

UPFRONT

LAUREN VALENTINO '10



“We will foster a teaching culture that encourages students to discover what they love to do by demanding that they work hard at things that matter.”

—PRESIDENT MICHAEL S. ROTH '78

PAGE 6

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

**What's a
Robot Chicken?**

**Reflections on
leaving Kenya**

**Foreign policy
and the candidates**

**The modern-day
slave trade**

PRESIDENT’S LETTER

by Michael S. Roth ’78



My first year as president has been an eventful one. We have a number of bold initiatives underway, but we still have much to do to realize the enormous potential of this great university. In addition to getting to know the campus and teaching a course in film studies this semester, I have been traveling around the country to meet with alumni. It has been revealing to hear the variety of perspectives on the institution, and it is encouraging to see the level of devotion to alma mater. On campus, I have been very impressed by the thoughtfulness and care of the students and faculty as they help this new president determine where to focus attention and energy.

In the fall I announced that we would take steps to increase our scholarship offerings, replacing loans with grants for our neediest students and decreasing student loan requirements by 35 percent beginning in the next academic year. It is clear that we need to do more, both to recruit low-income students who may not be finding their way to Wesleyan, and to offer more assistance to students from middle-income families. The financial aid landscape is changing, and we must continue to promote access to the university in a competitive environment.

During this first year I have come to understand the importance of some key facilities projects that have been in the planning stages: Molecular and Life Sciences Center, Allbritton Center for the Study of Public Life, and the Davison Arts Center. The MLS Building will make a great addition to the south side of campus, wrapping around the Exley Science Tower to create a truly charismatic space across from Olin Library. Renovating Davenport for the Allbritton Center will create an interdisciplinary organization that will link intellectual work on campus with practical and policy issues nationally and internationally. Finally, the Davison Art Center is part of the historical legacy of our campus, and we need to make it capable of exhibiting and protecting our extraordinary collections of works on paper.

Access to a campus with great facilities is vital, but we must also revitalize the distinctive educational experience found here. Over the last few months I have been soliciting ideas for curricular initiatives that range from strengthening our first-year program to developing

capstone experiences, from enhancing our programs in creative writing to developing a College of the Environment. It is very exciting to think about what is most “Wesleyanish” about the education we offer, and then to strengthen those dimensions of the university. We have formed faculty committees to bring these general ideas into focused, operational form, and you will be hearing more about our work in the coming months.

At my inauguration, I pledged to work with the faculty and students to develop a curriculum that emphasizes the radical freedom to explore new ideas, to cross boundaries, and to combine aesthetic or scientific practices. We will foster a teaching culture that encourages students to discover what they love to do by demanding that they work hard at things that matter. Wesleyan attracts some of the most gifted students at any school; by teaching them how to draw on their gifts, their passions, we enable them to work with enthusiasm and creativity.

I have emphasized the active nature of a Wesleyan education, and it is important to create opportunities to pursue research practices that advance the fields we teach. We must support this endeavor with new resources, and we must connect our researchers with one another and with colleagues around the globe. It is not enough that we encourage, even demand, the very best from our students and faculty. We must set an example through the work we do in whatever field we choose to apply ourselves. This takes time, money, energy, and a joint commitment to support innovative excellence wherever we find it in our community.

As other institutions focus on maintaining the status quo and avoiding risk, we can be proud of the qualities of mind and heart that are enhanced by the education we offer. And we should be proud of a community that mixes experimentation with kindness; that combines edgy critical thinking with affection and tolerance.

As one of America’s great institutions of higher education, Wesleyan University has a responsibility to contribute to making our public culture more thoughtful and more humane, more creative and more just. As your president, I pledge to join with you in making that contribution. **UPFRONT**

STARTED AS UNDERGRADS Alumni Writers Gather Virtually

[Orpheus]: “So get rid of the gun in the first act. If you have a gun, it better go off, sure. But if you don’t need the gun, don’t show it.” [Thebusdriver]: “Instead of a gun, I wanted more of a realization by someone.” [Orpheus]: “Physical damage or psychological?”

This snippet from a writers’ group took place online among four alumni living in New York, California, and Oregon. Twice a month they gather at a favorite haunt from their Wesleyan years, a StoryMOO created by Kit Reed, recently named resident writer by the university.

Reed set up this online environment to host her undergraduate writing classes. The topic of an article in *Wesleyan* (summer 2000), StoryMOO—a multiple object oriented/multiplied owned and operated online environment—helped beginning writers who feared face-to-face critique. Online they felt free to offer and receive honest evaluations under the cover of screen names.

“The anonymity of StoryMOO was the difference between having classmates help you unearth your story by using hammers and chisels—real tools, helpful criticism—instead of feather dusters,” Orpheus (Nik Houser ’01) explained. “If you really want to improve your story, you want people to be honest with you.” Houser, who was a member of Reed’s first MOO class and later a course assistant, now lives in California, with several published works of short fiction to his credit. “First Kisses From Beyond the Grave” (which *Kirkus Review* called “howlingly funny”) has been anthologized in the *The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror 2007*.

Rachel Torrance ’04 (aka thebusdriver) was the force behind the StoryMOO’s renaissance.

Wanting more than her MFA program offered, she recalled StoryMOO. “Wesleyan is open-minded about what constitutes valid art; people would respond to whatever you turned in for Kit’s class.”

Tatiana Uschakow ’04 (aka vodkataco), a production manager for a New York City design company, had been seeking ways to “kickstart” her writing, from a course at the New School to an informal group with Wesleyan friends until, “Everyone got busy and it fell apart.”

Sam Bathrick ’04 (aka lionfish) was seeking ways to bolster his personal writing projects.

He had spent two years in Ghana after initially traveling there on Wesleyan’s Brodigan Award, teaching writing and photography, and eventually creating a book of his students’ work, along with a scholarship program. Now involved in documentary film production based in New York (although he’s from Atlanta), he, too, was enticed by Torrance’s idea.

When Torrance approached Reed about reactivating StoryMOO, Reed was delighted. Her four former protégés agreed to “meet” every other week, posting stories and comments prior to their discussions, the protocol familiar

to them from their class with Reed.

As a further perk, Reed agreed to drop in to the virtual community on a regular basis.

Says Uschakow of the rekindling of the MOO: “It’s an easy way to get together. And it’s nice that Kit pops in; it kind of makes it more official.”

Bathrick concurs on this advantage. “She has an amazing way; she doesn’t baby you... she’s somehow gentle but brutal at the same time.”

“They are funny, serious, smart, witty, and highly motivated,” says Reed. “It’s fun to see them and know that when I leave for the day, they will carry on.” **UPFRONT**

O’ROURKE’S IS BACK



O’Rourke’s Diner, a Middletown landmark badly damaged by fire in August of 2006, reopened in February with a spiffier look and kitchen equipment donated by Wesleyan.

ROBOT CHICKEN
Plucked from a Chinese Menu

The first thing you need to know about *Robot Chicken* is that this Emmy Award-winning animated show for adults bears the name of Matthew Senreich’s favorite dish at a Chinese restaurant in West Hollywood, Kung Pao Bistro. Everything else about the show, a sus-

tained takeoff on pop culture, is equally crazy and delightful. Senreich ’96 visited campus in February with hilarious clips of *Robot Chicken* and stories about his adventures in Hollywood. He likes to say that he gets paid to play with toys, but no one should mistake his offhand, self-deprecating manner as indicating a tendency toward slouchdom. To create *Robot Chicken*, he survived on two hours of sleep a night for six

months while he worked a day job as editorial director at Wizard Entertainment and pursued his vision of animated figures in off-hours. The program, airing on Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim block, uses toys, action figures, dolls, and claymation. Among the better known episodes is a parody of *Star Wars*. With an edge of wonder in his voice, yet with a tinge of chutzpah, Senreich told a packed room in the Center for Film Studies about his productive collaboration with George Lucas and Lucasfilm, a dream come true for someone who grew up steeped in the popular culture of *Star Wars*.

Senreich’s studio has become a popular spot for actors who want to have some fun by giving a voice to characters they will never play on screen. Senreich clearly enjoys the many associations his work has brought him, and his message for new graduates was to be fearless and patient in working the phone and e-mail in search of people who can help. The person who turns you down today, he said, may very well become an important source of business in a year or two.

DEBATED BY THE ANCIENT GREEKS

Does Your Dog Love You?

It takes a classics scholar to tell pet-loving Americans why Aristotle and his contemporaries would have said, “Your dog doesn’t love you.”

This could be upsetting news to Americans who grew up watching Disney’s *Bambi* or reading newspaper obituaries that sometimes include pets as surviving family members.

With this cultural context, it is no wonder that those attending a Center for the Humanities lecture in February responded nearly unanimously in the affirmative when Brown University Classics Professor David Konstan (a former Wesleyan professor) asked who believes that animals have emotions.

“Most of us agree that some animals have

some emotions,” Konstan conceded, offering the easy-to-imagine example of deer experiencing fear. But, he prodded, do bats and rabbits feel pity?

In today’s world, when the nature of emotions, and whether or not they are uniform across cultures, are the subject of intense debate, the insights of the Greeks hold valuable lessons.

The Greeks devoted considerable attention to emotions, especially in the context of what was likely to be roused by public speaking. They understood emotion as a response in a societal construct. Anger, for instance, was pain for a perceived slight accompanied by a desire for revenge upon those who are not fit to insult you. Furthermore, anger could only be experienced between equals capable of exacting revenge.

While in our culture we encourage people to let go of the negative emotions, the ancient Greeks encouraged their angry citizens to explore the catalyzing incident: had it truly been meant as a slight?

The cognitive process necessary to traverse before anger could be named was what kept it, in the minds of the Greeks, in the purview of humankind.

And for those who questioned the cognitive aspect of emotions, Konstan provided this example: You are in a crowd on a busy curbside. You feel a push and experience an immediate flash of anger. You turn around and discover the push was accidental, and your anger dissipates. Or, you turn around and discover that

Do you have an opinion about our UPFRONT section? Please write us at letters@wesleyan.edu.

the push was intentional, and it actually took you out of harm’s way. Here, our understanding of another’s intent clearly influences the experience of the emotion.

For those who wondered if perhaps love might be universal—across cultures and species—again Aristotle’s definition keeps it human: love is based on an altruistic assessment of another’s noble character. What a mother feels for a child is primitive, instinctive, and therefore not a true emotion.

As for pity, Aristotle’s definition required ethical awareness that placed this, too, in a realm that might seem beyond the typical hanging bat: an emotion that occurs when one determines that someone suffered undeservedly—a qualitative pain that must be cognitively determined.

So, does your dog love you? Not in the cognitive sense that Aristotle and his contemporaries understood, although Konstan would probably admit that is unlikely to stop anyone from watching another Disney movie.

IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

A New Look at Schizophrenia



The colorful apartment has four rooms: a living room, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen. Medications are stored in the bathroom’s medicine cabinet. A clock hangs above the television in the living room. A Post-it reminder note is visible on the kitchen refrigerator.

This apartment, however, exists as a dynamic virtual reality tool created by a Wesleyan researcher and his co-investigators to help learn more about the neurocognitive skills of people with schizophrenia.

Assistant Professor of Psychology Matthew Kurtz led this National Institute of Mental Health-funded study to test the ability of schizophrenic patients to manage a simulated medication regimen. Previously, clinicians and researchers have relied upon paper and pencil tests, but Kurtz says that virtual reality can provide a more realistic assessment of the problems individuals face.

Schizophrenia patients’ ability to manage their medication regimen is critical for positive outcome, yet challenging.

“Many people who have schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder (which is a very closely related disorder) have limited insight into their illness,” Kurtz says. “The other issue is that people with schizophrenia—and this has just been revealed over the past 15 to 20 years—have fairly profound deficits in attention, memory, and problem solving. For both of those reasons, it’s often difficult for people with schizophrenia to keep up with their medication regimen.”

While paper and pencil tests of neurocognitive function “capture some important aspects of cognition,” they don’t capture cognition in the way “it actually plays out in everyday life,” he explains.

“We’ve actually got people trying to remember their medication, and at the same time, they’ve got dogs barking, they’ve got the

phone ringing, they hear a fire truck go by,” Kurtz says.

The results show that patients with schizophrenia are less able to maintain their medication regimen in the virtual environment than healthy control subjects. Kurtz hopes his work will help clinicians develop new methods for improving the ability of patients to manage their medications.

The virtual environment provides mental health professionals with “a very quick window into how easy it will be for the client, based on their cognitive skills, to remember to take a variety of medications at specific times,” Kurtz says.

“A Virtual Reality Apartment as a Measure of Medication Management Skills in Patients With Schizophrenia: A Pilot Study,” conducted with Elizabeth Baker, Godfrey D. Pearson and Robert S. Astur, was published in the *Schizophrenia Bulletin*.

EARLY DAYS AT SOUTHWEST

Clipping Newspapers

Under the leadership of Herb Kelleher ’53, Southwest Airlines became one of the great achievement stories of American business, but success wasn’t always assured.

In 1978, Southwest was poised to make its first interstate flight from Love Field in Dallas, but Congressman James Wright of Fort Worth introduced legislation that would have kept the airline from flying out of Texas. Kelleher ran a full-page ad in Dallas newspapers asking readers to clip a petition and send it to Southwest for forwarding to the congressman.

Kelleher spent a Thanksgiving afternoon with scissors, cutting the petitions out of the pages that readers had mailed in. It was the type of hands-on leadership, says *Investors Business Daily*, that made Kelleher a legend and hard to replace.

FAVORITE BOOKS
Bestsellers in 2008 at Broad Street Books, the College Bookstore

| | |
|----|--|
| 1 | <i>I Am America (And So Can You)</i> Stephen Colbert |
| 2 | <i>The Audacity of Hope</i> Barack Obama |
| 3 | <i>A Woman in Charge</i> Carl Bernstein |
| 4 | <i>In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto</i> Michael Pollan |
| 5 | <i>Memo to the President Elect: How We Can Restore America's Reputation and Leadership</i> Madeleine Albright |
| 6 | <i>The Appeal</i> John Grisham |
| 7 | <i>Musicophilia</i> Oliver Sacks |
| 8 | <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie |
| 9 | <i>Dreams from My Father</i> Barack Obama |
| 10 | <i>Duma Key</i> Stephen King |