

# Alumni Newsletter

## A Spring Break Journey Takes Students off the Beaten Path

■ Sabrina Angelini, a School of Arts and Sciences senior, walked to the edge of the cenote, a large limestone pool linked to an underground lake, and threw herself forward. She could see the “black catfish under the clear water” before she hit the surface, submerging into the unknown, and coming up again to the cheers of her fellow travelers.

This adventurous group of School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program students spent spring break exploring ancient ruins, hiking a rainforest, sleeping in small towns, and, of course, swimming in the cenotes of the Yucatán peninsula of Mexico’s eastern coastline.

The Yucatán trip has become a spring break tradition for Honors Program globe-trotters, exposing students to natural wonders, indigenous culture, and insightful history far off the beaten track of postcard tourism.

Led by dean Julio Nazario, the students roamed the countryside in a minivan, exploring Mayan sites, Spanish colonial cities, and an ecological reserve in the jungle. They also climbed pyramids, sampled local cuisine, and snorkeled in the tropical waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Local guides provided impromptu lessons in history, archaeology, anthropology, and ecological science. Anu Sadhu, a sophomore, recalls sitting atop a pyramid at Uxmal and reflecting on her journey.



“I was able to see the city on a grander scale—perhaps how the Mayans saw it when they were the rulers of the land,” Sadhu said.

Ashley Polukord, also a sophomore, said the trip to the ecological reserve gave her a profound sense of the diverse ecological life within the jungle, and the importance of preserving the land.

Heidi Nicklaus, a graduate student, probed the Mayan sites, finding a core (a flaked stone), scapula bone, and piece of pottery, which she and others worked to identify. One evening the students heard the strains of a salsa band.

“At first we just listened,” sophomore Olivia Shabash said. “But soon everyone was dancing. It was a spontaneous moment of Mexican culture that would have been impossible to gain from just any tour.”

## In Their Own Words:



Why study philosophy? Just ask **Kevin Tobia**. For one, you might go for graduate study at Oxford University, courtesy of the Ertegun Scholarship, named for Mica Ertegun, the famous designer, and Ahmet Ertegun, the legendary founder of Atlantic Records.

*“My program at Oxford involves seminars, one-on-one supervisions, and papers. We choose two concentrations, so right now I’m working on the philosophy of psychology and cognitive science. In the spring I’ll start my second concentration on ethics.*

*Much of the daily life at Oxford is centered around the college, and I have enjoyed spending time with colleagues at my college, St. Hilda’s.*

*The Ertegun Scholarship program has been a tremendous benefit. The Ertegun House is a place to work and study, and it’s full of students working on many subjects in the humanities. This is the first year of the Ertegun program, and a highlight of the term was the program’s house opening with speakers including Mica Ertegun and members of Led Zeppelin.”*

## Message from the Dean

So far, this year has been a whirlwind for the Honors Program, pulling through the historic challenges of Hurricane Sandy and continuing to

build new initiatives for our exceptional students. This newsletter surveys just some of the excitement:



a special event for our Summer Reading Program with renowned author Rebecca Skloot; dazzling overseas study and adventure travel in the Yucatán; and new faculty-student mentor research collaborations. You'll read portraits of the young talents coming out of the program as they launch into advanced study and professional careers. Of course, we are especially featuring you—our graduates—to whom the Honors Alumni Newsletter is dedicated. We encourage you to be involved with mentoring students and to connect with each other around the world and across the generations. To this end, we invite you to be active in founding an official Honors Program charter group, run by alumni, to set the direction for our collaborations. Please contact us. We also look forward to seeing you at the annual Honors Alumni Gathering on Saturday, May 18, 2013.

Best always,

Matt Matsuda

## Welcoming the Artist in Everyone: Coffeehouse and Artists Collective

■ Most days, the white clapboard Honors house at College Avenue and Hamilton Street is a quiet enclave of academic offices. But once a month it becomes a hip nightspot.

The Honors Coffeehouse is packed with singers, songwriters, musicians, poets, and spoken-word performers—all students in the Honors Program. They come for the chance to try out their latest works, as well as old favorites, before an enthusiastic and supportive community.

A “no judgment” spirit reigns: a virtuoso cellist is followed by a pop singer and a slam poet. A masterly finger-picker opens up for someone who just learned to play a few notes; trained a capella voices harmonize with shy first-timers.



The same do-it-yourself ethos pervades dean Julio Nazario's Artists Collective at the Honors house. The students draw, shade, concentrate,

and laugh their way through renderings of patiently posed live models. The experience also includes heady discussions of art, politics, and philosophy, and twice-a-semester displays of their work.

In addition, students occasionally accompany Nazario on trips to the Metropolitan Museum of Art

and the Museum of Illustration and Cartoons. They stop for lunch at the legendary Katz's Delicatessen, engaging in debates about modernism between bites of their pastrami and Reuben sandwiches.

## Acclaimed Science Writer Inspires Students and Spurs Discussion

■ Irada Yunusova wasn't sure what to expect from the lecture by *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* author Rebecca Skloot. But Skloot's appearance last fall at Rutgers left a powerful impression on Yunusova and her fellow students in the Honors Program.

“I found it very inspirational,” said Yunusova, a first-year student. “I've never met an author before and it was great how people had the opportunity to discuss with her their experiences with her book and ask her questions.” Skloot, whose book has become a global phenomenon, regaled the audience with tales of her wayward childhood and the science teacher who changed her life.

“It was interesting to hear how a ‘normal’ person who had similar college issues to the average student became interested in Henrietta Lacks's story,” honors student Bo Tang said. Skloot, in turn, was impressed by her audience. “I heard four questions that I'd never gotten before, and that's amazing,” she said afterward.

Her book traces the story of a young African-American woman who died of cancer in 1951, yet whose

cells, taken by a medical researcher, have proven “immortal” and formed the basis for hundreds of scientific breakthroughs in polio, antiretroviral, and cancer research.

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* was well known to the SAS honors community. The lecture and book signing were the culmination of a summer reading program in which all incoming

students read the book and engaged in online and in-person discussions.

Students contributed to a blog that garnered more than 1,700 commentaries on medicine, history, ethics, race, and the roles of writers and journalists.

“The summer reading program helps build a small community within our large university,” said dean Karen Dentler.

“It assists students with their transition to college and creates a common intellectual experience.” Indeed, the books are selected by students, faculty, and staff rather than an administrative committee. Anyone who loves to read can make a pitch.

Check out our website [sashonors.rutgers.edu](http://sashonors.rutgers.edu) in June to learn what we are reading this summer!

“The summer reading program helps build a small community within our large university”

## Inside the Honors Program Mentoring Experience

One of the hallmarks of the Honors Program is its ability to provide students with access to internationally renowned scholars from every discipline.

### Mentoring the Medical Professionals of the Future

■ Paul Dicker, an obstetrician/gynecologist and a Rutgers University honors alumnus, is always on call. A hospital may need him to perform an emergency procedure, or he may be hearing from one of the new mothers whose baby he just delivered. But he always finds time to give back to Rutgers.

On Saturdays in the autumn, he's usually at High Point Solutions Stadium cheering on the Scarlet Knights. And every month he takes

School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program students out to dinner in New Brunswick. Over rice and hummus, or chicken kebabs, Dicker and the students discuss all manner of subjects – from health care reform to the writings of surgeon and journalist Atul Gawande.

The students particularly enjoy hearing Dicker talk about his own journey from anxious premed to one of *New Jersey Monthly's* top doctors.

"He gives amazing advice," said Zahra Khan, a first-year student. "A couple of pearls of wisdom that he shared with us hit me really hard, and I still felt the impact as I drove home."

Junior Harsh Shah agreed. "Dr. Dicker is easy to talk to," he said. "He keeps everyone involved and asks us meaningful questions."

Dicker, a 1988 graduate of Rutgers College, received his medical degree from the New York University School of Medicine. He has a thriving practice in Westwood, New Jersey, the Center for Women's Health, which is part of a larger network of women's health providers, Lifeline Medical Associates.



Dicker said he feels grateful to Rutgers. "I had an absolutely phenomenal experience at Rutgers," he said. "It prepared me so well for my medical work." He relishes any opportunity to encourage and support the next generation of doctors.

"It's an honor to help the physicians of tomorrow," he said. "The students show a tremendous commitment, and if there is any small part I can play that's going to make the experience more fulfilling for them, then I am happy to do it."

More recently, he has organized "shadowing" opportunities in which students follow doctors on their rounds. Junior Geetika Baghel shadowed Dicker last December at a Paramus, New Jersey, medical facility affiliated with Valley Hospital.

"Although I have shadowed doctors before, this experience stands out from the rest," Baghel said. "With Dr. Dicker, shadowing becomes an

applied science. It was one of the most fulfilling learning experiences I have had this semester."

### Expanding and Enhancing the Undergraduate Experience

#### Professor John Krenos and Melissa Pamula

■ In the fall of 2008, Melissa Pamula was a nervous first-year student, afraid of getting lost in the crowd. Today she is all smiles, and a member of a prestigious cohort of young Ph.D./M.D. candidates and molecular biology and biochemistry researchers at Rockefeller University in New York City.

As an Honors Program student at Rutgers, Pamula found a wise and supportive mentor in John Krenos, the distinguished professor of chemistry.

"Every time Professor Krenos and I met, I learned something new about the department, the Honors Program, or Rutgers that helped me make decisions and prepare for my future," Pamula said.

More than an academic coach, Krenos was a "profound resource," who advised her on courses, helped her forge professional connections, and wrote recommendations, Pamula said. He'd take his mentees for group lunches and listen to their hopes, dreams, and fears.

Krenos is modest about his contributions. "I think I helped round off the edges and connected her to students not in her major," he said. "That really is the essence of the mentor program. It is really beyond the major."

*Continued on back, see [Inside Mentoring Experience](#)*



### SAS Honors Program by the Numbers

**1359** students in the program in 2012-13

Number of seniors graduated in May 2012 **34.5**

**96** percent of those who graduated in May 2012 did so in four years

### In Their Own Words:



During her time at Rutgers, **Anita Kambhampati** double majored in public health and political science, and wrote a senior thesis entitled "The Impacts of Celebrity Humanitarianism on Post-Earthquake Haiti." Now a master's public health student at Emory University, she reflects on her years in the SAS Honors Program.

*"Being in the honors program was a key part of my Rutgers education. It allowed me to be a part of a community, through trips to the Cloisters and the Camden Aquarium, classes like Colloquium, and my experiences living in Brett Hall. I was also an Honors Ambassador and Peer Mentor, which allowed me to help incoming students transition to the school.*

*I served in the Rutgers chapter of the Founda-*

*tion for the International Medical Relief of Children and volunteered at a medical clinic in Costa Rica. My participation in these activities as well as my education in the honors program led to my pursuit of a master's in public health and global health and infectious diseases at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health."*

Do you have a story to share about your time at Rutgers, or since? Please let us know at [honors@sas.rutgers.edu](mailto:honors@sas.rutgers.edu).

## Hardship, Hope, and Hard Work

■ In December, as other students were celebrating the winter break holiday, Vivian Nguyen was busy at her apartment in Piscataway. She was not a student anymore, having just finished her winter-graduation requirements for degrees in English and biology, and much of her break was devoted to packing up her apartment and moving out.

As she carted off boxes and lugged away stacks of textbooks, she had mixed feelings—sadness about leaving Rutgers, and excitement about going off to Costa Rica, where she would be working on a health care program for new mothers.

Her parents had come to the United States from Vietnam in the 1970s as political refugees and struggled to build up a family store. “I didn’t have the same things growing up as my classmates,” she says, but she worked hard and made her way to Rutgers—New Brunswick. Not initially an SAS Honors student, Nguyen was invited to apply for the program after her first year. It was, she says, “one of the best decisions I ever made.”

She became coordinator of the tutoring project and was also introduced to professor Kathryn Uhrich, who would become her Honors faculty mentor. The team worked on polymer research, developing techniques for analgesics to be delivered directly to wounds through hydrogels. Like many Honors students, Nguyen double majored, with a second major in African-American literature. She was deeply impacted by slave narratives and research on diasporic communities. She was moved and inspired, she says, by the stories of hardship and hope. She might have been speaking about her own life.

*Let's  
celebrate!*

Mark your calendar and make plans to join us at the  
**Honors Program 2013 Alumni Gathering!**

Saturday, May 18 • 4–5:30 p.m.

Raritan River Lounge, Student Activities Center

RSVP by April 30 to [honors@sas.rutgers.edu](mailto:honors@sas.rutgers.edu).

### *Inside Mentoring Experience* continued from previous page

**Professor Jenny Mandelbaum and Josh Rosenheck** ■ Jenny Mandelbaum, a professor of communications, and senior Josh Rosenheck are quite a pair, especially on stage. Recently invited to keynote a gala dinner of the Honors Faculty Mentor Program, the two engaged in a dialogue, underscoring their collaboration as researchers.

**Josh:** I was a bio major, headed for optometry school. I was encouraged to take a seminar outside my field: “Storytelling in Everyday Conversation.”

**Jenny:** We used a method called conversational analysis (CA). It became clear that Josh had a great ear for this work.

**Josh:** I had an idea to film eye exams and analyze the communication practices between the doctors and patients.

**Jenny:** Josh’s research proposal was funded. He took my interdisciplinary Honors seminar, and everything was looking great. Then one day...

**Josh:** I’m changing my major to economics. I’m sorry, but I don’t think it makes sense to continue our research.

**Jenny:** It does make sense, trust me.

**Josh:** Not wanting to disappoint, I said: “OK.”

**Jenny:** I encouraged Josh to take a leap of faith. He has since become an honorary grad student, attending research team meetings, guest lectures, and classes. He has presented studies and submitted work for an international conference.

Josh ultimately became an economics major. He still does original work on how optometrists and patients communicate.

**Josh:** I’ve gained connections to faculty and researchers, scholarships, summer jobs, and an internship at a management-consulting firm. It reminds me of

the Steve Jobs quote: “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.”

**Jenny:** As my grandfather used to say, “Cast your bread upon the waters; it may come back as sandwiches.”



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