Seeking the Work-Life Balance

By Dan Rivero

Carol Hoffman's appointment as Columbia's first-ever associate provost and director of work-life signals a new era for the University's family-friendly policies, programs, benefits and services.

Hoffman, a trained clinical social worker and native New Yorker, comes to the University from the San Francisco Bay area. She spent 20 of her 35 years on the West Coast at UC Berkeley, initiating and administering the employee assistance program and work-life office. At Columbia, she will be using her expertise to help faculty and staff address the sometimes conflicting responsibilities of career and family life.

She reports to both Provost Alan Brinkley and Vice President of Human Resources Cindy Durning, because her job will support the needs of faculty and staff alike.

"Hiring Carol and opening our work-life office is such an exciting and important step for Columbia," said Durning, who praised Hoffman as the best work-life officer in the country.

Hoffman is clear that her approach to work-life is to address issues from birth to death.

Eric Abrahamson, a professor of management at Columbia Business School whose specialty is organizational theory and change, grew tired of hearing the same refrain when visitors took in the sheer magnitude of the mess in his office: Piles and piles of papers, books sliding across the shelves, telephone messages stacked up. "Shouldn't you be more organized?" they asked.

The question inspired him to write an academic paper on mess. "It started as a bit of a joke, and it turned out to be really fascinating," he says. While there are hundreds of academic studies about organizational theory and behavior, there are very few about the lack of organization, or mess. Abrahamson's 2002 paper, "Disorganization Theory and Disorganizational Behavior: Towards an Ecology of Messes," drew the counterintuitive conclusion that messy systems are frequently more efficient than those that are highly organized.

Abrahamson defined mess as "a disorderly accumulation of varied entities." (He even came up with an equation to represent mess, pictured above.) In layman's terms, mess is "the failure to live up to one's idealized conception of order," he says. This refers not merely to messy desks and offices—the most obvious way most people confront mess—but to entire companies, organizations and even governments.

"People say order is better; I don't necessarily think so," Abrahamson says, and not just because mess may be his default mode. "In terms of time, reorganizations are prone to fail—"and risk. There's the question of 'What benefits do I get?' Some people, or companies, may spend all their time getting organized, but don't manage to accomplish the tasks that really are important.

A PERFECT MESS

By Bridget O'Brien

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Padma Desai's Russian Retrospective

By Adam Piore

At a time when the threat of nuclear Armageddon loomed large, many young scholars took up Soviet studies because they hoped to understand and help defeat the communist foe. Ronald Reagan would later dub "the Evil Empire."

But for Columbia economist Padma Desai, a professor of comparative economic systems and director of the Center of Transition Economics, it was always about something more. Desai was a precocious teenager, growing up on the West Coast of India, when she discovered Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment." "When you are only 13 years of age and read its themes of sin and redemption, suffering and murder, it touches you to the core," she said. "I was so bewildered over. I said I have got to read this in the original Russian."

Desai plunged into Russian (and economics) as soon as she arrived at Harvard in 1955, and today is a leading authority on the former Soviet Union and Russia, penning a number of books and widely read articles. In 1995, she served as a U.S. Treasury advisor to the Russian Finance Ministry.

On April 26 and 27, scholars from around the world gathered on campus for a scientific conference held in her honor. Guests included former Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, Nobel Prize-winning economists, former finance minister and chair of Russia's central bank Sergei Dubinin and Jack Matlock, former U.S. ambassador to Russia.

The conference title, "Russia: Soviet Past, Present Performance and Future Prospects," seemed especially timely due to the recent death of former President Boris Yeltsin.

Desai knew Yeltsin personally, as well as many of the others involved in post-Soviet Russia as it shifted to a free market. Her latest book, "Conversations on Russia: Reform from Yeltsin to Putin," provides interviews with many of them.

Yeltsin's legacy, she says, "on the whole is positive. [He] planted the liberal idea in the land of Lenin and Stalin. And in my view, history
Next stop, Sundance, Cannies and Tribeca.

Before they hit the film festival circuit, short films by Columbia students will have their premiere at the School of the Arts (SoA) film festival which starts April 30.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the Columbia University Film Festival will showcase 40 short films as well as readings for 13 screenplays, the thesis work from SoA’s advanced MFA students. The festival will run in New York until May 10 and then travel to Los Angeles for the West Coast leg June 6–8.

Shot around the world using techniques from 35mm film to the latest digital technologies, this year’s work reflects the film division’s focus on narrative storytelling as filtered through the vision of each student filmmaker. The film division is building on Columbia’s success at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, where Columbia students and alumni were invited to screen a record-breaking 20 films and walked away with top prizes, notably the Grand Jury Prize for best dramatic film, the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award, and the Audience Award for best documentary.

“The judges at this year’s Sundance Film Festival were impressed not only by the quality of our Columbia films but by their variety,” said Dan Kietzman, acting dean of SoA. Columbia’s entries at Sundance represented 10 percent of the short films invited to show there. “We don’t have a ‘house style’ at Columbia, and because of this, there’s no predicting what our students will come up with. We are proud of this diversity and proud to be known as the best single source for Columbia’s entries at Sundance represented 10 percent of the short films invited to show there. “We don’t have a ‘house style’ at Columbia, and because of this, there’s no predicting what our students will come up with. We are proud of this diversity and proud to be known as the best single source for short films in America.”

The judges for the CU Film Festival have viewed the films twice and have voted on the six that will be featured at the May 10 Faculty Selects screening at Symphony Space. Other awards are also selected by sponsors, students, and audience members.

The films will screen at the IFC Center, 323 Sixth Ave., from April 30 to May 3. The screenplay readings will take place at the McCraw Hall Theater, 1212 Sixth Ave., on May 7. and the festival will culminate with awards and screenings of the winning films at Symphony Space, on Broadway and 96th St., on May 10.

For tickets, times, and information about the screenings and readings, please visit the festival Web site at avara.cufilmfest.com.

By Melanie A. Farmer

Columbia’s Own Constant Gardener

Before landscape designer Lynden Miller first dug her hands into the soil at Columbia University’s Morningside Heights campus, the hedges were unkempt and the lawns were a sea of mud and dust.

Now, 10 years later, the campus is far more verdant and lush than she found it. On any given day, tourists pose in front of Miller’s “Cenobial bed[s]” of blue-and-white-themed perennials on lower College Walk. She has since planted oak leaf hydrangeas throughout campus, beds of jasmine near the Law School and daffodils on Low Plaza.

“She is a natural thing. Human beings respond to plants and nature,” Miller said. “People in the city deserve more than concrete and grass, and that’s what I’ve devoted my 25-year career to giving them that.”

Miller is a well-known public garden designer who has created gardens for the Central Park Zoo, Bryant Park and The New York Botanical Garden. On April 18, she led a landscape-touring of campus for a small group of faculty and students enrolled in the Master of Science in Landscape Design at the School of Continuing Education. The program, launched in 2005, combines the history and theory of garden design with studio work and horticulture and technical knowledge.

Twenty students will be graduating this May.

Miller, who is the program’s advisor, engaged students designing the campus landscape in 1997 and maintains the grounds in conjunction with Columbia’s facilities department. During the tour, she referred to her plants with careful attention and warmth, much as someone would talk about children or loved ones. Her face lit up when she discussed her ideas for future plantings.

On the tour and later at a lecture she delivered in Schermerhorn Hall called “Making Magic in the City Parks, Plants and People,” Miller underscored the challenges of convincing people that beautiful parks make a difference. One of her most notable projects is the revitalization of the Conservatory Garden in East Harlem—once a neglected public space of weeds and overgrown rhododendrons, it is now a thriving, ever-changing garden that thousands of New Yorkers enjoy each year.

As co-chair of New Yorkers for Parks, an advocacy organization, Miller helped develop the Neighborhood Parks Initiative, an innovative partnership that provides gardeners for park maintenance in underserved communities. Her message: “If you make it beautiful, they will come.”

In the future, Miller also hopes to help revitalize Ancel Plaza on East Campus, currently home to more concrete than foliage. In keeping with the adage that a garden is never finished, she would like to do more work with SIPA Plaza, behind Casa Italiana, around Low Library and the Journalism School.