

Scepter

The Students' Voice

Kingsborough Community College

November 2023

The City University of New York

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Kingsborough's Unanimous Call for Peace

KCC Community Mourns Lives Lost in Israel and Palestine with Peace Vigil

By Danny Gonzales

On the morning of October 17, students and faculty of all races, gender identities, sexualities, religions, and faiths joined together in U-219 for a peace vigil, mourning the recent events in Israel and Palestine.

"We stand here together in separate faiths, but together we stand in grievance and peace for Israel and Palestine," said President Schrader.

Sponsored by KCC's Student Union and Intercultural Center (SU&IC) with the Office of Student Life and arranged by the Director of the Student Union Helen-Margaret Nasser, President Claudia Schrader and Student Government Association (SGA) President Netanel Nemet, this event was a time to join in the name of peace, and to grieve for friends and family lost during this horrific conflict in the middle east.

Powerful speakers such as Director Nasser and President Schrader spoke about world peace and what we should do to spread love as a community at KCC. They evoked aspects from both Catholic and Islamic faiths through prayers.

"Rather than let there be hatred in this world, how can we build love and peace here at KCC?" asked Nasser.

After a short Jewish hymn, the attendees gathered as one, holding tealight candles. In the name of peace and love, they shared a loud and empowering moment of silence.

"It was meaningful," said Nemet. "This had to be done, especially for a college environment and education. This was necessary."

The leaders at KCC emphasize that we should all ask ourselves to find better answers, and to help the community here at KCC. No matter if you're a freshman or sophomore, student or faculty, or even a President, there should not be a gap separating us as a community — no matter your status, culture, faith, or beliefs.

"This was a moment to understand we are all human," said Schrader. "We just took a moment to reflect on our own feelings, but we did it together as a community."



President Schrader and Director Nasser led the vigil with heartfelt hopes and prayers.



The vigil culminated in a loud moment of silence — mourners gathered in a circle with tealight candles.



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Scepter welcomes letters to the editors and opinions from the entire Kingsborough Community.

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In Memorium



Number 1, Tabibi Abdelmaged was distinguished for his off-court character; his peers and coaches admired his groundedness and sportsmanship.

On Friday November 3, KCC student-athlete Tabibi Abdelmaged suddenly passed away at 21, devastating friends and family.

“Tabibi was an exceptional individual who embodied the true spirit of sportsmanship, dedication and perseverance,” announced KCC Athletics. “He was pursuing an associate degree in Physical Education, Recreation and Recreation Therapy.”

Abdelmaged had a seizure in the locker room after a game, and EMS was unable to resuscitate him, according to Brooklyn News 12.

As members of the Kingsborough community, we hope that Abdelmaged’s loved ones can find peace with such an unfair tragedy.

President Scradler visited his mom and sisters and shared: “They spoke about the love he had for basketball and Kingsborough. He told them that he never wanted to leave KCC. What I know is that his memory will live on at KCC for his friends, professors, teammates and the Athletics staff.”



Team captain Abdelmaged wanted to be a gym teacher to inspire others, according to Brooklyn News 12.

Student Government Wants to Amplify Student Voices

SGA and SGA Day

By Joseph Bucci

From conference rooms to the beach, student body President Natanel Nemet sees unrealized potential in every corner of Kingsborough, and he wants students to take full advantage of KCC’s resources.

To encourage students to make the most out of their available resources and promote communication between the student body and government, the KCC Student Government Association (SGA) hosted SGA Day: a few hours of games, build-a-bear and free lunch.

“Many people would say that COVID took a toll,

but the best thing we can do after the pandemic is focus on change,” said Nemet. “We have many beneficial resources on campus, the problem is just how do we send that message.”

Primarily, SGA saw the event as a way to introduce themselves over some light activities, but the senators were also keyed-in on a specific message.

“We want to promote student engagement,” said SGA Senator Abrianna Gibbs. “We want people to not feel so miserable. The student experience can make

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CAMPUS NEWS

New KCC Program Grows Mutual Education

Students Can Earn Credits While Reading Books to Children

By Chris Peña

A new initiative between Kingsborough Community College's education department, Kibbee Library and the Child Development Center is modernizing our educational system for our youth.

Librarian Pauline Cassino recognized the vast amount of children's stories at our library and envisioned the collaboration. A new program was born that allows students to gain experience in educational field work, while simultaneously inspiring children to develop reading skills and habits.

Education Club Members read to the children at the development center. The program meets EDC 200 meeting requirements and allows students to observe classes in schools and gain field experience working with children.

"If we can help young people to become more passionate about reading, and become avid readers, then we're really setting them up for success across the board," said Joanna Maulbeck, KCC Professor and Education Club Advisor.

We have a wonderful campus with many different organizations working on great interconnected projects. The more we build these connections, the better we serve the community. Students can share their experiences and knowledge and learn to become educators.

"I think it's so critical for them to see what it's like to work with young children really early on, and to see if you want to do it," said the very-motivated Professor Maulbeck. "For them to get that exposure at the very

beginning is so pivotal, and they are getting that through this program."

This program allows our students to practice a critical skill. Part of the credit is earned for the reading and preparation that they do beforehand.

"I want them to know that they should be taking time before reading to prepare their lesson," said Maulbeck. "They need to intentionally prepare for the read aloud, and to make it fun."

The program teaches students how to incorporate body movements and hand gestures mimicking the elements of a story, which may in turn encourage our hard-of-hearing community members to engage in the experience.

It brings words to life for the children by maintaining a dynamic storytelling experience.

The preschoolers are encouraged to bring items that they learn about in books so that they realize how something in a book exists in real life. They will hopefully "plug-in" newly-acquired knowledge into real life — plug-in is a technique commonly used in laboratory assignments by college students in the science department.

There is much research showing that children who read more develop a nuanced vocabulary, which benefits them throughout their school years. Learning critical thinking skills and sharing conversation about reading materials sets up a solid foundation for teaching children to develop a love for reading.

A Message From the Caribbean Club

Are you from the Caribbean or simply have an interest for Caribbean culture, music, and amazing flavors? Join us at the Caribbean Club in room U218!

This club is a hub for anyone who cherishes the rich traditions, warmth and diversity of the Caribbean. Together, we'll explore the Caribbean's unique rhythms, delectable cuisine and colourful traditions.

At our upcoming meeting, we'll embark on this exciting journey of celebration and connection. Whether you have Caribbean roots or simply love the Caribbean spirit, you're welcome to be part of our vibrant community here at KCC!

Throughout the year, we'll host events and activities that represent us as Caribbean people. From Caribbean-themed parties to cultural showcases, we'll create opportunities to share stories, create memories, and foster a deeper appreciation for Caribbean culture.

Let's come together to keep the Caribbean spirit alive at our school. If you're interested in joining, please stop by room U218 and sign up. Together, let's make this club a vibrant addition to our community. See you there! #CaribbeanClubU218



SGA senators (left to right) Ayesha Azad, Abrianna Gibbs, Riquelme Bennett and Sidra Zafar serving halal and kosher meals at SGA Day; respecting dietary restrictions is another important topic for the current SGA.

or break your whole college experience. The more people we get involved, the better."

"Students can take our survey and give us direct feedback," said SGA Senator Jaiden Pinnock. "They can tell us what their problems are and what we should do with our funding. The goal is to represent the students."

In addition to their focus on communication, SGA is currently pushing for the construction of a game room on campus and to officially reopen the beach outside of the cafeteria. Nemet encourages students to come to his office hours, and again, hammers down on the point that SGA believes student communication and participation will lead to a better student experience.

Nemet exclaims, "We damn do have a student government. And we are here to represent you! I am here for the students. I'm with you and for you."



SGA President Netanel Nemet in front of Kingsborough Beach, which SGA is working to get officially reopened.

JOIN SCEPTER, BE PART OF OUR TEAM!

Scepter is always recruiting new team members to contribute to monthly editions of the paper.

If you are a Kingsborough student and are interested in writing, photography, layout design, or copy editing, talk to us in M230. You can also email your opinion or letter to the editor to:

scepternewspaperkcc@gmail.com

Exploring Modern Concepts with Modern Technology

By Jon Sosa

On display from September 18 to October 20, Kingsborough Art Museum (KAM) hosted their annual faculty exhibition: *Reflections*. The exhibition hosted art from various mediums, including fine art, graphic design and illustration. Rhonda Levy and Thomas Mintz share the process of creating their work and their annual exhibition experience.

Levy, design teacher and art faculty member, introduces her latest art piece called the *Female Gaze*, a digital collage inspired as a poem without words. Mintz teaches and practices different branches of photography such as photojournalism, darkroom photography and design foundation, and presents his *Sun Blurring Shine*.

Scepter: Can you tell us about the artwork you've contributed to this year's exhibition? What inspired you to create it?

Levy: The artwork that I put in this exhibition is almost like a digital collage, because it does have photography in it, and it does have illustration in it. It's called the *Female Gaze*, created in 2023.

It was inspired as a poem without words. It's called the female gaze because we always had the male gaze for many years — about how men looked at women — but in about 1970-1972 women feminists started taking back their power by exploring the female gaze — how women saw the world.

It's about how women embrace the rhythm of nature; how they connect to it spiritually, physically and emotionally. So, it is kind of like meditating on a spiritual piece. It has that kind of iconography in the layout — of what you would see historically in religious pieces. It embraces the birth and the death and the regeneration of the world and of life.

Scepter: What medium or techniques did you use to bring your artwork to life, and how do they contribute to the overall aesthetic and message?

Levy: I always start with sketching. I have many different sketches and then I will pick one of them, and then I'll decide whether it's going to be illustration or photography, or a mixture of both. I tend to use Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop together all the time. I don't think I have any peace that only uses Illustrator or Photoshop. I tend to mix them up all the time. To me they're like 2 halves of a coin. You can't separate it; they belong together.

Scepter: Can you share any challenges or unique aspects of creating this piece for the exhibition?

Levy: One of the challenges is, you know, when you're finished, you keep on thinking, is this good enough? Are people going to understand? Was it worth my time to make this? Who am I making it for? You know, when you do design work, you know you're doing it for a client; it's very specific and everybody has to see it and get the same message right away. Otherwise, it's not visual communication.

Scepter: Can you provide an overview of the annual art faculty exhibition and its significance to the college?

Levy: The faculty exhibition was really lovely. I think one of the things it does is highlight the diversity of the faculty who teach at *Kingsborough*. I love to see what my colleagues do every year. I think it's great for the students to see what their professors do in their own time, how they express themselves outside of the course curriculum.

I think Brian Hack does a great job putting it together and we're so lucky to have him. And you know, being supportive of what our department does, to be able to share that with the students, I think it's a lovely experience. It's a lovely event and I think it benefits everybody and inspires everybody.

Scepter: Could you share some details about the participating faculty members, their backgrounds, and the types of artworks they contributed to the exhibition?

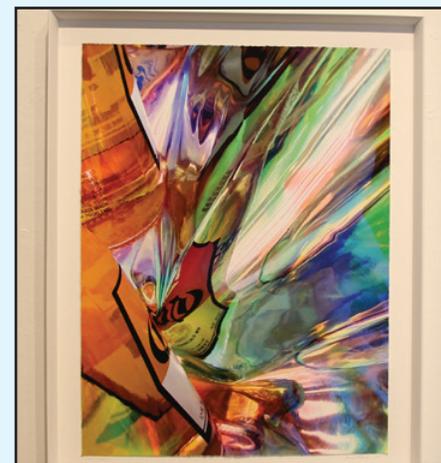
Creating *Reflections*: A Q&A Series with some of KCC's Art Faculty



Rhonda Levy's *Female Gaze* explores how women embrace the "rhythm of nature."



A Valerie Sokolova illustration for an upcoming book.



Janice Mehlman's *About A Pandemic* combines strong concepts with technical ability.



Tommy Mintz and his *Sun Blurring Shine* — a photo collage generated by a program he wrote.

Levy: Valerie Sokolova — she's an illustrator by nature. She trained in Russia, and every year she does illustrations that come out of the culture she came from: their level of expertise, their technical abilities in Russia — they're very strong on technical abilities.

If you look at Valerie's work, you'll see that everywhere it's very technically perfect. But if you look at other people's work, you'll see that not every work is as intricate. Instead, the concepts are very strong. So, there's this difference between technical ability and conceptual ability.

Scepter: Could you share a bit of your background?

Mintz: I grew up in New York City and I've been working with photographers since age nine. I went to an after-school program at Children's Aid Society down on Sullivan St. and worked in the darkroom there and never left.

Scepter: Could you tell us about your artwork's process?

Mintz: What I have in the exhibition here is a velour print that I made from photos of dress rehearsal at Hudson Guild Theater. The play's name was *Sun Blurring Shine*, and I took a number of pictures from that play and ran them through my program that created the collage. It's generated by an algorithm — that I wrote, called "automated digital photo collage" — that compares a sequence of images for areas of difference.

Scepter: Were there any unique or standout pieces in the exhibition that have garnered your attention?

Mintz: We had a huge sculpture by Gabe Bennett. He's a sculptor who teaches here. He has this amazing piece, the head, internal and external body parts are made of extruding foam and sand.

Scepter: What message or experience would you like attendees to take away from this exhibition?

Mintz: There are many ways to make art, to have a wide variety of mediums and styles and approaches, ideas that professors here use in their work.



Gabe Bennett's sculpture dominated the center of the exhibition floor.



Andy Cross' *G(u)arden* brings centuries of art history together in intuitive way.

One Part History and One Part Evolution: Utilizing and Breaking Genre

By Joseph Bucci

Andy Cross, in his 11th year teaching at Kingsborough Community College, continues to evolve his bold narrative style with *G(u)arden*. Featured in Kingsborough Art Museum, his piece serves as a collaboration of ideas across time and space, sewn together by a hand on the border of the conscious and subconscious. Cross shares his experience bringing history to a contemporary audience.

Scepter: The first thing I notice when I look at your art is that there's usually a difference in style at different points in the piece. What goes into those differences?

Cross: Mainly, I love art history. I think right now there's a couple things that are a reaction to the contemporary art world: the game is to kind of brand yourself stylistically. A very common question is, "what style do you paint?" I find it a little problematic, and I find it hard to answer.

Because I like all painting from all cultures, from all periods of history. I see something that I like and I, typically, want to emulate it. So, if I'm looking at Sigmar Polke one day, I want to spill some paint and do something like that. If I'm looking at an Egyptian sculpture, it makes me want to do something like that.

With literature and movies, they say there's basically only eight genres. We can think about it in terms of painting too. But you have all these styles within each genre and I just think that's fascinating.

Since I'm interested in painting, I'm not just interested in cubist still lifes for example, that seems like such a narrow focus to me. I'm interested in exploring painting. That means I have to explore cubist landscapes, but also photorealistic portraiture and then abstract expressionism.

Because my brain goes to all of those places when I'm painting, over the month it might take, my mood changes; my ideas change and I think it's important to let that painting evolve as I evolve.

Typically we don't think we've evolved too much over a month; we are day-to-day kind of the same and yet, maybe a new war has broken out or maybe the pandemic happened. A lot has happened in a month's time.

My mood has changed. I am different. My ideas about painting actually evolve each time I paint, so the way it starts might not be the way it finishes.

Scepter: Your painting in the exhibit, *G(u)arden*, is evocative of how you describe history paintings: there's sort of a portrait, you have the animals and you have the landscape in the background. Is that genre a big influence for this particular work?

Cross: To understand that, since I like art history a lot, we can look at the Renaissance period, when they're making a lot of history paintings.

They're often allegorical or mythological paintings; they're taking large themes and then the artist would probably do a figure, probably do an animal and probably do a landscape and then put all that together to tell a bigger narrative story. That's one of my favorite genres of art history.

But then I also grew up outside of colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. We moved there when I was seven and I specifically remember I'm walking down an aisle at the grocery store with my mom.

I looked down at the end of the aisle and there's this lady in like a hoop skirt and a bodice; her hair is in a bonnet sort of thing and yet she's buying Cheerios. It was like a convergence of the 1800's and 2000's. It's all happening at once and time melted.

We've all heard that history repeats itself. We can look back at history and learn lessons or repeat the same mistakes. So the game is to take a historical idea that is still relevant for our day and age, with a slight twist of the narrative.

It's kind of like lucid dreaming. If you're dreaming and you become aware that you're dreaming, then you can guide your own dream; you're not scared of the monster anymore. For me painting is like that.

I found an Instagram image of a guy sitting by a fire with a lion head, so that gave me an idea. Then I wanted to change the composition so I borrowed from Leonardo's *St. John in the Wilderness*. But then I'm friends with a 75-year-old Buddhist nun. So Leonardo's has him mostly naked with maybe a deerskin loincloth or something while my painting has more of a Buddhist yellow-orange robe.

I had an idea, then I started painting, but each time my idea changes or I get a new idea, I try to approach it; if a style changes a little bit and one monkey looks different from the other it's okay. I just let it evolve.



Professor Andy Cross builds stunning visuals from simple blocks.

Scepter: So if you're fascinated with all of these styles, and they all come together to influence your "lucid dreaming" in your art, do you ever find that these perspectives influence you back and how you think?

Cross: I have written notebooks and journals about this. My term for it is a canvas mirror.

The canvas I'm working on is a mirror for what I'm thinking. You might not be conscious of it: people often start expressing themselves subconsciously and when they step back it's like "what did I do?" But if you're conscious while you're doing it, like lucid dreaming, you become aware of that process.

You get an idea in your head, that idea percolates down through your body and your heartbeats, you start to pick up an emotional resonance with that idea. Then that vibrates out of your hand and onto the canvas. You become more aware of why you had the idea in the first place.

It's a beautiful process that makes you more aware of yourself and how your mind is working.

To be a good artist in this day and age, I don't think it's about technical mastery. I think it's about being authentically yourself. So the more aware of why you're getting the ideas you get, how you feel about the ideas and then how you're expressing those ideas, the better communicator you are.

The more authentically you're being yourself, the viewer gets it more. It's more natural because you're doing it your way and in your style.

It's not even really stylistic, you're just being authentically yourself. And then it feels really good. It feels really good.

Scepter: I don't know a lot about art history, but still, when I look at your paintings I can understand them. Do you have any inclination why a layman can still pick up on the nuanced tones in what you're making?

Cross: I don't think it's because I'm smart or even translating it better or anything. I think it's because I'm trying to distill something that I had felt myself, and I feel that feeling is also universal.

If I make it too much about me, it becomes too much about me and I think I can lose someone easily. I try to keep it more in a Carl Jung kind of archetypal quality.

You also got Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I think in particular with *G(u)arden*, it's an archetypal pose that harkens all the way back to the Renaissance.

We also have a relationship with nature. Even though we feel somewhat separate from that with global warming and everything, we are mammals and there's a snake in there. It's in our DNA; it's in our human experience.

So I start with myself but I try to keep it open-ended and archetypal so that you can bring your own self to it and you can fill in the points.

Scepter: It seems like a lot of this relies on an intuitive understanding of those archetypes. Do you ever think that maybe having all of these archetypes in the world could be a creative constraint?

Cross: I don't find it a constraint because it boils down, again, to there only being eight or so genres. Yet, look at how many different variations of paintings we've had over the years. It's really about how you interpret it and express it.

If you look at the Tarot deck, that's based on different archetypes. Or if you think about astrology with 12 sun signs, and yet how many people can read different things into those signs, combinations and their horoscopes.

Even though there might be building blocks that you can break everything down into, the way that you recombine those building blocks, I think, can probably be infinite.

I don't find it limiting, I think it's maybe a way to approach it. It keeps the door open for you a little bit, and once you go through, there's infinite possibilities.

A Homerun for Cancer Awareness

The Pink and Blue Charity Softball Game Brings Cancer Survivors' Stories to the Forefront

By Celeste Ramos

No matter the race, gender, religion or sexual orientation, health complications can put anyone in a dire situation. When it comes to illness, we sometimes want to turn a blind eye to it, but not everyone is given that privilege. Some illnesses are more prone to cause costly damages and become impossible to hide. Nothing forces us to confront that reality more than listening to the struggles that people go through just to strive for a peaceful and painless life.

On Thursday, October 26, a community of not only Kingsborough students and faculty, but of families, came together to show and support the power and strength of people living with cancer. The Pink and Blue Charity — a charity supporting breast and prostate cancer research, advocacy and awareness — hosted an afternoon of softball and togetherness: a platform for tales of fights for life.

“We’re dedicated to helping people going through cancer through our advocacy program, through our research and other public services that we offer to our cancer patients and their families,” said Renee Regnier, American Cancer Society.

The main point of cancer awareness is to show that there is someone there for every single person who feels alone or in the dark — the battle of cancer doesn’t need to be fought alone, despite grim realities. Cancer can develop at any age, regardless of health, and getting diagnosed is not always straightforward.

“In June of 2021 I was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer and I subsequently had chemotherapy, Lumpectomy and 20 rounds of radiation,” said Hillary Stackpole, KCC staff and recurring cancer patient. “Six months after my final radiation I was having difficulty breathing and I was hospitalized with fluid in my lungs. During that hospitalization I was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, also known as MBC or stage IV breast cancer, which is breast cancer that moves around to other parts of your body. In my case that was my lungs, bones and diaphragm.”



President Schrader joined the fray to support cancer awareness.

“I’ve been getting treatment since my diagnosis — I go for treatment every 3 weeks, and I frequently go for CT scans, bone scans, echocardiograms, pulmonary breathing tests and blood tests. It’s constant because, unfortunately, MBC will be with me for the rest of my life. But, with these treatments and advances in science I expect to live a long and full life to be with my family and the ones I love. The biggest thing for me now is raising awareness and the importance of early detection. My advice to everyone is no matter what gender, whatever milestone age wise is get your screenings.”



A softball game was a great way to promote comradery and create a homely space for cancer survivors to share their stories.

Being a person with cancer doesn’t always show. Sometimes it’s a hidden battle, which can be detrimental to not only the cancer patient, but to the people surrounding them. Yes, we don’t want to pry too much into someone’s privacy, but if we share, we can try to show compassion and care for each other. We can make a big impact just by being there.

“I had several family members who had breast cancer and are fighting to get better,” said Officer Rivera, security guard. “Having a large support network can help a patient fight a good fight, to get better and to try not to give up when the battle feels too tough.”

Sometimes you’ll have someone that will push past your ego and help you, because they see a person screaming for help on the inside.

“It’s an important topic, and it’s a fun way to bring forth families who get to celebrate, while we bring awareness of not just breast cancer, but other cancers as a whole, through a game of softball,” said Susan, KCC staff. “I have cancer in my family, not breast cancer but other types of cancers. No matter what cancer it is, they are all important.”



Good sportsmanship let the real story take center stage: all cancer is important to talk about.

There’s no cancer that is going to be more important than the rest of the cancers. They all affect the body in many ways more than one, and that’s something individuals don’t always understand. We think that breast cancer can only affect the breast, but it can spread to other parts of the body if not treated or monitored properly. Even if monitored and treated, it can still spread due to a lack of technology or research. Complications can be draining, but the absolute support of family or friends will lessen any individual’s burden.



Community participation is essential for making charities like Pink and Blue function.

Health and Science

All-Volunteer Organization Provides Free Preventative Healthcare One Part of Coalition of Concerned Medical Professionals' Multifaceted Fight for Healthcare as a Human Right

By Joseph Bucci



Photo by Joseph Bucci

CCMP's free forums and classes add historical and economic context to their work; they get volunteers more willing and able to help those who really need it.

As the bus pulls up to the corner of Remsen Avenue and Avenue M in Canarsie, the trimmed hedges and sprouting sunflowers compliment a signature green awning — it reads “Coalition of Concerned Medical Professionals.”

Established in 1973, CCMP is an all-volunteer organization that takes no funding with any strings attached and provides free-of-charge preventative healthcare to anybody without insurance or denied coverage.

“Preventative healthcare is the key,” said Operations Manager Trevor Martin. “We aren’t trying to make money off of difficult surgeries or anything like that. It’s about making people healthier.”

Often manning the front desk, Martin and a small team of other full-time volunteers organize a much larger network of nurses, physicians, dentists, local business owners and volunteer advocates from 9AM to 9PM, seven days a week — fighting for everyone left behind by the healthcare system.

“It’s not about charity,” said full-time volunteer and Organizer Training Coordinator Simone Hardaway. “This is survival for me. I understand that any of us could be in the same position as any of the people we help.”

That understanding drives a comprehensive, multifaceted program that aims to create a world built on mutual compassion. They use the United Nations adopted Sustainable Development Goals 2030 as a basic guideline for what needs to be accomplished.

In addition to providing free blood work, medical checkups, crowns and root canals — CCMP is the only organization that provides free restorative dental care on the east coast — CCMP educates and trains new volunteers in every job necessary to keep the organization running.

Volunteers are met through outreach events like the literature tables commonly seen in KCC’s breezeway. Led by Hardaway in recent months, the green tablecloth and banner, topped by pamphlets and signatures, serve as the main introduction to new faces.

“We never cold call,” said Martin. “We meet people with the bold new strategy of face-to-face conversations.”

Those new volunteers — a good portion are Kingsborough students — are then trained to conduct health surveys in neglected neighborhoods and to act

as advocates for benefit recipients. Advocates reverse denials of care, help expunge medical bills and act as aids between patient and doctor — often through language barriers.

Lunch between activities provides volunteers just enough time to goof off, share details about their week and discuss current events before returning to ever-needed work.

Practicing what they preach, CCMP’s lunches are vegan — prepared by local restaurants or full-time volunteers with donated and homegrown ingredients — and the building runs on solar power.

“We also pick up over 1000 lbs of fresh produce every week,” said Martin. “We then distribute it to the Central Brooklyn Lions Club’s two community fridges, where food is provided for free.”

CCMP branched off of a farmworker labor movement in Suffolk County. With roots in the working class, the group finds itself providing healthcare for domestic workers, construction workers and local business owners and employees who cannot afford insurance.

In return, not out of obligation but out of appreciation and solidarity, everything CCMP needs to run is donated — including funds for daily expenses.

“We don’t take any funding with any strings attached,” said Martin. “We don’t want anyone, be it a business or the government, telling us what we can or cannot do. But most people see the work we’re doing, identify with it, and pass on what they can to others.”

To round out healthcare and advocacy, CCMP hosts medical information sessions, classes on organizing and a weekly forum — part education and part conversation — to add context to their work.

“When I started I saw that CCMP had the means to help people in the short term, while keeping the bigger picture in mind,” said Hailey Nuthals, Education Coordinator and Administrative assistant.

CCMP prides itself on its capacity for mutual benefit and its resilience; they just celebrated their 50th anniversary in September.

“I often say the people we help the most are our volunteers,” said Martin. “We give them an option to do something; we give them hope.”

KCC Student Pushes for Free Public School Lunches

Press release by Connecting Through Stats

Brooklyn, NY: If bill S1678A is not passed through the U.S. Senate, millions of children in New York will lose access to free meals. College sophomore Sumaya Jashim is working to change that. In 2022, Jashim created her not-for-profit organization Connecting Through Stats, which focuses on food advocacy and spreading knowledge of food access throughout her home of Brooklyn and beyond. Since learning about Senator Michelle Hinchey’s bill S1678A, which calls for all schools - regardless of type - in New York State that participate in national school lunch or breakfast programs to provide free meals for students - Jashim started a Change.org petition receiving 776 signatures in a week and is only growing.

Senate Bill S1678A, active for the 2023-2024 legislative season, proposes providing free meals to all students, with a focus on addressing financial barriers. It presents an opportunity to explore innovative, cost-effective solutions, like introducing salad bars in all schools - improving student satisfaction while managing costs effectively.

Jashim’s passion stems from personal experiences with dietary restrictions. Jashim became an activist for food equity in 2021, when she conducted summer research virtually at Harvard University. 70% of Jashim’s study’s 1,060 respondents had dietary restrictions, and over 50% were from low-income neighborhoods. As Jashim’s study showed, students, especially older ones, know school meals are a hardship to their parents; and would rather skip lunch, opting to wait until dinner instead to quiet their rumbling stomachs.

Consider this: lunch costs \$10 over a 180 day school year, costing over \$1,800 annually. Similarly, if families make lunch daily, many will spend over \$100 on groceries weekly - easily totaling \$50,000 over 13 years for one child’s lunch.

Jashim is passionately sharing with the world the benefits of bill S1678A, especially the opportunity to introduce salad bars in all public, charter, and non-public schools in New York State. She speaks on behalf of many in NYC public schools and schools nationwide when she states that she believes it is a practical solution to community food equity.



Link to Jashim’s Petition

Beat the Burnout

Tips for Mental Wellness and *Scepter's* New Health Survey

By Scarlet Levins

As the semester nears its end, the increased workload of finals is likely wearing many of you down. Perhaps your efforts have slowed or decreased as you yearn desperately for a break, and with increased stress and lower energy myself, I can't blame you. In prioritizing your educational, professional and familial obligations, it's easy to overlook the most vital component in action, yourself.

College students are amongst those who sacrifice sleep, proper diet, and other forms of self-care for the sake of their education, but did you know said sacrifices could negatively, even severely, impact your academics? The importance of mental wellness on our overall functionality is undervalued, under reported and utterly crucial — misunderstood as an unnecessary fad rather than an internal resource for positive, continuous success.

Thankfully, implementing wellness habits into your busy schedule is quick, easy and effective in building long-term improvements to your mood, motivation, physical and mental health, academic and professional performance and even your relationships. In demystifying mental wellness, I'll guide you through its impact on your academic career while offering a checklist of habits that will have you revitalized and motivated like it's the first day of school.

Like many terms within trendy lexicon, mental wellness is difficult to define, due in part to its symbiotic relationship with the similar sounding *mental health*. Mental health encompasses one's social, emotional and psychological functioning and is as integral as physical health is to our overall success. How an individual manages emotions or processes information, handles stress or makes connections with others, all stems from one's mental health.

"Poor" mental health can be characterized by mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety, or impaired functioning at home or at school — though where one lands on the spectrum of health varies from person to person.

While mental health is an individual's emotional, psychological and social traits, mental wellness is defined by the Global Wellness Institute as "an internal resource [and] active process that helps us to build resilience, grow and flourish." Maintaining physical health, fostering positive relationships and navigating changes or challenges are all properties of mental wellness, which can be strengthened and increased similar to an exercised muscle.

The digestible concept of self-care can encapsulate wellness practices from bubble baths to sobriety, and mental wellness can prevail regardless of, and has even been shown to mitigate, pre-existing mental illness.

To understand the effects of mental wellness on education we must first discuss the relationship between poor mental health and academic performance. One does not need a mental health diagnosis to exhibit ailing mental wellness, with common — and not necessarily concerning — challenges amongst college students ranging from sleep difficulties and lack of energy to a harder time focusing in class or building relationships with peers.

Even procrastination, which is oftentimes incorrectly labeled as laziness, could be a consequence of poor stress management. Conversely, nursing your mental health and implementing mental wellness practices has the ability to improve upon your productivity and academic engagement in the classroom, self-esteem, relationship-building and

physical health, all while drastically increasing your motivation to succeed.

Interested in what mental wellness can do for your academic performance? The following sections list not only focus areas for your journey, but means

of implementing them into your daily life. Because we're busy college students, this list aims to compile quick, effective — but easily implementable — inexpensive habits scientifically proven to optimize self care and thus target and increase mental wellness:

Get Quality Sleep

If you take nothing else, know that rest is crucial. It seems obvious enough, but it's easy to sacrifice sleep in favor of more exciting matters. I struggle the most with good sleep hygiene and rarely get the recommended 8 hours a night, as do an estimated 70.6% of college students, as reported in a 2014 study by Dove Medical Press.

Going to class with just a few days of inadequate sleep will likely impact your performance on exams and decrease your ability to remember what you're learning. Continued sleep deprivation can significantly worsen performances in critical circumstances such as driving or caregiving, while exacerbating depressive symptoms in those with or without the disorder — if you continuously struggle with falling or staying asleep, consider talking to a professional.

The same aforementioned study, conducted by University of Michigan's Shelley D Hershner and Ronald D Chervin, found that getting sleep before a test yields better scores than all-nighters, even if you studied less. Maximize your sleep hygiene:

1. Keep your room dark — or wear an eye mask — and relatively cool (60-67° is ideal)
2. Avoid alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine before bed. Metabolizing alcohol in the middle of the night can effectively wake you up, while nicotine and caffeine may keep you from falling asleep.
3. Get off your phone, ideally over an hour before bed. The blue light of screened devices severely disrupts our brain's melatonin production, the hormone responsible for helping us fall and stay asleep. If you're a doom scroller, however, consider blue light glasses or filters, but note that there are conflicting studies on their efficacy.
4. Exercise

Exercise

I used to think that exercise-obsessed "gym bros" only hyped up physical activity for the visual benefits, until I started going to the gym myself. Exercise does wonders for your mental wellbeing, impacting everything from your mental health, to sleep, to your self esteem. A single workout has the ability to immediately decrease anxiety and increase your mood, because it reduces stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, and production of endorphins and serotonin.

Sleep following a workout is often deeper and more rejuvenating, contributing to a more constant and effective sleep routine longterm. Over time, daily exercise improves concentration, energy levels, stress management and attention, and could decrease the effects of mental illness. Here's how to get the most out of physical activity:

1. Exercise for at least 30 minutes a day, the recommended minimum for young adults, and aim to keep your heart rate elevated. Speed walk around campus, listen to your lecture on a treadmill, or follow along with a 20-minute yoga tutorial (plus cooldown). During my busiest days, I use the Quizlet app or read my digital textbooks on a stationary bike, which leaves my hands free and my legs busy.
2. To maximize the impact of activity, attempt to raise your bpm so your heart works at 50-85% of its maximum rate, calculable by subtracting your age from 220. To find your heart rate without a watch or electronic calculator, you can use your wrist or the side of your neck.
3. For your wrist, lightly press your index and middle finger below the base of your thumb on the opposite hand. On your neck, press below your jawbone. Count your heartbeats over 15 seconds, then multiply that number by 4. You'll want to repeat the processes a few times for the best accuracy, and can compare your current bpm to 50-85% of your maximum heart rate.
4. Staying hydrated reduces your risk of heat stroke, maintains endurance levels and aids in muscle recovery to stay tear and strain-free and repaired for the next day. As you exercise, aim to drink about a coffee cup's worth of water (7-10 ounces) every 10-20 minutes, and knock back another two cups within a half hour of completing a workout.
5. If you're looking to round out your exercise routine, aim within a week for about 2 ½ hours of moderate activity — hiking and walking, biking, dancing, swimming or even quickly performed house chores — with 2 hours of strength training — push ups, aerobics, weights or gym exercise machines.

Get the Most out of Socialization

Not only does hanging out with friends and family feel good, it positively impacts many facets of your mental wellbeing. Social connections can reduce stress, increase self-esteem, provide a support system and enhance mood overall. Academically, students who don't carve out time for their loved ones reportedly have lower attendance and motivation and are less likely to retain information in the classroom.

Emotional distress from isolation, such as loneliness, depressive symptoms and anxiety, reduces performance overtime, but exercising and even the smallest of social efforts can counteract such effects:

1. Aim for recurring, stress-free interactions to look forward to. Having as little as a weekly exchange with loved ones can decrease stress and improve mood fast, and implementing it into a routine ensures connection remains a priority no matter your schedule. Even if you socialize with loved ones daily at home or school, a half-hour coffee outing or park meet up pauses both your hectic lives to refresh and soothe.
2. Pairing your connections with other activities aimed towards mental wellness has added benefits of community and teamwork building, decreased anxiety at trying new things, an accountability-buddy and new memories!
3. Volunteering is not only beneficial to others, but increases our self-esteem, gratitude, mood, mindfulness and connections with our or other communities.
4. Yoga or meditation groups can be intimidating, so bring a friend so you can both experience long-term stress management, increased endurance, metabolism, muscle mass and flexibility. A consistent, low-stress environment has the added benefit of providing you with a safe space where you can allow yourself to separate yourself from your hectic routine.
5. Eager to implement any of the previously mentioned habits into your routine? Encourage others to join in and set goals, to be celebrated together once achieved! You're more likely to succeed in maintaining a habit when you start small with easily met objectives, and encouragement from others is proven to aid in triumph. Being open with your loved ones about any foreseen obstacles establishes trust and reliance before you even begin. Then prepare to become each others' cheerleaders through daily texts, habit-tracking apps or score sheets. Get creative, and have fun!

Submit to our anonymous mental health survey.

How is your mood and mental wellbeing? Seeking anonymous advice on complex social or emotional scenarios from peers with lived experience?

Scepter is implementing an "Ask Us" segment to answer any mental-health adjacent questions you may have. Depending on the request, we may provide evidence and research based advice or offer personal anecdotes to help you feel supported and informed. No submission is too simple, and anonymity is 100% guaranteed. Email your question and a pseudonym/ preferred name to scarlet.levin01@students.kbcc.cuny.edu, or submit to the anonymous survey by scanning the QR code.



A Fight for Equitable Healthcare The Birth Justice Tribunal Takes on Obstetric Violence

By Chris Peña

Three years after burying the mother of his kids on his birthday, due to medical negligence, Bruce McIntyre III has yet to see his name on his own child's birth certificate.

On October 6, 2023, survivors and supporters with similar stories gathered at The Birth Justice Tribunal in Furman Hall to share their experience with obstetric violence.

As National Native American Heritage Month approaches this November, the tribunal aims to acknowledge their birthing people's continuous abuse and discrimination, and to teach how allies can counter those injustices. We use the term obstetric violence and obstetric racism to describe the ways in which systems and individuals harm birthing people throughout the perinatal period.

What is meant to be a peaceful time to reflect on the good and the bad, Native American, Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, and many womb carriers on this Indigenous land are forced to face and remember maltreatments and traumas.

"The medical staff would gossip about me," said Channa Sakaskusiwok. "Just another Indian girl looking for drugs."

Their survival and effort to prevent future struggles for all birthing people have inspired and established many organizations and communities that have contributed to the decrease in obstetric violence and obstetric racism.

Black non-Hispanic womb carriers amplified the message with their own experiences, illuminating the full scope of structural violence in medicine. This country has mishandled women, Black women, especially in the intersection between domestic violence and pregnancy.

"Story telling is deeply rooted in LGBTQ+ community," said Indra Lusero, founder of The Elephant Circle. "To be present is not passive, it is to be a counterforce."

The Elephant Circle is an organization who offers strategies and coaching to individuals during the perinatal and post-partum periods. They, alongside 49 other organizations and 25 sponsors, organized the tribunal in efforts to reduce the harm caused to all birthing people.

Our laws do not recognize the true obstetric violence or obstetric racism occurring to birthing people across this Indigenous land. Organizations like The Elephant Circle are gathering to create a counter force — a term used to describe what survivor Oneika Bogle, who was robbed of the most precious moment of her life, believes to be the answer for our goal of accountability.

"Feared for my life," "treated like criminals," and "ignored my constant vocalized pain" were some of the most common words shared by Channa Sakaskusiwok, Oneika Bogle, Jaimie Rose, Jaid Laurie, Whitney, Rinat Dray, Nina, Kimberly Turbin, Vanessa Caldari, and Bruce McIntyre III.

By showing up, allies not only listened, but put movement to the tribunal's words and expanded this network of perinatal support systems. There was once a time when Indigenous names were the only names that existed and now at the rate of this obstetric violence and obstetric racism, their existence is in critical condition.

Let us reflect on the history of this Indigenous land and the injustices that our ancestors faced, and we still face, and become a counterforce that will bring accountability to those responsible.



A Social Space from a Tattered Time

Brooklyn Games and Arcade Brings Back Home for Lost Gamers

By Joseph Buccci

Through glass panes, white plastic of an arcade cabinet emerges from the epicenter of a small crowd. The metal handle is still warm on an October Thursday, as the groans and honks of the city give to a sweet harmony of clacks and trash talk.

While retro games and eBay sales pay most of the bills, Brooklyn Games and Arcade was created by and for that exact scene — a home for hype, nostalgia and found family.

“It’s about building a community,” said proprietor Esteban Sosa.



Photo by Joseph Buccci

Successful entrepreneur Esteban Sosa opened an arcade mid-pandemic, not for additional profit, but to have a space for his community.

Sosa already operated a successful business out of Bensonhurst, where Brooklyn Video Games served as a base for retro game restoration and sales since 2015. His decision to open a second brick-and-mortar store on June 19, 2021, in the middle of a pandemic while most of his business could be done online, could not be about anything else.

“Tournaments are hardly profitable,” laughed Sosa. “The merchandise is where the real money comes in. The arcade is the fun part.”

Arcade cabinets boasting games like *Street Fighter 2* (1992), cathode ray tube (CRT) tvs hooked up to ‘80s and ‘90s home consoles and PC setups with curved low-latency monitors generate most of the light across the new store’s two floors.

It’s everything the old locality lacked.

“We had a lot of people coming in to play *King of Fighters ‘98* and ‘02 when the pandemic started,” said Sosa. “We were doing pretty well and we needed more space, because I wanted to run different games too.”

“This has all been a process. When we opened, it wasn’t too full,” nostalgia apparent in Sosa’s drifting gaze. “We started getting different machines. Some of the stuff is mine but some is from a few friends. Instead of leaving their cabs in storage, they bring them here; we take care of them.”

While all genres of game are represented, one stands out as the community lifeblood. More often than not, those eloquent arcade-stick swirls are coming from a fighting game.

“Any day of the week, any fighting game you play, there’s going to be at least one other person who plays that

game too,” said regular and New York arcader of over twenty years, John Quaranta.

“For me, fighting games are about the mind games, the smack talking and that you cannot learn them on your own,” said staff member José Hernandez, one of the arcade’s repair experts. “You teach each other. Communication is the key, because if you play and don’t communicate, what do you learn? You have to be the bigger person to ask questions.”

One player leans back on their seat, echoes of a mashing start-button swell in the room. Across the cab, the player turns his head to his friends sticking his tongue out. They share some harsh words over the sticks, then start laughing. The loser walks over for a sincere fist bump.

The two had only met that day.

“A place like this, it builds bonds,” said Quaranta. “People make friends, I’m sure people have made relationships. It keeps people together and it keeps people social.”

A New Home for Old Bonds

“I met this one guy about twenty years ago at Chinatown Fair. We would play *Marvel vs Capcom*, which is one of my favorite games,” said Quaranta. “Now it’s years later, I get a message that some guy who’s really good at *Marvel* was running a cab here. I come down and it’s him!”

Chinatown Fair, home of legendary players and myths, is a household name among native New York fighting game players. As arcades grew thinner and home console releases boomed through the ‘90s, Chinatown Fair held the city down through the “dark ages” — roughly 2001-2008 — before the release of *Street Fighter 4* breathed new life into the scattering community.

The arcade closed in 2011, but reopened in 2012 under new management. “Real OGs” mourn the original store with reverence.

“I lived through it, to really understand it. As the late ‘90s approached, arcades started to die,” said Hernandez. “Chinatown Fair was the last real arcade of New York.”

But like something out of a movie, Brooklyn Games and Arcade began to reassemble lost brothers just months after opening.

“In a short period of time, I lost half my family, and my ex broke up with me a month before our wedding. She kicked me out of the apartment, took my pets, real



Photo by Joseph Buccci

Retro games from the ‘90s attract New York gamers from the same era, reuniting decades-old friends.

low stuff,” Quaranta looked away, tears forming. “Then I found this place like that week. There was a MvC2 cab downstairs, which you don’t see much anymore and I started playing. It saved me. I’ve been coming every week, if not every day since.”

“I found this place through a TikTok,” said Barry Pang, 45, who started going to Chinatown Fair at 7. “I’m married, I got a kid. Life’s not bad but we have stress in our lives. Here, we drink our beer, talk our shit and have fun. Then the next day we go back to our daily lives.”

The night grew older, but the incoming traffic did not grow weary. Each new face roused a section of the arcade, with just about equal commotion for the food delivery driver.

One guy takes a swig of his forty-ounce Modelo between rounds, another steps out for a smoke. Someone has their arm around another, explaining the difference between east and west coast scenes. Purple lights hang above a group laughing while someone in the corner is refining their technique.

“A lot of younger players stay home and play ranked online, because it’s easy,” said Quaranta. “I’d rather come here, play with these guys, have a drink, have a smoke, and kick it back with some real people.”

One Link in an International Chain

The ambient chatter and shouts begin to focus on two opposing cabinets in the corner; some New York *King of Fighters* (KOF) players want to welcome their out-of-town guests the only way they know how.

“If you like KOF, you’re about to see some crazy shit,” said Hernandez, gesturing to Augustín Escorcía from Mexico, who was preparing for a 3v3 exhibition match in KOF ‘98.

Known as Wero Asamiya, Escorcía regularly finishes in the top eight of KOF tournaments across the continent. He and Alberto Martínez from Chicago were traveling to Connecticut for a world qualifier event.

“We were going to Connecticut and saw that this place was only an hour away,” said Martínez. “Might as well stop by for a tournament, but really, it’s to see Esteban.”

“We get people from out of state all of the time,” said Quaranta as he begins pointing around the room. “He travels from New Jersey, and she’s visiting from Greece.”

Cheers and Spanish smack talk crescendo with the highs and lows of team New York vs team outsiders. A light scent of booze begins to waft through the room, flavoring the mixture of rhythmic clicking and mingling. There’s no money on the line, only pride.

“Our job is to bring back the ‘90s and early 2000s,” said Hernandez. “But more importantly, it’s to make it feel like home.”



Photo by Joseph Buccci

Small venues like Brooklyn Games and Arcade unite fighting game players across the globe. Augustín Escorcía (right) from Mexico stopped by on his way to a larger tournament.

Metal Band Comes Back After Untimely Vocalist Death

By Chris Peña

After an unexpected hiatus due to the death of their vocalist Yordan Ivanov, progressive metal band Sky Empire's released a new album, *The Shifting Tectonic Plates of Power – Part One*, October 27. Delivering a nostalgic sound innervated by their personified musicality, the classic yet modern progressive metal music strikes it just right for appreciators of the genre.

Based out of the United Kingdom, Sky Empire is appreciated by fans of iconic bands like Iron Maiden and Pantera — apparent influences — among many others. Mastered at legendary Abbey Roads Studios — also producing The Beatles, Journey, and many more — at the producing hands of guitarist Drazic Lecutier himself, *The Shifting Tectonic Plates of Power - Part One* is filled with smooth transitions, aggressive instrumentations and clear distinctions between each member's contribution, blended just right.

At the intersection of classical music meets pedalboards is where you will find the riffs of guitarist Lecutier's Dimebag Darrell inspired guitar riffs. The aggressive, technical, melodies remind us of the legends that were studied. These riffs are backed by Remi Jalabert's dramatic drumming, which solidifies him as a top tier musician. Tom Hobson's symphonic keys bring a new perspective to classical music-inspired phrases and ideas. Just for keeping up with the drummer, Jon Delaines enraptures the audience throughout the album, substantiating the ensemble with his attacking bass play. And lastly, Jeff Scott Soto brings his smooth, gritty and classic Metallica-esque vocals; he's very well known in the world of metal for always delivering the right voice.

The album culminates in a nostalgic sound for, not only fans of metal music, but lovers of action and role-playing video games. Although metal and rock music ruled the '80s, Sky Empire proves that their music can still carry unique concepts. They take from the sound of their influences, but add the emotions and ideas of their own personal life.

The Reading Corner

Students Share their latest reads, from thrillers to self-help

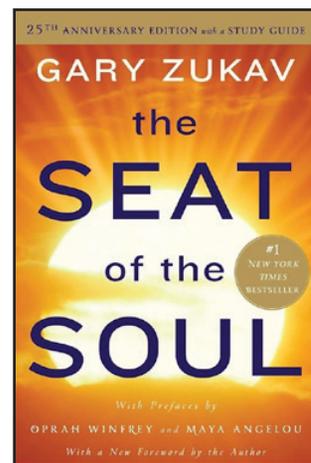
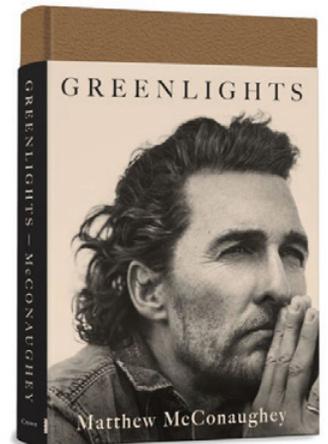
By Jehiah Alleyne

When it seems like younger generations are switching to newer and newer media sources, some KCC students still engage with a classic and diverse form of entertainment.

What was the last book you've read?

"Greenlights by Matthew McConaughey — the book title is a play off of street lights. As we all know, they are red, yellow, and green. In the book, he analyzes that as we go through life and inevitably encounter red lights, instead of getting upset at the events, we should focus on turning red lights into green ones, making the best of what life has thrown at us."

Savannah, Liberal Arts

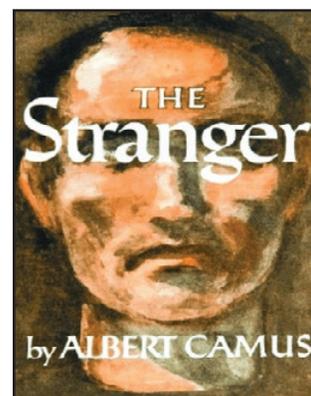
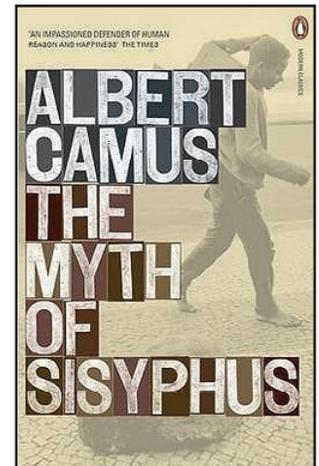


"The Seat of the Soul by Gary Zukav is about the journey as one of Earth's many inhabitants, and all the connections we make, whether in the classroom or at work. We should carry ourselves in a certain manner, so that we may not only do right by ourselves, but by the people surrounding us."

Jemimah, Pre-med Neuroscience

"The Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus is a long philosophy essay that deals with the issues of nihilism and existentialism. It suggests that the universe is not evil, careless, or cold, just absurd and senseless, and trying to make sense of it will only lead to disappointment or disillusionment."

David Tou Tou, Liberal Arts

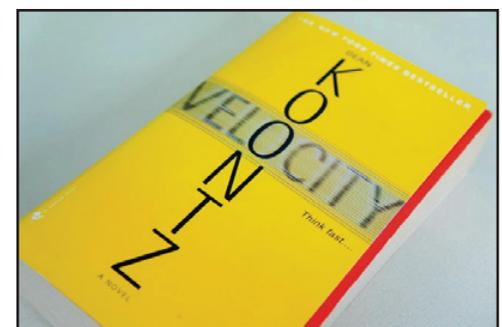


"The Stranger by Albert Camus is a story of a Frenchman who got put on trial for murdering a man in cold blood. Throughout the book, you're not really expecting the ending, or his course of action, to take the turn that it did."

Akenti Lewis, Political Science

"Velocity by Dean Koontz — you find this note of this mild-mannered bar keep named Billy Wiles, who one day found a note containing an ultimatum. It tells him that he has 12 hours to make a choice, and if Billy goes to the cops, he'll kill someone."

Rachel, Liberal Arts



Career Birder Bobbi Manian

Continued from Page 12

"A lot of people try to help conservationism through their consumer choices," noted Hrehowsik "They might use recycled paper towels or seventh generation soap"

"Or go to Whole Foods," Manian interjected, giggling.

"But that's not really the best way to help. All of this low brush around us, these trees, it's not really what people think of when they hear natural environment, but it is!" continued Hrehowsik. "Small things like not dumping your charcoal at the base of a tree, leashing your dogs and not letting your cat outdoors are going to help more so than any consumer choice."

Despite the wealth of knowledge and over a decade of community participation, Manian knows exactly where her heart is.

"The phrasing, career birder, for me it's more tongue in cheek. It's just a passionate, passionate hobby."



Photo by Joseph Buccì

Conservation efforts are not only about keeping our planet livable; they also create beautiful spaces for people and wildlife to enjoy together — like Marine Park Nature Reserve, where this mockingbird stopped for lunch.

ENTERTAINMENT

Post-Pandemic Birding Boom Rests on Veteran Volunteers

Career Birder Bobbi Manian Guides New Generation

By Joseph Bucci



Community leaders like Bobbi Manian (blue jacket) and Dennis Hrehowsik (left) use walks through Prospect Park as a way to educate a new generation of birders.

One autumn morning, in a lull between flood advisory warnings, a group gathers under Prospect Park's rustling trees. One calls, "White bird, flying left," pointing to a space over a restless lake, "who can ID it?" Half the group rolls their eyes, like a kid being quizzed on their dad's favorite hobby for the umpteenth time, but the corners of their mouths impulsively curl upwards, unable to hide their eagerness. In unison, "great egret..."

"Why?"

The group answers, half sighing, "the yellow beak and legs." Walk leader Bobbi Manian's eyes meet Brooklyn Bird Club President Dennis Hrehowsik's, pride beaming between the two.

Manian, retired software engineer and 12-year career birder carries her passion for birding like someone trying to keep a lid on a pot of boiling water; her energy is always bubbling just beneath the surface, ready to explode.

"Anything I do, I do slightly obsessively. When I worked, it was always startup tech companies," said Manian. "It's 60 to 80 hour work weeks, you're working weekends, you're thinking about work when you're at home, you're thinking about why something isn't working. For me birding is the new obsession."

That obsession manifests in a magnetic personality, gathering birders from all walks of life to her Tuesday walks in Prospect Park, and a peculiar choice of favorite bird.

"One of my specialty areas is gulls, which most people, even birders, hate gulls," chuckled Manian.

"They're so hard to differentiate and it makes it like a puzzle. They'll sit still for a long time so you can settle in with a flock and

study them. They take various numbers of years to reach maturity, anywhere from two to four, so one species can have four different plumages," gushed Manian. "You'll be looking at a flock of gulls and think there's 27 different species, but there's not. There are really only five species but 16 different plumages, and you have to work out what is what. It's a puzzle that you can get better at all the time."

Birding, not to be confused with the mundane 'birdwatching,' has increased tremendously over the pandemic. Hrehowsik estimates that Brooklyn Bird Club's membership more than doubled, from about 200 members before the pandemic to around 450 at present.

To guide the next generation of avian-afficionados, veterans of this increasingly not-so-niche hobby have cemented themselves as the community vertebrate.

Currently a community staple, running the Brooklyn Bird Club Birdathon and the local Christmas Bird Count — referred to as the bird census — many books ago, Manian was a novice birder adopted by a generous community.

"I retired early, and kind of burned out in technology and stuff, and I literally googled, 'what are inexpensive or free activities to do in Prospect Park,' and this introduction to birdwatching thing popped up. I went and I was hooked immediately," Manian recalled.

"Everyone was so welcoming, and when you're new, you're overenthusiastic, like a hyper puppy. They took me under their wing and were nice. There's a lot of giving back to do."

Now turning 60, Manian jokes that she was "suckered" into taking over the Tuesday walks by the previous leader, Rob Bate, but that's hard to believe with the apparent joy Manian exudes while meeting fellow birders — who very much return the enthusiasm.

Terry Von Ploennies, a regular on Manian's walk was happy to share, "I'm one of those crazy people who started birding over the pandemic, when there was not much else to do. I showed up on one of these walks one day and have been coming ever since," she leans in mischievously, "Bobbi's are the best."

Manian bragged that Von Ploennies first showed up without binoculars, and now she can tell sparrow species apart by minute colored specks on their backs.

More trained eyes in your flock can mean more spots, faster IDs and possibly even more life-long relationships. Community is a common word among birders.

"I have friends with kids, and if they run into another parent with a kid, it's an automatic connection.

They stop and talk and then they're friends," explained Manian. "It's the same thing with birders. You just stop and talk, you ask questions and maybe you end up birding together. It's a built-in community."

Of course, for someone as obsessive as Manian, birding also provides a competitive side.

More serious birders keep a list of birds they've seen in their county, state, country, or even the world. Travel isn't cheap, but a county list is more than manageable for the average birder.

When a birder wants to challenge themselves, they might go on a big year, just like the movie of the same name starring Jack Black, Owen Wilson, and Steve Martin. They try to see as many species as possible within a year. Manian herself recalls placing as high as second in Brooklyn.

"It's not unusual, in recent years, for multiple people to see over 300 species in Brooklyn," said Manian.

Brooklyn residents can easily picture fearless pigeons feasting on plaza scraps or gulls circling their melting ice cream at Coney Island, but urban birding does boast some advantages that Manian appreciates.

"During migration, the birds are forced to concentrate in these urban green spots. If you go birding in the countryside of New Jersey, there's warblers coming through, but they're so spread out, they can land anywhere," Brooklyn pride showed in Manian. "It's like a funnel. Prospect Park on a good week in the fall, you'll have birds just falling out of trees. It's magic. That's unique to Brooklyn and other urban areas."

Manian is hardly exaggerating. Red heads of cardinals, dancing swifts and radiant warblers made such frequent appearances on her walk that the group moved about 30 feet over the course of an hour and a half — each bird called and identified for the whole group to appreciate.

"Brooklyn also has an amazing coastline. We're surrounded on three sides by coasts. We get sea ducks and waterfowl; people from Manhattan come out to see our water birds. It's great," said Manian.

The Brooklyn Bird Club does not take the majesty of a soaring great egret or the transient warbler spotting for granted. A large part of their message and advocacy is geared towards conservation.

The 2022 Birdathon, for instance, raised funds to plant bird-friendly native foliage near Green-Wood Cemetery.

"They realized that by not just having a green carpet of grass, they can save money on lawn care, reduce gasoline pollution and attract pollinators," boasted Manian. "That has really taken off. They've got several sections of the cemetery that are just gorgeous, especially this time of year with the wildflowers."

Manian personally is in the process of creating a native habitat "conducive to migratory birds as well as bees, moths and butterflies" at her future retirement home in Florida. So far, she has planted 75 different native species of trees, bushes and wildflowers across the approximately 5000 square foot lot.

"To me, it feels like a small but meaningful way to fight back against the sense of hopelessness that we have trashed the planet beyond repair, and under our — my generation's — watch," said Manian.

Not every gesture to help the environment has to be so grand.

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It's not all pigeons and gulls. KCC campus is a regular hunting ground for migrating songbirds like this hermit thrush.



Without a discerning eye, these migrating royal terns blend right in with the usual gulls of Manhattan Beach.