

University**Competing interests cloud alcohol debate**

by Tamara Conrad and
Suzan Erem

“Penn State: Party School” is a moniker that makes many State College residents over 30 groan in dismay and many under 30 cheer with mischievous glee. Borough officials juggle limited resources and complicated relationships. Downtown restaurant and tavern owners watch alcohol and food sales skew out of balance. The state pulls millions in taxes out of the community to help balance its budget. And Penn State officials repeat a mantra about how complicated the issue is, how we all need to work together and how it’s a national, not just a Penn State, problem.

The basic statistics are startling. In the 2008-2009 academic year, 30 percent more students were admitted to Mount Nittany Medical Center for alcohol related problems than the year before. Police issued 29 percent more citations to students for public drunkenness. In a recent university survey, more than half of Penn State students identify themselves as moderate to

heavy drinkers, and almost half report not remembering some of what happened the night before. More than 77 percent of the students who drink had Blood Alcohol Content above the legal driving limit. And more students are launching their college careers with drinking patterns in place.

Meanwhile, business is booming at the state liquor stores, especially here. The Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board reports the liquor sales in 2007 averaged 3.51 gallons per Centre County resident for the year, well above the state average of 2.92 gallons. Sales increased by more than \$1 million from 2006 to 2007, according to the latest available figures published in the 2009 The Partnership: Campus and Community Against Dangerous Drinking report. Total sales were almost \$21 million.

The challenge is formidable and the problem national, but State College and Penn State face their own perfect storm of lousy odds: a large student body in a rural area with limited entertainment alternatives, located in the Northeast where drinking is higher than the national average, combined

Of 846 off-campus alcohol and drug cases processed by Judicial Affairs last year, only 22 resulted in suspension or expulsion and 49 resulted in a last chance warning.

with a successful football program and a lively fraternity system.

The most recent debate is spurred by the death of freshman Joe Dado last fall. But Penn State students also fell and died after drinking in 1997, 1993, 1984, and 1983, noted the Dec. 18, 2009 This American Life’s broadcast about Penn State’s alcohol issues.

University officials say they’ve

- Implemented the best practices from across the country,
- Built community partnerships,
- Developed alcohol-free activities for



Lace Abel-Bey

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Cultural Conversations brings diversity to the stage

by Jordan Toronto

Cultural Conversations, an annual play festival that presents a series of never-produced, unpublished works, which all share the theme of exploring and challenging our views of various cultures, will present 10 shows in five days late March.

The festival includes several professional pieces from international playwrights, who are in residence for the week of the festival, as well as the works of local artists here at Penn State.

Susan Russell, Assistant Professor of Theatre at Penn State, is especially excited to see this year’s Cultural Conversations unfold.

“It is the only university program of its kind in the country,” Russell, the creator and artistic director of this year’s event, said. “This festival is unique, in that all the pieces (dance, visual arts and plays) are based on issues of local and global diversi-

ty, and it represents the works of professional playwrights alongside the works of Penn State students.”

This event’s theme this year is “The Abled, Disabled and Disappearing Body,” and the lineup will include “Accidents & Innovations”, a dance piece by Bill Shannon, an international, disabled, hip-hop dancer and choreographer (using abled and disabled dancers from Penn State), and “Eat Like a Bird”, a play inspired by the story of an American photographer who killed himself after taking a picture of a starving child in Uganda.

This year’s festival will also feature the work of Penn State faculty member, Steve Broadnax, whose play, “Smash/Hit”, will be his second play performed in Cultural Conversations.

In 2007, Cultural Conversations started with a compilation of works that were all generated locally by Penn State playwrights and choreographers. There was also a guest

performance by Heather Raffo, an Iraqi-American playwright and actress, who performed her play, “Nine Parts of Desire,” a series of monologues from the viewpoints of nine Iraqi women. “I call her ‘the global mother of the festival,’” said Russell.

Raffo actually returned to Penn State to perform in Cultural Conversations the following year, that time collaborating with musician Amir El-Saffar, who plays the jazz trumpet, and the Iraqi santoor to create “Sounds of Desire”.

Since 2008, Cultural Conversations has continued to broaden its circle of playwrights, including national as well as local artists, bringing it a new level of attention and prestige.

“In fact,” Russell said, “there was a very sassy article written in American Theatre magazine last year about ‘Killadelphia’, a one-man play written and performed by Sean Christopher Lewis (and part of Cultural Conversations in 2009), that has

gone on to great success off-Broadway and in regional theatres across the country.”

Russell believes it is important to foster playwrights, and is grateful to have had the opportunity to share these and other playwrights’ voices, not only with her students, but with her community as well.

One element that is key to this particular festival is the “talk back” that happens after each performance. This open dialogue reveals the importance of collaboration within a creative team of playwright, director, and actors. The “talk back” also adds one more significant piece to the development of a play: collaboration with the audience.

“The audience can ask the playwright questions about things they didn’t understand,” Russell said, “while the playwright can ask the audience, ‘What do you see?’”

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students,

—Built a relationship with local police and enforced on and off campus behavior,

—Performed some social marketing—informing students that their peers are not drinking as much as they think,

—Instituted the mandatory AlcoholEdu for incoming students so they can learn about alcohol and its effects and

—And hired a full-time specialist on drug and alcohol addiction.

“I’m not saying we’re doing it all well, but we’re doing it,” said Andrea Dowhower, an assistant vice president for Student Affairs.

“Penn State has been engaging in both prevention and intervention efforts for many years,” said associate director of Health Promotion and Wellness at University Health Services Linda LaSalle, who is directly involved in collecting data

on student drinking. “We’re like almost every other institution in the country—we’re not having a dramatic impact. I think the whole field is really struggling with identifying and implementing effective strategies.”

And while law enforcement, researchers and social workers struggle to contain the personal and physical damage done by excessive drinking, they face a more complicated challenge that no one will speak to on the record, but confirmed off the record: How to contain the alcohol while not alienating fun-loving alumni, including avid football fans and fraternity members, who support the university financially to the tune of many millions of dollars a year.

Excessive drinking and the damage it does center around a finite number of nodes in the region: downtown at taverns, on campus in the dorms and at football events and off campus at fraternities and at private house parties largely located walking distance to campus. The majority of drinkers

are students, but there is a secondary audience of adults, presumably a high percentage of those Penn State alumni, who live here or visit to attend home football games.

Money, money, money...

Economic incentives or disincentives are not the only forces driving this dilemma, but they do drive it.

An alcohol license can go for as much as \$400,000 here depending on the business, according to some sources, and having one in the lucrative view of 44,000 young people is a gold mine. There are 145 licenses in Centre County, according to the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board.

In 2005, the borough commissioned a study that showed restaurant and alcohol sales represented by far the largest segment of downtown revenue, an estimated \$63 million, some fraction of which translates eventually into revenue for the borough in the form of property taxes.

The other revenue municipalities receive

from alcohol sales first gets filtered through state government. In 2009, the Liquor Control Board reaped \$1.9 billion in sales of beer, wine and spirits, according to the board’s latest annual report. After deducting operating expenses for running its stores, Pennsylvania had \$500 million left over. Of that, less than one percent, \$4.6 million, was returned to municipalities to share among themselves statewide.

“It would just be good to see a lot more of that money stay locally rather than be spread across the state and pay for other things and benefit other programs,” said Roger Dunlap, assistant borough manager of State College. “There’s a lot of money that’s leaving the room. I’m not saying it should all stay here, that it shouldn’t be used for other solid state purposes. That being said, we feel like we’re left holding the bag.”

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That bag includes an estimated \$2.8 million (of an \$8 million total budget) in police services for alcohol-related crimes, which make up two thirds of all crimes according to information supplied by Police Chief Tom King. He expects that number to grow to \$3 million this year. In addition, the Downtown Improvement District, subsidized by the borough, dedicates an estimated \$12,000 per year to keeping downtown clean. Then there's the cost of sign theft and vandalism that can run the borough as much as \$500 to \$1,000 in a week, according to Public Works Operations Manager Eric Brooks.

"On Monday, we could have as high as five signs, one particular weekend I remember they went on a rampage and we had 13 signs ripped out," he said. "On Christmas vacation or Spring Break we don't see the vandalism, so we know where it's coming from."

In comparison, Penn State provided in-lieu-of-tax payments to the borough of \$524,281 in 2009, up from \$485,780 in 2008, Dunlap said. Additionally, Penn State pays for supplemental police support for football games and other major events, and contributes to other governmental bodies in the county through in-lieu-of-tax payments as well.

Meanwhile, Penn State's student body grows each year, but food and alcohol sales downtown don't appear to be keeping pace, according to some retailers. Some attribute Penn State's aggressive marketing of campus-based foods combined with students acquiring more of their alcohol from state stores. In 2006, sales of Vladimir Vodka, a new favorite among young people, outpaced rum sales for the first time, with almost 26,000 units sold. That number jumped to more than 30,000 within a year.

Where the Wild Things Are Downtown taverns

There are two ways to enforce the alcohol-related violations in a bar or tavern. One is criminal. The local police come in to a bar, see an underage drunk person and haul him or her off to jail or issue a citation.

The other is administrative. The Liquor Control Enforcement Police come in, see a bartender serving an underage or obviously



drunk person, and cite the bar owner who then faces escalating penalties of fines, temporary closures and eventually loss of license.

Last year, out of that \$500 million left over from liquor sales just \$20 million, or 4 percent, was spent statewide to enforce the administrative side of the law.

At full complement, the local Liquor Control Enforcement office in Altoona staffs eight officers, two supervisors and spokesman Sgt. Wayne Bush to enforce more than 1,000 licenses spanning eight counties.

So how does such a small office cover eight counties effectively? Targeting.

"Since last State Patrick's Day we've been putting more effort up there trying to change the environment," explained Bush. "I went to one of the meetings with the tavern owners and one asked me, 'What kind of environment do you want to change it to?' I said, 'Let's start with one that doesn't have 311 calls to the police in one day.'"

The officers also rely heavily on local police.

"I worked patrol for 12 years," Bush said. "So I know what it's like to be on the same bar every weekend and wondering when somebody was going to do something. Now I'm the guy that does something. So I encourage the police to let me know when they're having a problem."

Where the Wild Things Are II Behind closed dorm doors

Penn State houses 13,000 students each

year, many of them freshman and sophomores who are not yet 21. There is a Penn State policy against underage drinking in the dorms, on campus and even off campus. There are Resident Assistants whose job it is to monitor such offenses and report them. There is a code of conduct that states that Penn State will not tolerate underage drinking among its students. Yet, thousands of students manage to get plastered before they even set foot out of their dorm rooms.

To "pre-game," Penn State students gather quietly in small dorm rooms in groups of about 10 to drink before even setting out for the night. An upperclassman furnishes the alcohol, usually a mixture of vodka and rum because it's easier to sneak into the building. The students buy juice and soda at the commons with their meal points and set up a mini bar. Often the pre-game lasts only about an hour between the time the students all arrive and when they leave for the party destination.

Getting away with drinking while underage at Penn State is "an art some perfect, some don't," said Darlene Santos, a sophomore at Penn State housed in the McElwin dormitory and one of the few students who would permit Voices to use her full name.

"As freshmen we learned: Don't stumble, don't throw up, and you'll be fine," Santos said.

One Penn State freshman told Voices, "We had a guy last semester who vocally said he wouldn't tolerate any alcohol in the dorms but if you weren't obvious about it, didn't display it visually, there was no way

he could do anything about [it]." She estimated that of her all-freshman dorm floor, "on any given weekend, 70 percent of them would go out drinking. It was a very large majority."

Other residents and RAs, (Resident Assistants), agree that 70 to 80 percent of all students living in the dorms also drink in the dorms. They also say only 5 to 10 percent of those students get caught.

Yet the latest Partnership report lists the number of students out of those 13,000 who were busted for drinking in the dorms: 566. Underage drinking: 404.

The discrepancy is not lost on the people who crunch the numbers. LaSalle was an integral part of putting the report together.

"We interpret the data with great caution," she told Voices. "It gives us the sense of the nature of the problem as long as we acknowledge interpretation limitations."

The Partnership report, cited widely among those concerned about this issue on campus and off, refers to increases and decreases in reported alcohol offenses over time, but those fluctuations can be attributed to a wide number of factors, LaSalle agreed, including the average age of the RAs that particular year and the quality of training they received. But LaSalle, a 15-year veteran of her department, is pragmatic.

"I think it's better to have this information than not have it all, even with all of its limitations."

Some of those limitations include the prevalence of RAs who turn a blind eye. RAs are undergraduates themselves, and the overly-enthusiastic ones fear being alienated from their dorm-mates quickly. Numerous sources told Voices that so long as students are drinking quietly in their rooms, an RA will not open the door to investigate.

Students quickly weigh the odds of getting caught.

Sunday through Thursday nights at Penn State, one RA per dorm is on duty from 8 p.m. to 7 a.m. to monitor activity and assist other RAs. Even though 42 percent of students report drinking on Thursday nights, only one RA is on duty per building those nights to oversee as many as 300 students. Only on Fridays and Saturdays are two RAs

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on duty together.

From 8:30 p.m. and 1:30 a.m., these RAs take three tours of the building. They may be responsible for two buildings, depending on the size of the buildings. They take 30 minutes to an hour to do a sweep of the dorm halls. If the RA is checking six floors, that gives him or her an estimated five minutes on each floor to check for alcohol policy violations, noise or other problems, explained 21-year-old Valerie Marcellus, a senior and RA in East campus. Marcellus said drinking is encouraged at Penn State, and some students may feel they "have to be drunk to succeed."

Off-duty RAs are free to enjoy the night as they please. Students say they sometimes don't even see their floor RA if he or she is not on duty.

"He seemed to either stick in his room or he'd be out doing his club activities or with

his friends," explained one student of her RA, a sophomore supervising freshmen. "So he wasn't going to be there at midnight when they go out or 3 in the morning when they come back."

Residents and RAs say the students who draw attention to themselves are usually the ones who get caught, but not always.

Tony M., a junior living on campus, said he doesn't think there's a drinking problem at Penn State, "besides Joseph Dado." He said he and his friends could play loud music and "party like crazy," and his RA never said anything. Tony also said getting away with drinking in the dorms depends on the resident's relationship with the RA.

"If you talk to them, and you're friends, you can tell them [you're going to drink] ahead of time, and they'll say 'OK,'" Tony said.

RA Danny Burnside, 22, said he gets along with most of the residents on his floor, and he admits he is more lenient than other RAs about enforcing the housing poli-

cies.

"I'm more lenient, because I don't want to get people in trouble, but I still have to do my job," Burnside said. "My take is, you're not allowed to do it, so if I catch you, you get written up." But the Penn State senior admitted, "I'm not a hound."

Burnside did not write up any students during the Fall 2009 semester, because he did not catch anyone violating the rules, he said.

Marcellus, who stands 5 foot 4 inches, believes her strength is enforcing policies. She and Burnside are RAs in the same freshman, co-ed building. She said if RAs investigate a room, they sometimes call her for back up.

Yet Marcellus only wrote up four students last semester.

"I told my girls, 'I don't want you to drink,' but I know they're going to drink so just don't do it here, and be safe," she said.

But she has her limits. "If you wake me up, and I have to get out of bed, I'm going

to write you up for something—noise violations, your shoes untied, something," Marcellus said.

Discretion is a big part of the RAs' job, university officials admit.

"A first-year student who the worst he's done is have an open container in the residence halls but is not doing any harm to anyone else, we're certainly not going to drop the hammer on that student," explained Dowhower of Student Affairs. "It's a teachable moment, and we can use the opportunity to get students to understand the expectations of the community."

Joe Puzycki, also an assistant vice president for Student Affairs, said coordinators who oversee the work of the RAs are all Masters-level professionals who ultimately meet with students who violate policy in the residents halls. When told of the prevalence of drinking in the dorms confirmed by a

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***PS Save the date: City of Lights, the 13th annual Taste of the Town, December 12, 2010 at the Penn Stater**

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number of Voices reporters, Puzycki sighed. "It's frustrating, when you look at the training and the commitment of our resident assistant staff," he said. "You have to realize, developmentally these students are supervising their peers." He said he believes most staff do their job well. As for the consequences for RAs turning a blind eye include losing their position, "We don't tolerate students looking the other way," he said. "Some of that comes down to being more aggressive, but it's not that easy."

Where the Wild Things Are III Frats and party houses

Aside from dorms and downtown bars, the third popular alcohol sources are fraternities and private neighborhood parties. Yet the borough operates with never enough police, a high turnover of students causing a shell game of moving party houses each semester, and the private premises of fraternities, in high concentration along Garner Street, that limit their access.

Burnside, the RA, is also president of Sigma Lambda Beta, a multicultural fraternity that is a member of the Interfraternity Council. Some fraternities in the IFC have houses that have become infamous for their parties. Sigma Lambda Beta does not have a house.

Burnside said the fraternities at Penn State have turned into the scapegoats for the university's drinking problem.

"Penn State has a drinking problem, but if you shut down the frats, they're going to drink somewhere else," Burnside said.

Some of the dry parties in the HUB or other commons on campus have students who arrive drunk, he said. He admitted that the frat houses do serve underage students alcohol, but he said it is done to create a lively atmosphere to draw people to the individual fraternities.

"If [one frat is having] a dry function, and the other frat is serving alcohol, people are going to go with the other frat," Burnside said.

"[Fraternities] can't survive without members," Burnside added.

Except that students admit the majority of the people at frat parties are women.

The search for solutions

The people involved most closely in looking for solutions all admit there is no "silver bullet." Still, without a discussion of potential solutions, the community will not arrive at any. And discussion is one thing this community has in abundance.

The debate invariably turns to local law enforcement and policy enforcement in the short-term and what many refer to as a "culture change" in the long term.

One council member said the police could use their resources differently.

"The police we have could bust more students, they could arrest them for things they are now just warning them on," said Borough Council Member Peter Morris.

But why hasn't the council voted significantly more resources to the police over the years?

"There is not a council policy on how you treat someone who's vomiting on the sidewalk," Morris responded. "I think that hiring more police to keep doing the same thing that the present force is doing will not change it. I think a change in their policy might." He added that there is some discussion to that effect occurring now.

Then there's Penn State. Officials, who frequently state that Penn State is an educational institution first and foremost, continue to develop and implement, with little success, more and different ways to educate students away from excessive drinking.

Yet research published in 2003 also offers stricter enforcement as a solution.

Alcohol-related crimes costs the borough \$2.8 million last year in law enforcement. Penn State pays State College Borough \$523,281 per year in the form of in-lieu-of-tax payments.

In a paper published in the Journal on Studies of Alcohol, Sept. 2003 issue, Dr. John Knight and his colleagues at Harvard conclude that "stricter enforcement by campus security officers of policies that limit underage drinking tends to be associated with lower rates of heavy drinking." The study covered 1,252 students at 11 college campuses in the Massachusetts state system. The level of drinking and the level of enforcement varied widely across the campuses, allowing researchers to study the differing impacts of a newly-instituted policy.

"We at Penn State are by far one of the most aggressive universities in the country," said Puzycki, a former head of Judicial Affairs. "We are the most aggressive in responding to off-campus [violations]."

While police were required to report every one of the 1,545 violations in 2008-2009 to the university, Penn State's Judicial Affairs processed just over half that number, 913.

Puzycki said the numbers don't match up because of multiple violations or cases that have been dropped by the police. The bigger issue, he said, is what to do with the violators once they're in the system.

"What do you expect me to do with an open container [violation]?" he said. "Some people say, 'You should expel them.' People want that until it's their kid."

Penn State doesn't expel students for minor violations; it educates them by putting them through an alcohol program, and if there are repeat violations, sanctions can increase to probation, or in serious cases, removal from the residence halls or school, Puzycki said.

"And we're probably responding tougher than our criminal justice system that isn't doing much but slapping a fine on them," Puzycki. His colleague Dowhower agreed that the "fear of God" of getting called into the Judicial Affairs office can be very effective with students.

It would have to be.

Out of 846 off-campus alcohol and drug cases processed by Judicial Affairs last year, 22, or 2.6 percent, resulted in expul-

sion or suspension and 49 received probation "with notation," essentially one last chance. Another 273 received probation and 107 received a warning, according to documents provided by Puzycki, who added that the recidivism rate for students who go through the process at any level is a consistent six to nine percent.

Liquor control officer Sgt. Bush believes it's not enough.

"I think the university could do a lot more to curb it if they ever decide to do that," he said.

Other universities offer alternatives.

Marquis Jones, a Resident Assistant at the University of Pittsburgh, said his school imposes a \$250 "hosting" fine on a student caught in the dorms with alcohol.

"This is very effective, especially after people get caught," Jones said.

Then there's the issue of staff. At Penn State, the average RA is single-handedly responsible for 40 or more students on his or her floor throughout the day.

At Allegheny College, where RA Shane Downing reports that "drinking is not a huge issue," the resident-to-RA ratio is 24-to-1, almost half of that at Penn State.

"We have a community at Allegheny where you can be who you are," Downing told Voices.

Fraternities have taken new action against excessive drinking as well.

New rules established by the IFC are designed to curtail some of the wildest partying of recent years. Fraternities are now required to hire professional security for large parties, provide a printed guest list to security to eliminate impromptu invitations and no longer serve alcohol during the recruiting week called "rush."

And local fraternity alums are stepping up as well, noting that these measures are not enough.

"We realized that we need to go further to effectively address the concerns of the community," said Jim Edwards, a leader of the



Kelsey Stratton

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alumni fraternity group who organized a January gathering of about 40 university officials, students, neighborhood leaders and borough council members. The discussion ended with a list of potential solutions including adding a student representative to the Partnership committee, developing a community relations committee for the fraternities, creating a program for victims and perpetrators to meet so the victim can describe the impact of the crime and publishing a list of offenses and the subsequent disciplinary action taken by the university.

This group, the local Public Issues Forum, and others are bringing people together from across the town/gown divide to find solutions. In progress too is State College and Penn State's next effort: to create yet another "partnership" with a new program they call F8, for the First Eight weeks, still in draft form. The draft plan calls for a committee of town and gown

officials to meet weekly beginning in mid-August for about 45 minutes to compare notes and look for patterns in behavior across neighborhoods.

"Basically, I think it's a good try," said Council Member Morris while expressing pessimism about the lack of students or council members on the committee. "I think in the long run you can't solve this problem without getting the students involved. And from a council person's perspective, we aren't involved. It maybe isn't a good idea in this case."

According to the plan, F8 will use "proactive intervention" with subsets of "officer initiated contacts, pre-party contacts, community policing," plus "Educating students, administrators, officials, property owners, and residents; Increasing Enforcement [and] Focusing on mixed neighborhoods near campus." But Morris said other details were lacking in the PowerPoint presentation made to the borough council in January.

"We've been putting huge efforts for-

ward," said Puzycki, who helped with the presentation. "But maybe it's time for a different approach. I'm very enthused by that."

"We need boots on the ground," said Assistant Borough Manager Dunlap. "Graduates, the RAs, [Resident Assistants], you've got to make it a focus, train the trainer where you have a neighborhood association, use the infrastructure that's already there. We need to get them before they're drunk, find a more constructive use of their time."

Perhaps more enforcement combined with those new approaches will bring about some of the long-term culture change so many are calling for.

"There's a parenting gap and it's being filled by their older peers right now," Dunlap said. "They're showing them you go get drunk and pass out. And nobody's showing them otherwise. We have to inject some other influences in their lives."

Associate Prof. Careen Yarnal, who studies the role of leisure and positive aging, agreed. While reiterating how complicated

it is, she said there is an adjustment young people make from their lives as teens in their parents' homes to their lives at college, and amidst that adjustment, young adults are less likely to listen to their parents about alcohol or anything else, she said.

"If a professor or somebody else says it to them, they're more likely to listen," she said. "So that's one possible role for professors."

Without those other influences, young people have only so many places to look for guidance. And so long as their peers who are in authority let them "party like crazy, or they're being told they "have to be drunk to succeed" or that it wasn't any fun if it didn't result in that alcohol-induced amnesia the next morning, it could be a long time before anyone sees a culture change.

"It's peer pressure, it's culture, it's prominent," said Dunlap. "And I can't imagine the bravery it takes to break out of that pack..."

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Yea! We can celebrate all the achievements of African-Americans in the United States and throughout the world.

For one month.

At first glance, February always seems like an inappropriate month to celebrate a people's culture and their contributions to American society. It's only 28 days long, cold and often times filled with snow. When you go a little deeper, however, you find February is a month filled with importance. Fredrick Douglass and W.E.B. Dubois were born in February, and the NAACP was founded in this month as well. Most of all, the civil rights movement gained one of its most powerful tools, the sit-in, on Feb. 1.

The only problem with all of the aforementioned moments in history: They should be celebrated every day, not just February.

Check the textbooks that we currently



use. Unless by some chance the book is expressly for an African-American studies course, the mention of African-American achievements is few and far between. We can be fairly sure that the events of January 20, 2009 will be in all of the history books, but will that be all it's worth, a footnote? Prison rates, fractured families, delinquent fathers, emasculated males, single mothers—when it comes to these topics, you can easily find detailed research saying how poorly African-Americans are doing.

When my children get to school, will February be the only time they hear of an African-American with incredible achievements – outside of sports? Schools systems constantly state that they are trying to be more inclusive with their curriculums, but

with all the concerns on standardized testing, the test is more important than the education. Parents, school administrators and educators want to make sure the education they deliver is correct and broad enough to cover all aspects of the society in which they teach.

However, a true broad approach to education gives students the opportunity to learn about Juneteenth, C.J. Walker, Josh Gibson, Claudette Clovin, and Joseph Lowery as well as other notables in Africa-American history. It also helps to show that African-Americans are more than just the continual glut of images that they see on television.

A great majority of students will never know anything of the achievements of African-Americans past Jay-Z's last

album—I liked Jay-Z's last album, but I also like Etta James's and Miles Davis's albums, too.

Will giving the students a few more days of diverse history help them to gain a better perspective to the diverse contributions to this country? Absolutely! Appreciation for the contributions of diverse cultures can help to bridge gaps of controversy and provide valuable points of reference for deeper levels of understanding to begin.

February is great because it is Black History Month, but African-Americans have done more than a month's worth of achievements. In fact, all of our histories are worthy of more than just one month.

I want to make sure my kids and their friends know that. My family will know because I will teach them, but that is every day.



Students meet challenge of launching businesses

by Mary Campbell

Every day, Tyler Drony, owner of GroceryU, goes grocery shopping for himself, his roommates—and 200 other Penn State students and residents.

GroceryU, a grocery delivery service available to all Penn State students and State College residents, is the brainchild of Drony and friends Lucan Schmidt and Brandon Salvador, who are vice president and executive vice president respectively.

"I lived with four other guys for the past two years and we would always run out of groceries within a week," said Drony, a senior majoring in finance. "And it just came to me—everything else is delivered here. Why can't we get groceries?"

Customers place grocery orders online, and their items are delivered to them the next day between 4 p.m. and 10 p.m. Started in August 2009, GroceryU has more than 200 customers and on any given day fills 110 orders, according to Drony.

Starting a new business is challenging, but starting and maintaining a small business during a recession can seem impossible;

however, several Penn State student entrepreneurs, including Drony, have undertaken the challenge, and succeeded.

Linda Feltman, senior business consultant at the Penn State Small Business Development Center, said starting a small business is all about finding the right market niche, a place where a small business is needed and will thrive.

It is possible to start a business, even in a recession. Feltman, who is currently working with four student entrepreneurs, said launching a business while still in school is an opportune time.

"It is a low-risk time in your life when you can afford to fail," Feltman said. "Sometimes enthusiasm and passion will trump ignorance."

And enthusiasm abounds for Davis Shaver, founder of Onward State.

Onward State, the creation of Shaver and now-editors Evan Kalikow and Eli Glazier, is a student-run blog that focuses on the Penn State community.

"The idea was to create a blog that would basically be the type of site I would want to read," said Shaver, a sophomore studying

history. "I did it because I enjoy it, and I like writing about Penn State."

The site has begun offering paid posts to spark revenue, but the plan is to not necessarily profit, but create a self-financing site.

Shaver's plans to monetize Onward State may be challenging, but he is compelled by his blog.

"Onward State benefits the Penn State community by increasing the number of perspectives people are able to get on any given story," Shaver said. "One of the biggest things we have is voice."

Compared to GroceryU and Onward State, which are young and burgeoning businesses, Lion Launch Pad is a grandfather, launched in the fall of 2006.

Founded by Robert Shedd, Lion Launch Pad is a non-profit corporation designed to assist undergraduate students in advancing an idea for a business startup from conception to making a move in the market.

Shedd said he agrees that the recession has challenged small business owners, but he also appreciates the upside.

"In other ways, I think that for individuals who have been laid off or suffered corporate

hardship, it has inspired them to work on an idea that they had," Shedd said. "That [the recession] might have pushed them to move forward with an idea for a startup."

Shedd recently left his job as a senior consultant at IBM to launch a social gaming startup called FanGamb. Shedd and his mentoring team are still working on achieving the original goals of Lion Launch Pad.

"It's definitely a process to figure out what kind of organization to create, and then move it forward," Shedd said. "You run into a whole variety of challenges in launching a business and you have to persevere."

Even as a recession threatens the global economy, student entrepreneurs have future plans for their businesses.

Drony, of Grocery, wants to expand the program in State College to continue to reach more people. He also has plans to expand to other universities, depending on his future academic plans.

"Having a good idea, and basically doing what you have to do just to give it a try makes a business successful," Drony said. "It was something I really wanted to do, and it was worth taking the risk."

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The inclusion of the audience in the discussion allows the play to become their property, too, because they were a part of the process.

"Cultural Conversations is about the text of the play, and the needs of the writer first," Russell said.

"It is not about the spectacle of performance," she said. "That is why they are staged readings, so that a writer can keep working on it [and] make changes at any point, even at intermission. I keep waiting for the day when a playwright will stand up and yell, 'Stop! Take that out. It's not working.'"

The unique and exciting characteristic of this year's Cultural Conversations is that it will open with a new project called "Body Language," which will express female voices, ages 8-80, regarding body image and

the media's influence on how they see themselves. This will be done through the collaboration of three local schools, Penn State, women in the community, and the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty.

Russell is thrilled to have Jess Weiner, writer and motivational speaker and Penn State Alum join the "conversation" this year.

Weiner is considered the "go-to girl" for self-esteem. She's been on Oprah, Tyra Banks and The Today Show, and writes a monthly column for Seventeen magazine. She came to State College in November to do a workshop with local students and will be back in March for Cultural Conversations.

Gloria Libkin, guidance counselor at Park Forest Middle School, and Russell, having both connected to Weiner's mission, gathered Judi Kur, First grade teacher at Radio Park Elementary School, Lisa Harpster, ESL teacher at State High, and Sue Brindle, State High guidance coun-

selor, to discuss the idea of a "cultural conversation" in the form of monologues, written and performed by their female students.

In preparation for putting "Body Language" together, Russell has also done workshops with the students about body image and how to write a monologue.

The workshops have made a big impact on students, according to Libkin, many of whom she would call "little activists" now.

"For me," Libkin said, "it's not about the production. It's about the process that's happening...when they start to think about and question these things.

"One girl said that, before these discussions, she would have looked at a catalog for the clothes," said Libkin. "But now she thinks, 'What are they trying to make me think I need to be?'"

Cultural Conversations will present shows at the Pavilion Theatre from March 24-28, 2010, with performances Wednesday-Saturday at 5 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., and Sunday at 3 p.m. and 5 p.m.



Photo by Jordan Toronto
Susan Russell shows off her momentos from previous Cultural Conversations festival.

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