One Day in the Life of Richard Gonzalez

A compelling account of life and death in Iraq wins BMCC’s Writing and Literature prize for Autobiography  (Story on page 4)
Reinventing the Community College

Reinvention has become one of today’s more overworked buzzwords, typically applied to individuals, institutions, and industries as they seek to recast themselves in a new image. But for community colleges, the word has particularly compelling significance.

In the 100-plus years that they’ve been around, community colleges have made indispensable contributions to American educational life. Today they are playing an even greater role, as rising prices, declining wages and a volatile economy force many families, especially those with college-bound children, to rethink their priorities. More and more families are viewing community colleges as a viable and cost-efficient alternative to four-year schools.

But economic uncertainty isn’t the whole picture. More than ever, community colleges are places where individuals can acquire and hone the skills they need to function and thrive in a fast-changing world. But if community colleges are to continue filling that role, they must increasingly serve as incubators of innovation and change.

One notable way they’re doing that is through ASAP – Accelerated Study in Associate Programs – launched by CUNY last year to create a new model for educating undergraduate students. ASAP’s objective: To reverse a nationwide decline in community college graduation rates by giving a group of highly motivated students the support and resources they need to graduate within three years.

At the time of its launch, Mayor Michael Bloomberg expressed high hopes for ASAP, which he said could help provide New York City “with the educated workforce necessary to stay globally competitive.” Indeed, it is innovative programs like ASAP that will enable community colleges to maintain their vitality and relevance as these indispensable institutions continue to reinvent themselves to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

All Smiles: BMCC President Antonio Pérez, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, and Mayor Bloomberg announce the good news.

Fiterman is Funded

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver personally delivered the BMCC community good news on Nov. 13, announcing inside a packed Richard Harris Terrace that the financing is now in place to rebuild Fiterman Hall, the college’s educational facility destroyed during the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

Bloomberg said the city government will contribute $139 million of the $325 million
A truthful voice

Poet Amanda Pollock

necessary to complete the deconstruction of the old Fiterman, and reconstruction of the new building. An insurance settlement will kick in roughly $80 million, with the state and CUNY picking up the balance.

“It’s over,” Bloomberg said, drawing loud applause from school officials and student leaders. “The Borough of Manhattan Community College as well as Lower Manhattan residents have arrived at a day they have long been waiting for.”

“This is another great victory in the rebuilding of the Lower Manhattan community,” said Silver, “and great news for BMCC students, faculty and staff.”

Once decontamination at the old Fiterman finishes in mid-February, a six-month long deconstruction and 30-month long reconstruction will go forth, and the new, larger Fiterman will open in the spring of 2012.

“Fiterman Hall will benefit our ever-growing student body, seeking their own American dream,” said BMCC President Antonio Pérez. “With this announcement, we learn that their dreams – our dreams – have not been deferred.”

BMCCer Wins Poetry Award

In its fourth annual award contest, BMCC’s Writing and Literature program honored student Amanda Pollock for her poem, Potter’s field…of Hymn and him. According to Pollock, her poem reflects “a true woman’s voice.”

“I’m a woman, I’m a writer, I’m a poet, I’m an American, and I want to relay a truthful experience about what I feel, and how I interpret what’s going on in my life,” said Pollock.

Pollock’s literary talent caught the attention of Smith College in Northampton, Mass., where she now attends college on a scholarship.

“It’s an incredible opportunity and I really credit BMCC and the English department, specifically, for helping me along the way,” said Pollock.

Expanding Services for Veterans

BMCC’s Organization for Student Veterans (OSV) recently received a $13,000 grant from CUNY that has enabled the college to provide additional support services to student veterans looking to transition to civilian life.

The grant has helped boost both psychological and educational guidance for BMCC veterans, helping them explore the educational and occupational options available to them at BMCC and around the city.

“The transition from military life to student life can be overwhelming,” said the organization’s president Aubrey Arcangel, an ex-Marine who served two tours of duty in Iraq, 2003 and 2005. “The OSV is there to help.”

“The Ethicist” Speaks at Donors Reception

Andy Cohen, author of the syndicated column “The Ethicist” – which is featured in The New York Times Magazine every Sunday – discussed politics and praised BMCC this fall at The BMCC Foundation’s fourth annual Donors & Friends Reception. The event, held in Richard Harris Terrace on Oct. 30 to mark the start of the November-long CUNY Month, put the celebratory spotlight on the donors whose generous funding has provided scholarships and enriched programs for BMCC students. Cohen complimented both the BMCC Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that provides leadership to the college in acquiring financial resources needed to support student scholarships and other initiatives, and those who donate to the group.

“It’s one thing to have the desire and be willing to contribute money and effort, but it’s quite another to do it effectively,” he said. And his acclamation for the college didn’t stop there: he moved next to the educators in the room. “It’s incredibly hard to make a difference in the lives of others,” he said, “but at BMCC, you routinely make profound differences in the lives of your students, many of whom are the first in their family to attend college. You change the lives not just of your students, but of generations.”

A BMCC Writing and Literature major who graduated this spring, González received the $1,000 prize for autobiography in this year’s Writing and Literature Program competition, and now attends Hunter College. His entry was titled “MASCAL” – military jargon for “mass casualty incident.”

A detour en route to college

Raised in Brooklyn, González had planned to go to college upon graduation from high school in 1998. “But I didn’t know how to pay for it,” he says, “so I decided to enlist and then attend college on the GI bill.”

After training stateside, González was deployed to Iraq in the summer of 2005, landing first in Kuwait. From there, he flew into Baghdad and then helicoptered into Abu Ghraib, site of the notorious military prison where U.S. military personnel reportedly abused and tortured Iraqi war prisoners. He would spend the next year in the base hospital there, tending to patients “subjected to a kind of pain and suffering that I hope I never understand,” González says.

González’s 12-hour workshifts would routinely be filled with blood, gore, screams and chaos. But one hellish day in particular stood out in his memory and inspired “MASCAL,” which he originally wrote as a student in English Professor Joyce Zonana’s autobiography class.

Long day’s journey into night

After completing my shift... a report comes in that ambulances are arriving full of injured U.S. military and Iraqi National Guard personnel,” he writes. “Just when I think my day is over, I find out that it has barely begun.”

González’s words paint the scene in powerful brushstrokes: “Picture a large tent with about 30 people in it. Now picture that same tent with 12 patients bleeding excessively with partial and complete traumatic amputations from shrapnel and explosive injuries…. Add screams, blood splatter, bodies thrashing from shock, anguish, groans, and an extreme sense of urgency, and you have a partial sense of what happens during an incident like this…. This is the picture of conflict. This is the art of war.”

González’s wife, Amber, is also part of the picture. Trained as a Nutrition Care Technician, she doubles on days like this one as a litter bearer, helping to transport patients into the operating room.

Beyond multitasking

By the time the last patient has been treated, the sun has risen on another day. González picks up the story: “I’m so very tired. I’ve been up so long that I actually feel giddy. I have multi-tasked in ways that would make a workaholic sick. I have transported, ventilated, bandaged, processed surgical instrumentation, gotten lunch and breakfast, delivered blood, made coffee for the section and updated our record book of procedures.”

It has been a year-and-a-half since Richard and Amber González returned from Iraq. They live in “a nice part of Queens” and life has been good. But González is still coming to grips with what he saw and experienced during his 12 months at Abu Ghraib.

“I have problems sleeping sometimes,” he writes. “On some days, I feel like I’m ready to fight some invisible foe. Loud noises scare me. Little noises alert me… But if I had to do it over again I would.”

For more on this story, visit http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=691

I will never be the person that I was when I left the States,” writes Richard González in a haunting remembrance of his experience as a U.S. Army operating room technician and medic in Iraq. “I will never be the person I was when I came back. Who I will become, though, remains to be seen.”

“Life and Death in Iraq”

A portrait of Gonzalez: Louis Chan

 Zimmerman’s portraits
Redefining the “Soccer Mom” at BMCC

Dahiane Romero is a mother – but also a student and soccer player

When one thinks “soccer mom,” usually what comes to mind is a middle-class suburban mother ushering around school-aged children in a minivan. Yet Dahiane Romero represents a different definition of “soccer mom”: a mother who plays collegiate soccer and weighs school responsibilities while raising her young daughter.

Romero had Leila in June 2007, causing her to miss her senior year of soccer at Newton High School in New Jersey. Looking to start on a college education and play soccer somewhere in New York City, she found a perfect fit: BMCC. She began with a few summer classes while working herself back into shape, and then registered for a full load of four courses this past fall.

While it wasn’t easy to get back in shape after having a child, Romero said that wasn’t the hardest thing she had to endure. “I think I’m more attached to her than she is to me,” said Romero.

So, in an effort to make life easier on Romero, Head Coach Kenichi Yatsuhashi allowed her to bring Leila to the summer pre-season practices. Leila – who is learning to speak both Spanish and English – enjoyed every second. Romero said Leila loves soccer, and one of the first words she learned was “goal.” During practices, she could be found kicking around her own mini-soccer ball (under the supervision of a family member or friend who comes to practice as well).

But Yatsuhashi told Romero that once the season started, Leila would be too much of a distraction and couldn’t come to practice anymore. The rule, which Romero completely understood, was part of the reason she wanted to bring Leila to preseason practices.

“I brought her so at least now she knows where I go, and what I’m doing when I leave,” said Romero. “I don’t want her to think I’m leaving without good reason.”

Romero has one season down and one more to go. She’s currently majoring in early childhood education, with hopes that a degree, or soccer – or both – will bring an opportunity her way.

“I want to have a career in both education and soccer,” said Romero. “This is not Plan A and Plan B – it’s a packaged deal. Soccer has opened a lot of doors for me, so who knows what will happen.”

Athletic Update: On the Web

BMCC currently has six sports teams: women’s and men’s basketball and soccer, women’s volleyball, and baseball. And now, for the first time, you can get all the information on each team at the BMCC Athletics Department’s new Web site. ◆ The site – located at www.bmcc.cuny.edu/athletics – is packed with schedules, scores, rosters, statistics, and photo galleries, along with recreational hours, and information for prospective student-athletes. ◆ Athletic Director Steve Kelly said the site will be a great recruiting tool, bringing in student-athletes who will seek out BMCC with the determination to succeed both athletically and academically because they want to continue their career after BMCC. ◆ “One of the things we take a lot of pride in is moving our students on to four-year colleges, because so many of our kids want to play at the next level,” Kelly said. ◆ “Of course our main goal is to put a competitive team on the field or court, but my own personal goal is to have our athletes be both athletically and academically successful. I tell them: you have these dreams of going on to another school? Well, you’ve got to be academically sound, too.”

Student-athletes can’t step foot on our athletic field or court unless they’re in good academic standing.

BMCC Quote

Manhattan Commons
Finding the Hook in Short Stories

Holly Messitt’s English classes are about thinking as much as literature

Years before Holly Messitt joined BMCC’s English faculty, a boss of hers — the head of a public relations agency — decided to recruit several doctoral candidates as staff writers.

“He explained that he needed people who knew how to think,” she says. “He said he could teach public relations to them, but he couldn’t teach anyone to think.”

Now, Messitt, an assistant professor in BMCC’s English department, is forever reminding her students that “the ability to think critically — to know how to ask questions and follow up — is the most valuable thing you can get from college.”

Indeed, critical thinking is the key element of the 300-level English courses she teaches — in the novel, the plays of Shakespeare, and especially the short story.

Love and hate in literature

“Regardless of which course I’m teaching, my aim is always to get my students to engage with what they’re reading — to find the places that hook them, whether they love or hate what the author is doing, and then use that as a way to go deeper into the work and ask questions about it,” Messitt says.

In a class last semester, a narrator’s comment in the short story, Drown, by the Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz, provided just such a hook for a Haitian-born student.

“At one point, the narrator says, ‘We couldn’t have been any poorer unless we were Haitian refugees,’” Messitt recalls. “The student was upset and wanted to know why the author would make such a remark. I got him to tell me something about the relationship between Haitians and Dominicans and learned that Haitians were looked down upon in the Dominican Republic as refugees.”

Rather than accepting the student’s reaction at face value, Messitt challenged him to probe more deeply into the author’s intent. “I asked, who is characterizing Haitians in this way — the author or the narrator? If it’s the narrator, what is Diaz trying to tell us about him?”

The student’s feelings became a way of “getting deeper into the story — and ultimately resulted in a much deeper and more satisfying experience,” Messitt says.

Asking the right questions

Writing figures importantly in Messitt’s courses and typically takes two forms — more formal papers, and what Messitt calls “reaction papers,” in which students are asked to summarize the action in a story at a particular point in the plot and ask questions about it.

“They don’t need to know the answers,” Messitt says. “The important thing is that they know what questions to ask.”

For more on this story, visit http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=689
Lisa Cobham could be spotted singing around the campus in the early 90s.

“I miss New York all the time,” Cobham says. “My favorite thing that I love about New York is the culture – the opera that you can just get at your fingertips, anytime.”

The first time she ever performed professionally was at her sister’s wedding, which made her nervous because she comes from a musical family. Cobham is the daughter of world-renowned master jazz drummer Billy Cobham, and her grandfather was a NYC-based jazz pianist.

Since singing at her sister’s wedding, Cobham has focused on pursuing a career in performing, mostly focusing on opera. Her past credits include performances in Marriage of Figaro, The Magic Flute, Dido and Aeneas, Carmina Burana and Bach’s Magnificat.

Cobham has won many competitions, which are a great way for up-and-coming singers to showcase their talent. “Competitions are where a lot of singers get their start, and they become professional in that way,” she says. “And from that, they are seen and recruited for shows.”

She has performed professionally throughout Connecticut. Could Carnegie Hall or the Met be next? As the adage goes, you never know. “I really have only been doing this for approximately four years now,” says Cobham. “At this point, I am really trying to get my experience to catch up with the talent.”

Save the Date: Class Reunion

BMCC 1980s Reunion
Saturday, April 4, 2009 199 Chambers Street
Invite to all 80’s alumni to follow in March.
In Good Company
Innovative internship gives students a close-up look at big businesses

Luis Marin used to believe there was little room in the business world for creativity or independent thinking. “I always assumed that when you were first starting out, routines and expectations would be pretty rigid,” says Marin, a second-year business management major. However, his participation in the BMCC Student Entrepreneur Real Business Experience has changed that view dramatically.

Through the program, Marin and 13 fellow students spent time at the 1-800-MT-TRESS headquarters in Long Island City, Queens, interacting with senior management, and contributing to meetings and marketing strategy sessions. Exclusively a domestic operation, the company asked interns how its business might be introduced in places like Latin America – an exciting prospect for Marin, a native of Colombia. “The idea of selling bedding over the phone, and delivering it the same day, has never been introduced in my country, but I think it could really go over well,” says Marin. “My plan is to gain as much knowledge as I can here and eventually return to Colombia – both to succeed as an entrepreneur and also to give back to my country.”

Commons Calendar
Events, exhibits, performances for the coming months.

Concerts

- The Hudson River Quadricentennial Concert. Three of New York’s most eminent composers/musicians, Mark O’Connor, Don Byron and Daniel Bernard Roumain, will present fresh arrangements, while David Gonzalez will read poetry.
  - March 13 @ 7:30 p.m., $35 orch, $25 mezz; Students and seniors save $10, BMCC alumni save $15

- Circus Incognitus, Jamie Adkins. In this new show, Adkins’ clowning and acrobatic feats on the ground and on a slack wire bring to life the story of a man who has something to say, but can’t quite get it out.
  - March 21 @ 1:30 p.m., $25

- Hudson Vagabond Puppets, Peter and the Wolf & the Sound Mall. The classic story and score by Sergei Prokofiev used to believethere was littleroom in the businessworld for creativity or independent thinking. “I always assumed that when you were first starting out, routines and expectations would be pretty rigid,” says Marin, a second-year business management major. However, his participation in the BMCC Student Entrepreneur Real Business Experience has changed that view dramatically.

Film Series

- Scenes through the Cinema Lens: Stanley Kubrick’s Music. A look at how Kubrick transformed the practice of music in films such as Dr. Strangelove, A Clockwork Orange, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Full Metal Jacket, and Eyes Wide Shut.
  - March 17 @ 7:30 p.m.

- The fable of the little boy who saved his animal friends from the hungry wolf.
  - April 4 @ 1:30 p.m., $25

- Tribeca Dance presents beyond words. Directors Andrew Palermo and Taye Diggs dive into the world of autism with both wonder and sympathy. Through first-person accounts, propulsive choreography and interpretive actions, they challenge misconceptions, and hope to shed light on the beauty of autistic beings.
  - April 2 through 4 @ 8 p.m., $10 all tickets

Cabaret

- Tsidii In Concert: To A Rising Sun. The South African native, who played the Tony-nominated role of Rafiki in Broadway’s The Lion King, performs music that is intimate, earthy, and filled with wide ranging influences.
  - May 1 and 2 @ 8 p.m. $25 /$15 students and seniors

For tickets call: 212-220-1460.