Dr. Tyseer Abounasr, Dean of the Faculty of Applied Science and Professor of Electrical Engineering at UBC.

Dr. Abounasr holds a B.Eng. from the University of Cairo and earned doctoral and master's degrees in electrical engineering from Queen's University. Prior to coming to UBC she was Dean of Engineering at the University of Ottawa. She has a stellar research record in the area of digital signal processing, but from the perspec-

tive of St. John's College she also has extraordinary talents beyond the academic.

In 2001, Dr. Abounasr was named one of the top 100 influential people in Ottawa; in 2005 she was named to the Order of Ontario and in 2010 she was named one of the top 100 influential women in British Columbia. She has been heavily involved in community groups aimed at fostering understanding among Jewish, Arab and Muslim Canadians.

In her role as Senior Fellow, she recently moderated a dialogue at the College concerning the Israel-Palestine conflict, specifically with respect to the Gaza Strip. This was a superb example of her unique skills and profound understanding of that confrontation.

Dr. Abounasr combines excellence in research and teaching with a strong sense of responsibility towards society, and she is accomplished in other aspects of life, holding a first degree black belt in Taekwondo.

Clearly, Dr. Abounasr is an ambassador of intercultural understanding, as evidenced by her straightforward, yet powerful summation of SJC's international mandate and its impact beyond the College walls:

"In a time where some are pushing the world into an 'us and them' paradigm, a paradigm where fear of 'the other' is fanned, St John's College is a reminder that the capacity to understand where the other is coming from, is the only way we as a global community will survive," she explained. "The College is an island where the environment empowers its residents to understand—without expecting them to agree—what motivates the other and as such how better to communicate one's thoughts, and argue passionately for one's beliefs, while respecting others' differing views and their right to argue equally passionately for those views. St John's is a true reflection of UBC as a living laboratory; in this case a laboratory experimenting with how to create real communities where people have serious conflicts, but discuss them and seek resolutions for them through respectful dialogue."



SJC Senior Fellow, Dr. Tyseer Abounasr.

Honouring our founders

College community unites around the Living Memory Project

St. John's College is taking action to honour its Johannean founders and to preserve Johannean history and culture by bringing together current College residents and the larger Johannean community under the Living Memory Project.

The first step involves telling the Johannean story. To do this, the College will be recording the life stories of Johanneans on video. More than ten life stories have

already been recorded, including interviews with prominent Johanneans T.F. Ying, Stanley Kwok and Harry Wong. These videos aim to preserve and honour the memories of Johanneans. Their life stories will help form a legacy that will live on in the memories of their own descendants and in the future generations of College residents.

The Johannean story will also be told through the archiving and showcasing of treasured memorabilia, including an already significant collection of

books, photo albums and other materials that have been generously donated by Johanneans far and wide.

Much of these memorabilia will be dedicated to the memory of the College's founders and be displayed in locations such as the proposed Alumni Hall and the Alumni Library, where College residents and visitors will be able to immerse themselves in Johannean culture and history.

The College also plans to replicate symbols that were prominent on the original

St. John's University campus to increase the overall Johannean presence. For example, a proposed replica of the St. John's College Arch will cultivate a strong sense of Johannean tradition for current College residents at UBC. Our hope is that through the Johannean Living Memory Project, College residents will realize that they are the living inheritance of St. John's University and that they have an important role to play in preserving its history and identity for generations to come.

Alumni profile

Genevieve Gagne-Hawes

SJC alumna gives the gift of education to South African students

My name is Genevieve Gagne-Hawes; I lived in St. John's College from 2007-2010. Today, I'm in Cape Town, South Africa, volunteering with "ABC for Life," a NGO based out of Sentinel Intermediary School. Sentinel is located in Hangberg, one of two townships flanking the more affluent community of Hout Bay in the Western Cape of South Africa.

Our students come from harsh backgrounds; many have absentee or abusive parents who struggle with drug/alcohol addiction and take little interest in their child's education.

The majority of the first, second, and third graders with whom I work did not take "Grade R" (kindergarten equivalent), entering first grade unable to form letters, count backwards from 10, or read three-letter words. But they are SO sweet, so loving, and so eager to learn. Being able to give them a bit of a chance—or failing that, a bit of affection—is a huge gift.

"ABC for Life" works with groups of 8-10—most classes at Sentinel have more than 40, with 1100 students spread among 28 teachers—to provide individualized attention to struggling



An inside look at the modest Sentinel Intermediary School classroom in Cape Town, South Africa.

learners. Many of our students are quite smart—but no one has ever taught them what "zero" means or shown them how to count without using their fingers. Learning is slow, frustrating, enlightening, and sometimes scary—Sentinel was caught up in the midst of riots during my

second week of volunteering, and our classrooms were destroyed by vandals. We've bounced back, and are heading toward a very positive end of semester.

If anyone is interested in more information about "ABC for Life," please feel free to contact me at gagnehgj@gmail.com.

2010/2011—A year of transitions

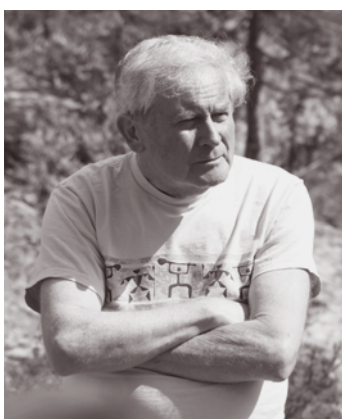
SJC embraces new faces and collective leadership

In our previous newsletter, we bid farewell to Tim Brook, and welcomed Henry Yu as our new Principal. Professor Yu is on a well-deserved sabbatical during the 2010/2011 school year, and the College is fortunate to have an unparalleled team of academic leaders working collaboratively to oversee its operations until July 2011, when Dr. Yu officially resumes the Principalship.

Those sharing the task of leading, inspiring and celebrating the achievements of St. John's College this year include:

Dr. Olav Slaymaker, Emeritus Professor of Geography, SJC Acting Principal

Dr. Olav Slaymaker has been with UBC for 42 years, serving successively as Assistant, Associate, Full and finally Emeritus Professor. Born in Wales, he spent his first six years in occupied Norway.



Dr. Olav Slaymaker

He then returned to Wales for schooling after the Second World War, went on to study at Cambridge and Harvard, and taught geography at the University of Wales before coming to UBC. Professor Slaymaker has been a Senior Faculty Fellow of St. John's College since its inception. His research centres around the theme of environmental change in mountain environments of North America and the European Alps. Over the course of this year, he is responsible for overall College operations and the general dispensing of wise thoughts!

Chris Lee, Assistant Professor of English, SJC Associate Principal

Chris Lee is a long time Vancouver resident who attended high school on the North Shore before making his way to UBC. He graduated from the University's Honours English



Chris Lee

Program, and also studied critical theory and Asian American Studies at the University of California. From the West Coast of Canada he moved to the East Coast of the United States to attend graduate school at Brown University. Before writing his dissertation, he spent a year in Beijing taking classes and doing research. He returned to Vancouver in 2006 and took up an appointment as Assistant Professor of English at UBC in 2007, when he also became a Faculty Fellow of the College. Chris' areas of research include Asian North American literatures and cultures, American Studies (with a focus on race/ethnicity and transnationalism), critical and literary theory (especially the Frankfurt School) and aesthetic philosophy. As Associate Principal, Chris is responsible for the College's community outreach.

Neil Safier, Assistant Professor of History, SJC Associate Principal

Neil Safier is a native of northern California. He received his bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature from Brown University and later worked in educational and non-profit fundraising (including for the environmental NGO the Sierra Club in San Francisco) before studying graduate history at Johns Hopkins University. Neil taught at the Universities of Michigan and Pennsylvania before joining the faculty at UBC in 2008. It was a fortuitous trip to South America that led him to write a dissertation on an eighteenth-century French explorer's Amazon journey and that continues to inspire his interest in Brazilian and Latin American history and culture. Neil is also an avid traveler and music lover, and he revels in speaking foreign languages. He has been an SJC Faculty Fellow since 2008 and as Associate Principal he is responsible for the College's academic programming.



Neil Safier

Alumnus tops Cyber-Schools challenge

SJC celebrates the achievements of SJC alumnus Andrew Deonarine

We are thrilled to announce that SJC alumnus Andrew Deonarine recently won the \$10,000 top prize in the joint 21st Century Cyber-Schools Challenge sponsored by The Economist and InnoCentive, Inc., where the goal was to find new ways to provide educational opportunities to the tens of millions of children in developing nations.

Andrew's "EduCell" plan is a cellular phone-based educational system that has content creation, distribution, and delivery capabilities, and provides a platform for basic literacy through "phonecasting". It can run on cellular phones, PDAs and computers. Under the plan, teachers in developing areas can develop lessons and educational content on their mobile phones, and then publish the

small multi-lingual "scripts" to other mobile phones, PDAs, embedded devices and computers.

For example, the lesson could say "this is how you write hello" and then spell out the word. Or it could tell the user to press five, while flashing the number on the screen so they know what it looks like.

"It's a way of spreading literature en masse and you can expand it to any part of the world that doesn't have access to education," Andrew explained. He noted that cellphones are becoming increasingly common in undeveloped countries because they're so cheap and are ubiquitous in rural areas. According to the UN Department of Public Information, in sub-Saharan Africa, where only one per cent of people have access to fixed telephone lines, more than 30 per cent of people now have access to mobile phones.

Andrew was a Junior Fellow at St. John's College from September 2008 to August 2010, and has gone on to Cambridge to study computational and

theoretical biology at the Laboratory of Molecular Biology at Cambridge.

We offer our most sincere congratulations and continuing best wishes to Andrew!

SJC Alumnus Andrew Deonarine.



SJC backs original artistic endeavour

"Jade in the Coal" makes world premiere in Vancouver

This fall, St John's College was a supporting partner in the world premiere of Paul Yee's play, "Jade in the Coal," which was staged at the Frederic Wood Theatre by Theatre at UBC and Pangaea Arts, a local group specializing in cross-cultural theatre. Governor General's award-winner Yee spent four years developing this

play along with director Heidi Specht and UBC professor Siyuan Liu. "Jade in the Coal" tells the story of Chinese coal miners in Cumberland, BC, at the turn of the twentieth century. Located on Vancouver Island, Cumberland had one of the largest Chinese communities in North America at that time. Yee's play recounts the visit of an opera troupe from China, whose arrival literally brings old ghosts to life.

"Jade in the Coal" featured four professional Cantonese opera actors from Guangzhou and Singapore. They lived at SJC while they rehearsed and performed, and Paul Yee also stayed at SJC during opening week. Yee gave a talk on the play in the Social Lounge and SJC also hosted public events on Cantonese opera and Chinese Canadian history.

The College also hosted a special reunion of elders and their families who had grown up in Cumberland. The Junior Fellows welcomed our resident artists into the life of the College and supported the production in many ways. Thanks to all who helped out!

Drivers of change

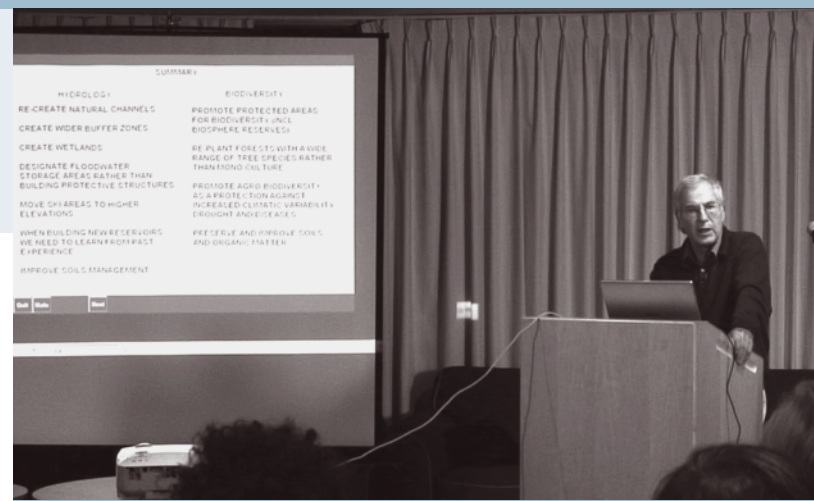
Dr. Olav Slaymaker

Lecture series inspires debate on greatest environmental forces

The first four lectures in the SJC Principal's Invitational Lecture Series (September 23, 2010—May 19, 2011) are now complete, with the upcoming dates greatly anticipated. The first lecture, by Acting Principal Olav Slaymaker, proposed that it is convenient to consider relief, climate, sea level, and human activity as the major drivers of environmental change. A first part of his thesis is that climate, especially temperature change, is the least important of these four drivers in temperate and tropical environments, in spite of the huge emphasis on this driver in contemporary scientific literature. Arctic environments, where phase changes in the cryosphere are highly sensitive to temperature change, are admittedly an exception. The second part of his thesis is that human activity, in the form of land use and land cover change, has become the most important driver of environmental change globally and that this driver will become increasingly dominant as the 21st century progresses. Although threats to the integrity of global environments are serious, the potential of landscape enhancement as well as land degradation should be entertained. The integrity of his argument is dependent on defining and comparing effects at specific temporal (century) and spatial (landscape) scales, and yet it is recognized that the major difficulty with the thesis is the absence of an accurate and universally accepted metric.

The second lecture, by Professor Marie-Francoise André of the Blaise Pascal University of Clermont Ferrand in France, examined the circum-arctic permafrost region, which is known as a climate change "hot spot". She demonstrated, with the aid of arresting illustrative material, the role of permafrost thaw as the major driving force of landscape change, soil disturbance and infrastructure damage in that environment. However, the most important emphasis of her lecture was the uncertainty that is present in all the major databases that are used to assert the direction of contemporary and future climate change. She noted the need for new and sensitive geo-indicators of environmental change; the importance of the interplay of climate and human activity; the fact that contemporary environmental changes in the Arctic had both positive and negative implications for society; and directed our attention to the intrinsic properties of landscapes that can mitigate negative effects of environmental change.

The third lecture, by UBC's Professor Emeritus Hans Schreier, introduced evidence of environmental change in the major mountain regions of the world: The Himalayas, the Andes, the European Alps and the Canadian Cordillera were the foci of his remarks. He noted that mountain regions occupy approximately 25% of Earth's terrestrial surface. More surprisingly from a Canadian perspective, approximately 22% of the world's



Professor Emeritus Hans Schreier shares his insights on the impact of climate change on mountain environments.

population lives in those mountain regions. His thesis was that as far as mountains are concerned, the only two drivers of environmental change worth considering are climate and land use. He tended to think that land use change is more important than climate, but acknowledged the difficulty of analysing them as independent variables when they are almost universally co-varying. The upshot of his analysis, which was marvellously illustrated, was that mountain environments world-wide are seriously threatened by both climate change and land use.

The fourth lecture marked a shift in discussion to the impact of environmental change on deserts, and was given by Professor Andrew Goudie, Master of St. Cross College, Oxford. He spoke on the problem of desertification, evidence for and against, and whether climate or human activity is responsible and what the future holds for arid and semi-arid regions of the world. Thirty three percent of Earth's terrestrial surface is occupied by arid to semi-arid regions and they support more than one

billion people or 18% of the world's population. Perhaps less known is the presence of large urban areas such as Cairo and Karachi, which are growing at exceptionally rapid rates. Firstly, some widely held misperceptions of the desertification process were corrected: Desertification does not advance along a broad front, like a wave, but it tends to occur at specific places and is a function of local factors. There is clear evidence of cyclic drought occurrence in certain regions (as in West and East Africa) but in other places there is no clear pattern. There is evidence of the controlling influence of ENSO (El Niño Southern Oscillation), but the precise mechanism whereby aridity is increased in certain regions is not fully understood. The intensity of cultivation, the use of fuel resources and population growth in cities are placing unique pressures on the arid environment.

We now await the last lectures on rivers and coasts and a final presentation on the relationship between environmental change and energy transitions. For more information on upcoming dates and speakers, please contact the College.

Passing the torch of “Light and Truth”

Johanneans express hope for next generation at Founders’ Dinner

In September, Johanneans of every age gathered in Vancouver at the 2010 Founders’ Dinner and relived the highlights of their history during a speech delivered by Dr. Sophia Chih Hsu Yu, Past President of the Vancouver Chapter of the St. John’s University Alumni Association.

Dr. Hsu eloquently described the original purpose of the University in the words of one of its founding principals as being “not only to teach students to learn, and to think, but also to behave. We want our students to be conscientious learners, creative thinkers, and men and women of sterling character, who will serve his or her native country”. She then walked listeners through the SJC journey of blending past and present, of Chinese and western beliefs, and summarized it all into the simple goal that motivates all Johanneans today: “To us, excellence is an inspiration, an attitude, a pursuit, and a way of life.”



Johannean Dr. Sophia Chih Hsu Yu

Dr. Hsu also noted that while St. John’s University in Shanghai is no more, alumni take heart in celebrating the growth of its offspring in the form of the St. John’s University in Taiwan and St. John’s College at UBC. She described these two institutions as “symbolic of the rebirth of our Alma Mater; they will uphold the St. John’s spirit and legacy.”

In the span of 73 years, St. John’s University Shanghai nurtured 6,500 graduates and at last count, there were approximately 3,500 surviving in China and overseas. And while many of the founding students are now in their eighties or nineties, Dr. Hsu emphasized that they remain young at heart in their collective hope for the next generation of Johanneans who will carry on the torch of “Light and Truth”.

Student-led initiatives

Student life spans charity, introspection and fun

St. John’s College Junior Fellows have been busy as usual this school year. As well as regular community events like yoga, choir, and language classes, they regularly look outside the bounds of the College to see what they can offer to the wider community.

The annual tradition of serving dinner at a shelter in the Downtown East Side drew an

eager crowd on December 10. A student-led panel discussion was held in March for Canadian and international undergraduate students on what to expect and what to prepare for during graduate student life. Other highlights have included a discussion of recent events in Israel and Gaza facilitated by UBC Professor Marwan Hassan, and a dialogue about Maclean’s “Too Asian?” article and racial profiling in the media,

with speakers Helen Zia, founder of the Asian American Journalists Association, and Johannean Visiting Scholar, UBC, and Henry Yu, SJC’s Principal Pro-Tem.

The Junior Fellows are indeed the lifeblood of the College and we are deeply grateful for their myriad contributions to the community and beyond.



About St. John’s College

St. John’s College has roots that extend back to St. John’s University in Shanghai, China. Graduates of the University—known as Johanneans—are able, through a blending of Chinese and Western approaches to teaching, to be at home anywhere in the world. Continuing in the tradition of excellence and internationalism of its namesake, St. John’s College at UBC aims to build links between different parts of the world, and to serve as an intellectually and culturally diverse centre for its members.

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