

The Graduates: Stories of Triumph Inspire Even a City of Success

By **GARY SHAPIRO**, Staff Reporter of the Sun | May 15, 2007

One graduate slept in a church basement and rummaged through garbage bins for food. Another came to America as an orphan after her parents were murdered in the Rwandan genocide. An Iraq War veteran, a Chernobyl survivor, a nursing student who became a patient, and an 84-year-old woman fulfilling her lifelong dream of earning a college degree are among those graduating from New York City's colleges and universities this season.

New York's status as a college town may sometimes take a back seat to the city's role as a financial, fashion, press, and cultural capital. But among this year's crop of graduates are several with inspiring stories of triumph over adversity that remind us that while the city's college students often make the news for rowdy partying or as crime victims, their achievements and immigrant success stories can be as formidable as those of our most famous citizens.

CHURCH BASEMENT TO CUNY BACCALAUREATE A double major earning a perfect 4.0 grade point average in accounting and a near-perfect 3.9 in classics, Bakchik Goo has overcome barriers to excel in the CUNY Baccalaureate Program, administered by the Graduate Center.

This 49-year-old magna cum laude graduate's life began in a poor Korean family in the countryside of Japan. His father struggled at a variety of jobs such as shipping fruit, dealing in shoes, and selling watches on the street. Mr. Goo began to learn English after his father gave him an English language children's book obtained from an American missionary.

To ease the burden on their parents, he and his brother headed during the summers to his grandparents' farm, where Mr. Goo learned to take care of piglets and dry tobacco leaves. Later in Osaka, he was a "delinquent" in

high school, where he was nearly expelled for fighting. He worked menial summer jobs, such as stacking boxes overnight in a refrigerated room at an ice cream factory.

He followed his older brother, a physicist who loved Bach, to New York in 1978.

But facing financial difficulties around 1983, he lost his apartment. Luckily, a pastor whom he knew let him sleep in a church basement on Manhattan's Upper West Side. He borrowed a golden-colored sleeping bag from a classmate and laid it across six metal chairs. At night, he searched the trash from delis for vegetables and fruit thrown out.

He was losing weight and down to about 89 pounds. "I was at the bottom of my life," he recalled. He eventually took time off from school.

But enduring this experience, he said, he learned that there was nothing more to fear in life. It was about this time he met his wife, Nancy, when he sat down next to her on a bus. He said he had very little to offer her at that time in his life.

Like a modern day Horatio Alger, he rebounded after landing a job as a waiter at a Japanese restaurant in New Jersey. He found a small room to let, and later worked at a Japanese securities company, where he prepared U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission reports. He returned to school and mastered accounting. Since last year, he has worked in Jersey City at Société Générale, a French bank, where he is a vice president of regulatory reporting.

Until 1997, he worked for the Chuo Trust and Banking Company on the 93rd floor of the World Trade Center. He said he was lucky that the company had gone out of business by September 11, 2001.

His brother played the harpsichord and pipe organ, and Mr. Goo, who also likes music, explored the sounds of Greek and Latin texts. He read aloud

Ciceronian orations and Platonic dialogues and studied their intonation. His final thesis explored Plato's use of pitch to disclose emotion.

He plans to become an American citizen.

GENOCIDE SURVIVOR EDUCATES OTHERS Jacqueline Murekatete, a political science major at New York University, came to America in 1995 as a 10-year-old orphan after her parents, four brothers, two sisters, and other relatives were murdered in the Rwandan genocide.

Now at age 22, she has devoted countless hours to genocide prevention. She said that as a survivor of genocide in her country, she has felt a responsibility to tell the world what happened and prevent it from happening again. A highlight during college was addressing the General Assembly at the United Nations. "Education is one of the best weapons we have," she said.

She has founded an initiative called Jacqueline's Human Rights Corner, which is part of an international nonprofit organization, Miracle Corners of the World, where she educates people about genocide.

She came to America not speaking English. She said in some ways high school in Queens was more lax than grade school in Rwanda, where students were spanked if they were late. Her life in America, she said, has been "blessed with privileges."

In Rwanda, she grew up with no electricity. Her family and neighbors would gather around the fire and sing. She recalls playing tag by moonlight on the hills of her village. But after the Rwandan president's plane was shot down in 1994, the Hutu majority proceeded to kill Tutsis for about 100 days.

She was visiting her grandmother when the killing started. They fled to the central government office building, with Hutu neighbors following to threaten them. Eventually her grandmother placed her in an orphanage

run by Italian priests. Roadblocks meant certain death, as identification cards were checked. She heard radio broadcasts refer to Tutsis as "cockroaches." The priests bargained and pleaded with Hutus who would periodically arrive with machetes to kill the children in the orphanage. "There is no logical explanation why we survived," she said.

Ms. Murekatete was awarded a full scholarship from the Jerry Seinfeld Family Scholarship Foundation. With a full course schedule, she still manages to speak all over the country and the world. She traveled to Germany as part of a delegation from Touro Law Center and visited Dachau and Nuremberg.

Meanwhile, she has set her sights on aiding orphans, children-headed households, and AIDS victims in Rwanda. She credits her strength to her belief in God. She derives optimism from what she has witnessed visiting American high schools: Nearly every school has a Darfur awareness group. She hopes for a time when "we as human beings can say 'never again' and really mean it."

FROM BARUCH TO IRAQ AND BACK With a grade point average in sociology of 3.966, Gustavo Agosto-DaFonsêca, 24, has already co-authored with a teacher an encyclopedia entry on immigration and immigration law. Focusing on subjects such as social inequality and social stratification, he has given a conference presentation on "Internalized Immobility in East Harlem."

These subjects are not just academic for him. He was born in East Harlem. His father died when he was six. His mother, born in a sharecropper family in Brazil, raised him. While he was growing up, his mother alternated between paying the rent and tuition, which resulted in alternating eviction and expulsion notices.

The first in his family to attend college, he enlisted in the Army Reserves at 17. His unit was called up with orders to go to Afghanistan, but instead was

stationed upstate at Fort Drum. He returned to Baruch and was called up to go to Iraq, where he was deployed in Tikrit at a base hit with mortars.

Sleeping in bombed-out former Iraqi Air Force Academy barracks, amid plywood partitions of about 4 feet by 8 feet, he read articles that his sociology teachers sent him.

Last year, he led two walking tours of East Harlem for a seminar called "Peopling of New York." He showed the transition along 116th Street between Third and Lexington avenues, where the blocks change from Puerto Rican to the more recent Mexican immigrants between Third and Second avenues. The area has changed considerably since the time when he was in grade school. He recalled that then, when he headed to the public library branch at 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, he passed a veritable "open-air drug market." Asked about Spanish Harlem's future, he said the demographics of the area are "transitioning along both ethnic and class lines" due to higher rents and out-migration.

Taking advantage of Baruch offering Portuguese for the first time, he headed to Salvador, Bahia, in Brazil to study the history of the African presence there. The trip was a life-changing experience, as he saw firsthand where his mother had lived in the 1950s and '60s. Walking over antiquated trolley tracks that she used to ride, he re-lived the images of his mother's youth.

When many people think of Brazil, they have images of beaches and sunny weather, he said. But this young sociologist saw homeless children sleeping on the street, young orphan children begging, whom pedestrians disregarded. He believes sociologists can play a larger societal role in public policy and wants to use qualitative methods to capture people's feeling and sentiments and "put a face and story to the numbers."

In the fall, he begins a doctoral program at Boston College. He would like to return to the City University system as a professor and researcher. "The foundations and principles that CUNY was founded on foster an

environment where I would be most effective as a professor, given my life experiences," he said. He also wants an opportunity to give back to the institution that that helped prepare him for this career.

FROM NURSE TO PATIENT Brain injuries and traumas would frighten many, but one Columbia University nursing student handles them with courage. Kristen Thompson works part-time in the neurology intensive care unit at New York-Presbyterian Hospital, helping the critically ill. The first in her family to go to college, she thrives in emergency rooms amid life-and-death situations. "The only time I'm in my zone is when chaos is everywhere," she said.

Mastering subjects such as genetics, advanced pharmacology, psychobiology, and pathophysiology, this 25-year-old with mid-length straight black hair had originally wanted to be a special-effects animator. She headed to film school at Rochester Institute of Technology for a half-year, where she made a student film about a girl trying to find peace during her first year at film school.

One thing she finds in common between animation and nursing is attention to detail. She found her calling as a member of the ambulance squad responding to campus medical emergencies.

She followed her sense of adventure while studying nursing ethics in Australia and New Zealand in the winter of 2004, going skydiving, bungee jumping, snorkeling, and swimming with dolphins. She works part-time at Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, N.J., helping amusement-park patrons who have heart attacks or accidents. She grew up in Monmouth County, N.J., and attended Catholic school in Red Bank, the only child of parents of Italian, French, English, and Cherokee heritage.

She says one thing she has carried over from working in an amusement park to hospital work is an emphasis on customer service. Sometimes she worked in the hospital intensive care unit 7:30 a.m., then slept three hours

before heading to class at noon. She learned American Sign Language while working in clinical rotation at the Delaware School for the Deaf.

She found roles reversed unexpectedly in February. She was strolling with her family at the South Street Seaport on Super Bowl Sunday, when she suddenly experienced chest pain. Her family thought maybe it was anxiety. She entered the emergency room of New York-Presbyterian, where she was treated for a collapsed lung, or spontaneous pneumothorax. She had never been hospitalized before. She still managed to keep up with schoolwork. Then, in March, at the beginning of spring break, the condition recurred. She underwent video-assisted thoroscopic surgery, and a procedure called a pleurodesis, where her lung was mechanically abraded to prevent another collapse.

What has she learned from being a patient rather than caregiver? She said that the experience has given her "a little more heart" in understanding what patients face.

Overall, she said it made her realize that even though one expects tomorrow is going to come, it may not. She said, "Even if you're a nurse practitioner or a doctor, you're not immune from it."

CHERNOBYL TO CHEMISTRY STAR As a three-year-old, Kevin Shenderov left the Ukraine in 1990 with his family after his brother, Eugene, developed leukemia in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear plant explosion. Kevin will now re-cross the ocean as a Rhodes Scholar to study biochemistry.

His brother made a full recovery and is now completing his PhD at Oxford in chemistry, also as a Rhodes Scholar. What impact did living through Chernobyl have on these siblings? "It makes immunology much more personal," said Kevin Shenderov.

Kevin went to school in Brooklyn, skipping fourth and seventh grades. He was the valedictorian at Edward R. Murrow High School and at New York University's College of Arts and Science, where he earned a 4.0 GPA.

While his brother studies how cells of the immune system recognize tumors and viruses, Kevin will research the two branches of the immune system and explore how to manipulate and optimize their interaction to create cancer vaccines.

Mr. Shenderov will spend half of his time at Oxford and the other half at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md. His career model is the physician-scientist who closes the gap between scientific discoveries and actual therapies. He said it is important for scientists to communicate with the public, so that science is not a "black box."

While an undergraduate, he founded two journals: the NYU Global Health Review and a Journal of International Service Reflections. He also organized a youth leadership summit on global health. What did he learn from the conference? He said he better understands the difficulties those in impoverished settings have in accessing health care. But he also learned how much "we can do to help them relatively easily" such as purchasing bed nets to prevent malaria.

Science runs in the family. Not only is his brother a scientist, but his maternal grandmother is a pediatrician, his father a medical physicist at Maimonides Medical Center, and his mother a pharmacy supervisor at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

"They never pushed us to go into science," Kevin Shenderov said. On the other hand, he recalled how his parents would explain how car engines work or how water gets to the top of a tree. "They were great about interesting us in science," he said.

YOUNG IN SPIRIT, 84-YEAR-OLD IS NEWLY MINTED GRADUATE How many new graduates use a 1937 certificate to fulfill a language

requirement? One who did is Helen Katz, who fulfilled a lifelong dream of earning her bachelor's degree this spring at age 84. She steadily took one course a semester, graduating Queens College after fourteen years.

"I have no career ahead of me," she said. But she has come a long way from the time she was born in a cold water flat in Harlem, before her family moved to the Bronx.

In high school, her parents dissuaded her from going to Hunter College and becoming a kindergarten teacher. Instead, they encouraged her to take commercial courses. She recalled her mother saying, "Men don't like smart women." (She has since written a play about this for a drama class.)

She became a stenographer, working for the New York state attorney general, Nathaniel Goldstein, and as an executive secretary at Columbia Pictures. She met her husband one Saturday at the 92nd Street Y at a dance welcoming returning servicemen.

Her parents had come to America on the eve of World War I. Her father passed along his love for singing. She recalls how he would cry upon hearing "The Star Spangled Banner" or "God Bless America." She has continued that interest singing as a tenor in a choral group, singing English, French, Yiddish, and other songs. She studied Yiddish at the Workmen's Circle, a diploma from which she used to meet her language requirement at Queens College.

Her father owned a machinist's shop at Sixth Avenue near 38th Street, fixing millinery machines. Carl Reiner, then in acting school, worked for him as a delivery boy.

As her husband was dying of leukemia in 1993, she told him that she would love to go back to school. "Go to it," she recalled him saying: "Life is to be lived."

She expressed surprise that the Queens College's Adult Collegiate Education Program accepted her at age 70. She has made friends with her younger classmates, including one who works as an off-Broadway usher.

Asked about the differences between the new generation of students and her own, she said that in her day, students were fully covered in blouses and skirts and did not wear jewelry visible in their belly buttons.

Then, there is the issue of language. She felt one student in her theater class used the f-word excessively in a play. She said her reaction during the anonymous class critique session was: "There are a lot of other words one can use."

She has kept up with technology and uses a word processor. Along the way, she has survived four bouts with cancer. Although she never became a kindergarten teacher, she has volunteered as a teacher's aide at P.S. 148, even attending the wedding of the teacher whose class she helped. She wishes her parents could be at her own graduation; instead, her son will attend.