**FACULTY IN FOCUS**

**Urban Renewal**

Concerned that one of his students had begun hanging around with “the wrong crowd,” Jeannot Barr, a teacher at Sleepy Hollow School in Tarrytown, N.Y., believed Williams’ Urban Scholars Program might help the high schooler get back on track.

“I thought if I could show him life after high school, show him a school like Williams, maybe I could turn him around,” Barr says. “He came, and it did.”

Begun 11 years ago by retired Williams Admission Director Phil Smith ’55, Urban Scholars has brought students from Sleepy Hollow and other low-income, New York-area high schools to the Purple Valley each June to build their writing and analytical skills and expose them to cultural and outdoor experiences. Participants, most of whom are black or Latino, are selected by their teachers for their academic achievement or potential.

Last summer—in addition to studying Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, seeing the play performed by Shakespeare and Co., climbing Mount Greylock and visiting the Clark Art Institute—Urban Scholars got a taste of what it’s like to be social scientists, using North Adams as their laboratory.

Scholars were divided into groups led by Williams student-teaching assistants. Each group examined a theme (the environment, arts, social services, health care or education), met with members of the College’s psychology and economics faculty, learned interviewing skills from a sociologist and examined economic, social and cultural forces affecting North Adams.

The groups then gave oral presentations, including a debate on charter schools, a rap song about North Adams’ challenges and a sequence of mock TV programs portraying the city from various perspectives.

“I wanted [students] to see how people in a community can bring about change and to learn how to research a social problem—how to take that stance of interest and concern but … remain objective and detached,” says German professor Gail Newman, director of the Urban Scholars Program and the Lissack Professor for Social Responsibility and Ethics.

At first, Newman says, students were skeptical about researching North Adams. “Their attitude was, ‘Why should we care about this little place that has nothing to do with us?’”

Ultimately, however, “It was an eye-opener for them,” she says. “Here was a rural, more or less white community that turned out to have some of the same problems their own communities have.”

Though Newman plans to continue the North Adams unit and add an oral history project, high school teachers like Barr say—curriculum aside—the Urban Scholars Program’s greatest strength is how it “re-directs” students.

“Almost all of these kids are challenged socially, economically, linguistically or a combination of all three,” Barr says. “Some kids are academically achieving, but they need that extra polish to get to the next step.”

Adds José Reyes ’06, who was a teaching assistant last summer, “They got to see what a college like Williams looks like, and they got to meet college students. They are definitely thinking about college in a new way.”

—Zelda Stern

**Funded by alumni, private foundations and the College, the Urban Scholars Program is an offshoot of a Winter Study course led by Phil Smith ’55 that takes Williams students to New York City to teach in high schools in high-poverty areas. Four alumni of the program have graduated from Williams; two more are currently enrolled as undergraduates.**

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**Fireflies, Rhythm and Inspiration**

One evening during a visit to Colombia, Cuban composer Ileana Perez Velazquez, an assistant professor of music at Williams, fell asleep during a car ride. She awoke to find the car surrounded by fireflies so vibrant she couldn’t tell them apart from stars in the sky. The image stayed with her; and, four years later, she wrote the piece “Constellations Lost Among Fireflies.”

For the prolific Perez Velazquez, whose music has been performed in festivals and concerts in Cuba, Colombia, Chile, France, Hungary, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain, the United States and Venezuela, the impulse to create arises from sensory experiences that interest her aesthetically or move her emotionally. “Sometimes, as in ‘Constellations,’ I start with a strong visual or poetic image that guides me through,” she says. “Sometimes, as in a piece I’m writing now for the Berkshire Symphony Orchestra (scheduled to premiere March 5), it’s the opposite: I start with the sound itself with certain rhythmic impulses, and the sound leads me to a visual image or a poetic abstract idea. Sometimes I write my own poetry. When I do, I write lyrics and music simultaneously. As much as I am a musician, I also love art, poetry, dance—all of it. … Through my own music, I find the other arts.”
**Fishy Business**

As an undergraduate biology major at Bowdoin College, Steve Zottoli was asked by his mentor if he’d like to assist him in research. Today, a mentor himself, Zottoli feels strongly about providing similar research opportunities to Williams undergraduates, with whom he works studying the same two cells in fish brains that first captured his imagination in college.

**Startling Research**

Zottoli, the Howard B. Schow ’50 Professor of Biology, has spent his career at Williams fine-tuning his research on Mauthner cells, a pair of unique cells in fish brains named for Ludwig Mauthner, who discovered them. The cells, which are large and easily identifiable, initiate a startle response common to many organisms. Fish, unlike mammals, are capable of functional recovery after a spinal cord injury, and Zottoli studies the role of Mauthner cells in the recovery of startle response. Over the years, his research has led to collaborations with about two-dozen colleagues around the world.

**Back to Basics**

In his 24 years at Williams, Zottoli has devoted his career to conducting basic research—that more hidden, constantly changing. It’s an unconscious process. The complexity of the polyrhythms of the music of my country is so strong that when it is not present in my music, I find the piece lacking.”

When she teaches composition, Perez Velazquez is careful to let her students find their own sources of inspiration. “I play many composers, different aesthetics—Bartok, Beethoven, modern composers—to give them an idea of the possibilities,” she says. “Then I ask them to compose something. I have them start . . . small: a simple structure for a solo instrument. I try to get them to organize their thoughts, to express one idea in a coherent way. They start with what they can relate to . . . They have to find their own identity.”

Perez Velazquez’s honors and awards include a Cintas Fellowship in 1999, first prize for interdisciplinary ensemble in the competition Encounter of two cultures in 1991 and first prize in the National Contest of Musical Youth of Cuba for the choral piece “yo os ame, amaos unos a otros” in 1987. She has been a professor at Williams since 2000.

—Jennifer Grow

—Zelda Stern

Spring 2005 | Williams Alumni Review | 11