Judges pick top 11 school staffers for 2015 Hometown Heroes in Education awards

BY BEN CHAPMAN, LISA L. COLANGELO / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS / Wednesday, August 5, 2015, 2:00 AM

Hometown Heroes in Education judges are, from left, principals union President Ernest Logan, Daily News President and Editor-in-Chief Colin Myler, CUNY Chancellor James Milliken, city Schools Chancellor Carmen Farina, NY1 anchor Pat Kiernan, CUNY Prof. David Bloomfield, Daily News education reporter Ben Chapman and teachers union Assistant Secretary LeRoy Barr.

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A panel of judges met Tuesday to select 11 top school staffers for the 2015 Hometown Heroes in Education awards.

The winners, selected from a pool of 20 inspiring finalists, were chosen at a lively lunch meeting at the Daily News’ lower Manhattan headquarters.

“It’s always tough when you are faced with so many excellent candidates,” said city Schools Chancellor Carmen Farinella, who served as one of the judges. “It’s thrilling to know that New York City has people who are devoted not only to their classrooms, but their communities as a whole.”

The News received about 200 nominations for outstanding teachers, counselors, administrators and other staffers who have made a difference in the lives of city students.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS HOMETOWN HEROES IN EDUCATION RULES

The winners will be honored at a star-studded breakfast Oct. 1 in Times Square for the third annual Hometown Heroes in Education awards.
This year's panel of esteemed judges, which included City University of New York Chancellor James Milliken and Council of School Supervisors & Administrators President Ernest Logan, compared the qualities of each educator.

"This is a really solid field," said NY1 anchor Pat Kieran, who also served as a judge. "The nominees are exceptional this year."

Some of the finalists considered by the judges included a social worker who mentors young teens incarcerated on Rikers Island, a beloved second-grade teacher who has molded generations of students and a principal who brought her love of words to youngsters.

Fariña lauded Scott Krivitsky, a teacher at PS 186 in Coney Island, who has created a network of educators focused on science, technology, engineering and math.

"He has changed the culture of schools beyond his own," said Fariña, who pointed out that Krivitsky volunteers his time on weekends to work on STEM projects with other educators.

Logan said he wanted to focus on educators who have made a big impact in their schools, but may not have received public recognition for their efforts.

"We are always looking for someone who really identifies as a New Yorker," said Logan. "A real New Yorker is someone who is doing something not just for themselves but to make this city better."

Daily News President and Editor-in-Chief Colin Myler, who also served as a judge, said many of the nominees met those high standards. "The nominations were truly outstanding," Myler said. "The unselfishness and sacrifice of our teachers and educators is beyond remarkable."

TAGS: hometown heroes in education 2015, carmen farina
Back to school: Why August is the new September

By Daphne Sashin, CNN
① Updated 8:00 AM ET, Wed August 5, 2015

A Sampling of 2015-2016 School Start Dates

Story highlights

School starts in August or even July for many schools

Educators say test prep and learning patterns are improved by earlier start dates

Editor's Note: Daphne Sashin is a producer with the CNN social discovery team. Reach her on Twitter @dsashin.

(CNN) — First came the summer camp promotion from the YMCA of Metro Atlanta, crashing like a brick into my inbox June 17.
4-year-old that we had only six more weeks of summer?!

But, going by the school calendar, they were right. My son starts pre-kindergarten today at our neighborhood school. That's right -- August 5. It's the same for children in cities and towns across the country, including in Phoenix, Oklahoma City, Indianapolis and Monterey, California. Lots of schools join them the following week and all throughout August.

We're not smashing any records here. In Hawaii and parts of Indiana and Arizona, kids have been in class since late July.

Having grown up in New England, where I was still writing letters home from summer camp in late August, I was perplexed and awash in nostalgia-fueled angst. What happened to school starting after Labor Day?

It turns out a lot of parents have the same question, and there are answers.

But first, a short history of school calendars: Kids didn't always have summers off. In fact, summer vacation as we know it is a pretty recent phenomenon. When the public education system started in the 1800s, calendars varied depending on the needs of the community. In cities, schools were open practically year-round, often 240 days a year. Rural schools, on the other hand, were open for only about five months over two sessions, in the winter and summer. Fall and spring, school was out so children could help harvest the crops and help with planting, said John Rury, a historian of American education at the University of Kansas.

By the late 1800s, a concern for the professionalization of teachers, periodic financial shortfalls and "the ill effect of too much schooling on students' and teachers' health" were among the factors that moved school leaders to eliminate the summer term, said Kenneth Gold, interim dean of education at The College of Staten Island/CUNY and the author of "School's In: The History of Summer Education in American Public Schools."

In the early 20th century, the rural and urban districts came into alignment so pretty much
new September?

There are more than 12,000 school districts in the country, and all sorts of laws and reasons govern when they can start and who decides. All the education experts I spoke with seemed to agree that through the 1980s, Labor Day still ruled. But by the mid-1990s, especially in the South, districts began to hop aboard the August train. The last time schools started after Labor Day in my current home of Atlanta, it was 1996.

This year, districts in states from Florida to Kansas to California will start in August and end around Memorial Day.

Kids and backpacks: Share your photos

There are still plenty of schools that start after Labor Day. The later date is popular in the Northeast, for one, and in Michigan and Virginia, there are state laws backed by the local tourism industry that prohibit schools from starting before Labor Day unless they have a waiver.

But, even in those two states, some schools are starting in August. This year in Virginia, students in Prince William County will start school before Labor Day for the first time.

Why start before Labor Day? Do schools hate summer?

I spoke with several education professors and the head of scheduling for Atlanta Public Schools, and they offered several reasons:

- An earlier start date gives teachers more instructional time before statewide assessment tests in the spring. Several experts agreed that this is one of the biggest factors pushing calendars back.

- Beginning in August allows students to complete the first semester before the December holiday break, rather than taking tests and turning in big projects after two weeks off. Teachers don't have to spend time reviewing material in January when they should be starting new lessons. Those were some of the reasons given by the Los
February, in addition to breaks around Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. Teachers are happier and kids behave better when they have more breaks throughout the year, said Rebecca Kaye, the Atlanta Public Schools policy and governance adviser, who makes the yearly calendar. "Learning is hard work, and teaching is hard work, and people need breaks," Kaye said. "We have gotten feedback from our employees that they need that time."

- When you start after Labor Day and end school in June, that last month is simply not taken as seriously. "That end of the year is perceived as being time that is sometimes not used to the maximum value," Kaye said. And in fact, when Atlanta schools ended in June, a lot of kids simply didn't show up after Memorial Day. "Even though we were having school after Memorial Day, people had it in their minds that school ended. It may seem ridiculous, but that's what happened."

- Many graduating students and staff members take summer courses at colleges and universities. Ending school around Memorial Day creates fewer conflicts for them.

I guess those reasons trump my nostalgia. But isn't it too hot for school in August? Is that the best use of money?

Wouldn't schools save money by starting later?

That's what some critics argue. They say that earlier dates put extra pressure on schools' air-conditioning systems and that it would be less expensive to have summer vacation during the hottest part of the year.

Atlanta Public Schools analyzed the costs and determined that there would be minimal, if any, savings by shifting the school year. There are people working in the schools pretty much year-round. "Schools are bustling with activities: summer school programs, summer camps and maintenance activities. And you can't just shut down the air conditioning; the technology requires a certain amount of climate-control to protect the equipment," Kaye said.

Fine. Maybe it's not so bad ...

I'll get used to this calendar, Kaye says. She points out that parents like me tend not to be quite as nostalgic for school in late June. Getting out at Memorial Day is nice, and I suppose June is a lovely time to vacation. Unfortunately, it probably means my kids won't be able to
If it was up to her, she says, she would extend the school year even longer, like the urban schools in the 1800s.

"I would love to have that 220-day calendar, because our kids -- the majority of the students in the system -- if they're not in school, they're not learning."

When does your child start school? Is it too early, too late or just right? Weigh in with CNN Parents on Facebook.
Conference and new research takes a broader look at the college match challenge

Submitted by Paul Fain on August 5, 2015 - 3:00am

WASHINGTON -- Only a small number of top-performing high school students from low-income backgrounds get admitted to elite colleges. This so-called undermatching problem has gained the attention of academic researchers, the White House and the news media in recent years.

Yet the studies that initially triggered this worry were focused on the much broader issue of the numerous barriers low-income students face in trying to get to college -- usually a public one -- and earn a degree.

A research conference [1] the American Enterprise Institute hosted Tuesday tried to shift the "college match" conversation away from the Ivy League and back to its initial focus on more typical students and institutions. The event featured discussions of seven new working papers [2], which covered a wide swath of the topic.

"That are lots of reasons that undermatching is intuitively appealing," said Andrew Kelly, director of AEI's Center on Higher Education Reform, adding that "the discussions also felt narrow at times."

The conference Tuesday began with a look back at influential research on college choice and the academic match between students and institutions.

For example, an influential 2008 study [3] by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago found that only one-third of that city's public high school graduates who aspired to complete a four-year degree enrolled in a college that lined up with their academic qualifications.

That report was followed by Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities, a book by three prominent higher-education experts. In the book [4] the three authors described [5] how academically overqualified students who enroll at colleges with lower admissions standards are less likely to eventually earn a degree than if they attend a selective university.

Mike McPherson, the president of the Spencer Foundation and former president of Macalester College, was one of the book's coauthors. At the AEI event he said it was based on students who attended competitive public institutions like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (the book looked at graduation rates at 21 flagship public universities and four statewide public systems of higher education.)

Yet McPherson said public attention to the issue became focused on how few students from rural high schools get into Harvard University. "That's a way less important conversation," he said, at least compared to the enrollment and graduation rate patterns of typical students at relatively selective
public institutions.

Nicole Farmer Hurd is the founder and CEO of College Advising Corps, a large nonprofit group focused on college access. She agreed with McPherson during the panel discussion, saying the college-match conundrum is not just about high-achieving, low-income students.

"Every student deserves a postsecondary education," Hurd said. "Let's remove the judgement."

Typical Students and Academic Quality

Undermatching and elite colleges became a hot issue in part because of a 2012 study by Caroline Hoxby, a professor of economics at Stanford University, and Christopher Avery, a professor of public policy at Harvard University.

That paper, which the National Bureau of Economic Research published, found that more than half of low-income, highly talented students do not apply to a single selective college. And those that do tend to be clustered at a tiny number of high schools that require minimum test scores for admission.

Hurd said the problems uncovered in Hoxby and Avery's paper are indeed worrisome.

"I don’t want to take all the oxygen out of that space," said Hurd, pointing to the relatively small number of needy students that elite colleges enroll. (One of the research papers said low-income students comprise less than 5 percent of the enrollment at the nation's most selective institutions, a percentage that has remained largely unchanged for decades.)

Yet Hurd called for more of a focus on low-income students like the ones her group has helped gain admission to the City University of New York (CUNY), often with full scholarships. And, as several experts said at the conference, that approach means looking at the academic quality of public institutions.

One of the new working papers that took a broader view of college matching was authored by Awilda Rodriguez, an assistant professor of education at the University of Michigan. It cited a recent study which said the national population of high-achieving, low-income students is small -- between 25,000 to 35,000 students, or about 4 percent of high school seniors (high-achieving was defined as having at least an A- GPA and scoring in the 90th percentile on the ACT or SAT).

"By focusing the conversation on a small percentage of students gaining access to an even smaller percentage of highly selective institutions," Rodriguez wrote, "we limit our understanding of the college match phenomenon -- and our understanding of other forms of stratification across the higher education system."

In contrast, her paper said the "average-performing" student is both "ubiquitous and obscure." These students, defined as those with high school grade-point averages between 2.0 and 3.5, account for up to two-thirds of college students. Yet this group's college aspirations and outcomes remain largely unstudied.

Average students in the study by Rodriguez are more likely to be low-income than are high-performing ones -- 45 percent come from families earning less than $50,000, compared to 27 percent of high-performing students. And they are less likely to have parents who hold college degrees.

Most students in the typical, or average, category do attend college -- only 8 percent were not enrolled in college or in the military two years after high school, according to the study. About 60 percent enrolled at four-year colleges, with 30 percent enrolling at community colleges.

When applying to college, average-performing students were slightly more concerned about price than high-performing students, the study found, and were more interested in staying close to home. Rodriguez wrote that 57 percent of this group enrolled in colleges that were located within 50 miles of their home.
Determining what constitutes a “good” match for average-performing students is more complicated than it is for high-performing ones, the paper said, because a good match for high-performing students tends to be enrolling at one of the nation’s top colleges. So Rodriguez proposed alternative ways to consider the match for typical students: 1) their career aspirations and academic interests; 2) their nearby college options; 3) the affordability of the institution; and 4) the likelihood of completion.

“Improving match can only be achieved if colleges that serve large shares of average-ability students well are encouraged to increase capacity,” the paper concludes, while “at the same time improving the colleges that have low or middling completion rates.”
CCNY Grad Student Wins Prestigious Fellowship

Kwangwoon "Jon" Lee, a student in the laboratory of Ronnie Ghose, professor of chemistry and biochemistry, was just awarded the American Heart Association predoctoral fellowship. He is the first CUNY student to receive this highly competitive fellowship.

The fellowship, which started on July 1 of this year and will continue until June 30, 2017, will allow Lee to continue his research into obtaining a better understanding of a cellular signaling pathway, the deregulation of which leads to hypertension. In particular, his research focuses on how this pathway that is regulated by the ubiquitous cellular sensor of calcium, the protein calmodulin, works in conjunction with several enzymes called kinases to form a finely balanced signaling circuit. An alteration in this circuit has many deleterious effects, including causing the smooth muscle cells of blood vessels to alter their shape and stiffness, resulting in increased blood pressure.

Lee attended UC Santa Barbara for his undergraduate degree in biochemistry. After graduation, he spent two years working as a quality manager in the medical device industry and as a research assistant in biochemistry at UC Santa Barbara.

Fascinated with structural biology, he came to City College in 2012 to pursue his doctorate.

"Jon has chosen to work on an extremely complex problem using diverse structural and biochemical tools," said Ghose. "Given his ability to learn quickly and work extremely hard — he often works through the night — I expect that his work will provide fundamental insight into this unique pathway of intracellular communication."

Lee's work is part of the Ghose Laboratory's longstanding collaboration with Kevin Dalby of the University of Texas at Austin to study various specific cellular signaling pathways that have been implicated in certain cancers, neurological conditions and, for Lee's project, in heart disease.

In other CUNY News, it has been announced that The City College of New York rose significantly in Forbes magazine's 2015 rankings of America's Top Colleges, landing in the top 100 in the Northeast for the second consecutive year. CCNY also ranked in the top 200 overall for the first time.

The only CUNY college to make the region's top 100, CCNY jumped to #78 from #92. CCNY is also one of only two New York state public institutions to rank in the top 200 overall; CCNY climbed to #177, up from last year's rank of #215.

The Forbes rankings cap a particularly successful year for CCNY. Highlights of the past year include: the awarding of the Nobel Prize in physiology to 1963 alumnus John O'Keefe, making him CCNY's 10th Nobel Laureate, CCNY's being a co-leader nationally in producing the most 2014-2015 Fulbright U.S. Scholars; CCNY students' and faculty's receipt of prestigious awards, fellowships and scholarships; and the establishment of the CUNY School of Medicine at City College in partnership with St. Barnabas Hospital.

In other news, Gilda Barbarino, dean of the CCNY Grove School of Engineering, was one of four experts invited to Washington on July 28 to brief the U.S. Congressional Sickle Cell and Research & Development Caucuses on promising new technologies to treat sickle cell disease.

The briefing, "Gene Editing and the Path to a Cure for Sickle Cell Disease," provided an opportunity for the researchers to discuss recent breakthroughs in gene-editing technology. Two such technologies are CRISPR/Cas-9 and TALENs, which have made gene editing faster and cheaper.

"While sickle cell disease is the first molecular disease, having been discovered over 100 years ago, long-lasting
treatments and a widely available cure remain elusive," Barabino told the Congress members. "New research discoveries in the application of gene editing tools provide significant advantages compared to previously existing technologies and hold great promise for a cure for sickle cell disease."

Barabino also used her time to press the case for diversity in biomedical research.

"The need for funded research and for efforts that bring researchers together with those being served by the research, as well as means to ensure that technological advance reach those who are most in need, is great," she said. "We also need more opportunities to train a diverse workforce and increase the clinicians, engineers and scientists from underserved and health disparity populations."

In addition to Barabino, the researchers invited to brief the caucuses were: Dr. Marsha Treadwell, director of the Northern California Network of Care for Sickle Cell Disease, UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital in Oakland, Calif.; Dr. Pankaj Qasba, program director at the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute in the division of blood diseases and resources; and Katrine Bosley, CEO of Editas Medicine.
What a garbage crisis tells us about Lebanese politics

By Rola el-Husseini | August 4 at 4:34 PM

During the past two weeks, Lebanon has been mired in a garbage crisis. The landfill used by Beirut since the mid-1990s has entirely overflowed, and local residents have forced the government to close it. Meanwhile, due to internal squabbling, the government has failed to extend its contract with the garbage company Sukleen and to find suitable alternative landfills. Civil society has attempted to step in to compensate for the lawmakers' dereliction of duty, and Uber drivers have been called upon to help remove trash from the streets of the city.

This trash crisis mirrors and compounds 14 months of system-wide gridlock that has prevented the election of a new Lebanese president. Indeed, as one lawmaker from Beirut pointed out, "the [trash] issue is being used by politicians as a proxy for broader struggles." The country is currently being managed by a caretaker government headed by Tammam Salam, the scion of a notable Sunni family that traces its origins back to the ranks of the Ottoman bureaucracy.

The stalemate in Lebanon is due largely to political polarization between pro-Hezbollah and anti-Hezbollah factions, a divide that reflects spillover from the Syrian civil war. Hezbollah's hold on Lebanese politics is strong. Despite growing unrest among Hezbollah's constituency due to the cost of its military support for the Syrian regime, it remains the main political force among Lebanese Shiites and one of the principle actors in the country's government. In recent years, Hezbollah has put its weight behind the Lebanese Christian leader Michel Aoun, helping to effectively split the political clout of the Christian community. Aoun's campaign to become the country's next president and install his sons-in-law in major political positions has been met by resistance from both his Christian foes and their Sunni allies. While the Sunni community is not splintered its opposition, its own leadership is ineffectual and fragmented, unable to put forth a central representative.

I was recently in northern Lebanon, an area referred to as the "Sunni reservoir," doing fieldwork among members of this community. As I navigated the streets, the disappointment with the country's Sunni leadership was nearly tangible. This disenchantment with Sunni political representation was combined with a resentment and visceral hatred of Hezbollah, which many accused of controlling the state and persecuting the Sunnis, particularly Islamists. The lack of political leadership in Lebanon's Sunni community is contributing to the perpetual gridlock and uncertainty in the political system.

One intriguing feature of Lebanese politics is that, in the wake of the 1989 Taif Agreement ending the country's decades-long civil war, the Sunni community was the only major sectarian group without a representative party composed of former militia leaders. Indeed, most of the Sunni militias that existed at the start of the civil war had effectively disappeared by the mid-1980s. This was, in part, due to the importance of Palestinian forces as Sunni protectors during the war; instead of developing local leadership, Lebanese Sunnis tended to rally behind the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Syrian opposition also played a role. Fearing that a powerful Sunni militia in Lebanon might encourage Syrian Sunnis to rise up against the Alawite-led regime, Syria's leaders actively and violently discouraged the development of any such organization.
After the war ended, Sunni political representation came to center not around a previous military leader, but rather around a business tycoon named Rafiq Hariri, also known as "Mr. Lebanon," a larger-than-life figure who elicited strong responses ranging from admiration to disgust. Unlike most other post-war political figures, Hariri spent much of the conflict's duration abroad, achieving great wealth through his business dealings in Saudi Arabia. Upon his return to Lebanon near the end of the civil war, he leveraged his financial resources to enter politics. Hariri was a central figure in bringing the civil war to a close, and he served as prime minister several times between 1990 and 2005. As the primary voice for Lebanon's Sunni community, his assassination in 2005 — later followed by the encroaching chaos of the Syrian civil war — threw all of this into turmoil.

Rafiq Hariri's son, Saad, inherited his father's political legacy and much goodwill from the Sunni community. However, Saad's lack of charisma, ineffectual political leadership and tendency (unlike to his father) to surround himself with loyalist sycophants and family members have turned both local and international public opinion against him. Many members of the Sunni community feel that Saad has forgotten his sectarian origins and is failing to promote the interests of his constituents. My interlocutors felt that he takes his community for granted, partly due to arrogance and partly because he feels there is no viable alternative to his leadership. As if to prove this point, most of these same disappointed voters agreed that if elections were held today, they would still dutifully cast their ballot for Saad and/or the candidates of his Future Movement party. Despite his self-imposed exile to Paris and Riyadh in recent years, Saad continues to appear as the only representative that the community can agree on.

Disappointment with Saad has created an opportunity for rival Sunni representatives to arise, but so far none have been able to make significant inroads. Najib Mikati, a somewhat pro-Syrian businessman and parliamentarian from the northern city of Tripoli, has established a strong political base in the region surrounding his home town. However, he is unlikely to develop much of a following among the wider Sunni community in Lebanon because of his perceived alliance with Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Other prospective Sunni leaders include the heads of traditional notable families, such as interim prime minister Tammam Salam. However, the outlook for these notables is not positive in the long run. It took Salam 10 months from his appointment in April of 2013 to form a working government, mostly because he lacks a strong public constituency. Salam's primary credential is that he can serve as a compromise candidate: his leadership is accepted by the regional powers and by Saad Hariri and is tolerated by Hezbollah and its allies. Sunni enthusiasm for Salam's government is virtually nonexistent, however, so it seems unlikely that he will emerge as a champion of the community.

Second-tier Sunni politicians who have previously held only appointed positions, including Ashraf Rifi, the minister of justice and former head of the Lebanese internal security forces, and Nouhad Mashnouq, the minister of interior and a former journalist, are said to have ambitions for the premiership and have been vying to represent their community. Rifi champions the hard-line position and appeals to Sunnis who feel their community is increasingly persecuted—epitomized in the treatment of Islamist detainees in the infamous Roumieh prison. Mashnouq, on the other hand, presents himself as the moderate statesman, appealing intellectually to the upper and middle-class urban Sunnis. Nevertheless, both men are clients of the Hariri clan and neither can command a strong base of popular enthusiasm.

The leadership void in the Sunni community has provided an opportunity for Islamist factions to gain political clout in Lebanon. Marginalized during Rafiq Hariri's tenure, Islamists, especially Salafis, have recently reemerged as a power to contend with. One can roughly divide Lebanese Sunni Islamists into two main categories. Modernists who accept the
Lebanese state (such as Jama’a Islamiyya and Jam’iyyat al-Mashari’ al-Khayriyya) have previously fielded candidates for legislative elections, though without significant success. In contrast, the so-called “scholastic Salafis” pursued a policy of rejecting the political process for many years. After Rafiq Hariri’s assassination, however, these Salafis began to mobilize their constituents and participate in elections. Currently, the Salafis are fragmented, lacking a unified leadership and voice. The main sheiks who represent the Lebanese Salafis today include Salem al-Rafe’i, Zackaria al-Masri, and Da’i al-Islam al-Shahal (the son of the founder of Lebanese Salafism).

It is important to note that these Islamists do not provide a viable alternative for Sunni leadership in Lebanon. Their version of Islam is not acceptable to the majority of the country’s Sunnis, which is why most of my interlocutors continue to dutifully line up and support Saad Hariri’s Future Movement, despite their limited enthusiasm. However, while Islamists do not have broad enough appeal to enter elite politics, they have become important enough to serve as unelected local community leaders and to disrupt political stability in some regions, as witnessed by the fighting between the local Alawites and their Sunni neighbors in the northern city of Tripoli over the past couple of years.

Lebanon has reached an era where the consociational system based on power-sharing between the country’s different confessional groups can provide only a limited guarantee of political stability. The reasons for this are twofold: Syria is no longer supporting but undermining the consociational system, and Islamist groups, both Sunni and Shiite, have begun to work outside the system and reject the elite power-sharing approach that has classically been the guarantor of Lebanese political coherence.

Amid all of the uncertainty in Lebanese politics today, the power-void in Sunni representation, the potential players who seek to fill that void, and the emerging influence of Sunni Islamist groups remain among the least understood. The Lebanese Sunni community is in disarray, unable to find one leader to rally around after their disenchantment with Saad Hariri’s performance. Meanwhile, the garbage continues to pile up in the streets of Beirut.

‘Rola el-Husseini is a researcher with the Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center and a non-resident fellow with the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) in Washington DC. Her first book was Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Postwar Lebanon (Syracuse University Press, 2012), and she is currently preparing a manuscript on the Lebanese Sunni Islamists.'
Writing on the Wall: Selected Prison Writings of Mumia Abu Jamal

Posted By admin On August 4, 2015 @ 10:15 am In Feature Stories,Featured Book | No Comments

Listen to this segment

GUEST: Dr. Johanna Fernandez, professor of history at Baruch College of the City University of New York, a former Fulbright Scholar, and one of the coordinators of the ‘Campaign to Bring Mumia Home’.

*This segment was originally broadcast on May 6, 2015.

The life of political prisoner and award winning journalist Mumia Abu Jamal remains in danger, as prison authorities in Pennsylvania are slow to provide him with appropriate medical treatment. Abu Jamal’s blood sugar had reached very dangerously high levels indicating a diabetic condition that seemingly appeared out of nowhere. And his skin shows evidence of a serious condition. Relatives and supporters who managed to visit him in prison in late April report that he is weak and barely able to walk and talk.

This morning the organization, Prison Radio reported that medical staff at the Pennsylvania Corrections Center informed Mumia that they were going to proceed with the first diagnostic test recommended by his doctor, and that a skin biopsy was done on Monday. But concerns remain about testing delays and inadequate medical care.

The vibrant reporter who has been behind bars for more than 30 years and who just celebrated his 61st birthday in prison, has shone a light on prison conditions through his insightful commentaries. But more often than not, his journalistic work focuses on the social and political issues of the day, both national and international.

Mumia Abu Jamal has managed to do inside prison what most people outside have never achieved – he has written more than a half a dozen books, starting with his ground-breaking 1996 work, Live From Death Row. Now, in just a few weeks, City Lights Books will publish his newest work. Writing on the Wall: Selected Prison Writings of Mumia Abu Jamal. The book has a foreword by Dr. Cornel West, and has been edited by Dr. Johanna Fernandez.

Mumia Abu Jamal’s: filed this commentary entitled 'Message to the Movement' on April 26, 2015. Visit www.prisonradio.org to listen to all of Abu Jamal’s commentaries.
It really does pay to stay in school

Now you’ve been in school a week. Some of you will be happy with your teachers and classes, and some will not. You might even think about truancy. Truancy is staying away from school without permission. Don’t do it! Research has found that it’s not good for the student who has significantly higher unemployment rates than those students who stay in high school and especially college. Another reason that it is a law to stay in school is that truancy is a gateway to later crime. The Honorable Judge Bruce Newman wrote an article stating that:

“Students who become truant and eventually drop out of school, set themselves up for a life of struggle by putting themselves at a long-term disadvantage. High school dropouts, for example, are 2 1/2 times more likely to be on welfare than high school graduates. ... In addition, high school dropouts who were employed earned much lower salaries. When kids skip school, they tend to get into trouble. More that 82 percent of prisoners today are school dropouts.”

And yes, there are gifted students who get bored, but here’s an idea: If you keep your grades up, you can attend Kauai Community College for one credit a semester in your junior year and get both high school and college credit for it. In your senior year, you can take two.

In another study, a new report from the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University finds that young adult high school dropouts—individuals aged 16 to 24 face even more difficulty in the labor market. The report, “The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Joblessness and Jailing for High School Dropouts and the High Cost for Taxpayers,” also examines other problems such as lower earnings and higher incarceration rates that affect young adult dropouts more disproportionately than their better-educated peers. It concludes that the average high school dropout will have a negative net fiscal contribution to society of nearly $5,200, while the average high school graduate generates a positive lifetime net fiscal contribution of $287,000 from age 18 to 64.”

What that means is that an average dropout costs everyone else $5,200 to pay for their court costs, jail time, and welfare costs. While the average high school graduate puts into society $287,000 for the same age span. With all the concern about Medicare and Social Security rates decreasing for our elder kupuna, it would benefit us all if people could carry their own financial weight, and that seems to be best done by staying in school.

Since everyone benefits from kids staying in school, maybe we ought to focus on keeping them there. The first focus is on the actual law that our kids would be breaking, with the understanding that the parents are responsible for getting their children to school.

Hawaii Revised Statute 571-11 (2-C) states that the court shall have jurisdiction over a juvenile. “Who is neither attending school nor receiving educational services required by law whether through the child’s own misbehavior or nonattendance.”

These are the legal exceptions:
1. The child is physically or mentally unable to attend school. This needs a doctor's note.

2. The child is 15 or over, suitably employed, and has been excused by the superintendent, his representative, or by a family court judge.

   a. The employer must notify the school within 3 days upon termination of the child’s employment.

3. The child has graduated from high school.

4. The child is enrolled in an appropriate alternative educational program as approved by the superintendent or his representative.

5. The child is home schooled, and that intent has been submitted to the principal of the public school that the child would otherwise be attending.

6. The child is 16.

7. The principal has determined that the child has engaged in disruptive behavior to other students, teachers, or staff.

8. The principal, a teacher or counselor, and an adult having legal responsibility for the child develop an alternative educational plan.

Truancy is also addressed in the Hawaii Administrative Rules (HAR) Chapter 19. It states "Truancy’ means a student is absent from class(es) or the school campus without authorization from the principal or designee." (p.19-16) Once students get on a school bus, or are dropped off on a school campus, they need to stay in school unless they get permission to leave from the office. This also means that they need to be in the classes that they are supposed to be in while on campus. Students can’t be in the rest room, school library, or another teacher’s classroom when they are supposed to be in a specific class, without permission from their scheduled teacher. On Kauai, the consequences of truancy are detention and detainment, by Kauai Police Department.

Schools are considered “in loco parentis” (in place of the parents). Everyone is concerned about student safety as well as education. No one wants our children to become victims of accidents or violent acts while they are supposed to be safe in school.

Sometimes students have to be dropped off early at school before the parent goes to work. They might want to leave campus to get breakfast with friends, but because of the law, they would be detained for truancy. All schools serve breakfasts for students. If a child wants to eat off campus with a friend, the parent cannot drop the student off at school first, without a possible detainment for truancy. Make another plan.

Sometimes parents home school students. They must submit an annual plan. Unless students are taking classes from an accredited school, their credits don't transfer to a diploma, so they can't walk at graduation with their friends. Kapaa High School Principal Daniel Hamada has witnessed that many parents return their students to the public school system. Besides the extra demands on the parents, it costs a minimum of $2,500 to home school one student,
according to Clive Belfield, professor of economics at Queens College, City University of New York.

Schools have an automated calling system that calls the parents every time a child misses a class. Sometimes students erase the calls. Parents can also pay attention to report cards, which list how many days a student has been absent. Parents need to pay attention to their kids’ schooling. Parents who want their children to go to school are one of the best motivators for children to go to school!

Probably the most effective people to help kids stay in school are their peers. Encourage your classmates to come to school. Show them this article. Help them study.

There are three A’s that are important in a student’s experience that make them want to stay in school:

w Attendance: Students who lag in attendance often drop out because they become overwhelmed by what they’ve lost, and can’t catch up. Show up! Do your best! Get help from friends, family, or a school tutor as soon as you feel you don’t understand something. Trust that school staff wants you to succeed, and everyone needs you to have a bright future.

w Attachment: There has got to be something at school that kids feel bonded to. It can be peers (often a boyfriend or girlfriend), teachers or other staff, a specific class and desire to learn something, a team or club after school, etc. High school offers a once in a lifetime free chance to experiment and find out what you are good in, and what makes you happy in lots of different areas. Try different things. Get to know your guidance counselor, and get to know yourself.

w Achievement: Everyone wants to succeed. We want to know that we’ve learned something when our efforts are over. Behaviorists have learned that people will keep doing things when they get a “reward” for it. So school staff, friends and family: When you see someone do something great, or make improvements, praise it. Also, remember that failure often leads to success the next time. It isn’t an end. It’s part of the learning process, which shows you what you need to do next to succeed. Experiments fail all the time, but scientists don’t consider them failures. They’re testing theories. They learn what didn’t work. Schools have tutors to help in areas you’re having difficulty in. Check them out.

Because a democracy needs competent, educated people to make decisions for it, education became free for students. Think about it: Would you want people who can’t read, write, do math, or think, to vote and make decisions about our county, state or country? There will never be a time where you are offered so much for such a small investment, as high school. Let it serve you. Learn as much as you can. Try different things, to find out what makes you happy and show up. High school graduates earn over $8,000 more per year than dropouts. In 50 years of working that’s at least $400,000! It pays to stay in school!

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Bringing College Back to Prisons

By Dasha Lisitsina / The Guardian
August 5, 2015

A couple of months after Sam Hamilton was released from Fishkill correctional facility, a medium security prison in upstate New York where he spent 32 years on charges of felony and murder, he returned to the prison – this time as a civilian.

Hamilton was there to celebrate. His friends, 24 inmates at Fishkill, were graduating with degrees in organizational management from Nyack College, which they completed while serving time. These men were among the few inmates in the country who have had access to higher education over the last few years, after Bill Clinton cut funding to 350 college programs in prisons around the country in 1994, as a part of his Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Hamilton was part-way through his degree at the time. “It was devastating,” he said.

But as part of Obama’s planned overhaul of the criminal justice system, on Friday the education secretary Arne Duncan reversed Clinton’s cuts, and announced a temporary Second Chance Pell program to reintroduce the federal grant to prisoners looking to enroll in college. The experiment will last three to five years and will be open to prisoners who are eligible for release.

“America is a nation of second chances,” said Duncan at a prison in Maryland on Friday. “Giving people who have made mistakes in their lives a chance to get back on track and become contributing members of society is fundamental to who we are. It can also be a cost-saver for taxpayers.”

The US, while having less than 5% of the world’s population, houses nearly a quarter of the world’s prison population. Increased media attention on mass incarceration has exposed the flawed prison industrial complex in America, and pressured the Obama administration to address the rehabilitative aspect of the criminal justice system.

“Funding for college classes in prison should never have been taken away in the first place,” Hamilton said in response to Duncan’s statement. “It’s just common sense when you look at what works, statistically speaking.”

Indeed, research shows that higher education in prison dramatically reduces recidivism rates. While nearly three-quarters of released prisoners are back behind bars within five years of release, a seminal study by Rand, a global policy think tank, found that inmates who participated in education programs were about half as likely (43%) to end up back behind bars compared to inmates who did not.
At the Fishkill graduation ceremony, balloons floated from window bars, the graduating class of 2015 high-fived fellow inmates, adjusted their square caps, and kissed their moms and kids.

Professor Robert Ferguson of Columbia Law School addressed the men at the ceremony: “You’re better equipped than anyone else I know for work. Why? Because your education has been so hard to get.”

It costs an average of $30,000 to keep someone in prison for a year in the US, and in New York the cost can be as high as $60,000. The Rand study concluded that every dollar spent on an inmate’s higher education means four or five dollars not spent on reincarceration further down in the assembly line of the criminal justice system.

“[Teaching college classes] in prison is the most serious crime-fighting tool I know of,” Ferguson told the Guardian. “It’s a win-win scenario.”

Prison reform advocates have been calling for the reintroduction of funding for more than a decade now. “I think it will have a huge impact on the thousands of people languishing in prison, in terms of their ability to do something productive with their time there,” said Vivian Nixon, executive director of College and Community Fellowship, a nonprofit which works to provide higher education for incarcerated women. “And it will have an even bigger impact on society.”

“This is a hard-won victory of years of counting the payments and speaking to anyone who would listen,” she said after the announcement Friday.

Prisoners with higher education degrees are 13% more likely to find a job straight out of prison than those without them, according to the Vera Institute of Justice.

“If people are employable, then they are able to support their families,” said Soffiyah Elijah, director of the Correctional Association, an independent organization that has a government mandate to monitor prison conditions. “No policy that perpetuates poverty is ever going to sustain a society.”

The recidivism statistics, increased post-release employment opportunities and long-term individual and federal financial benefits are the tangible, quantitative outcomes of higher education on the inside. But these aren’t the only values of doing a college degree in prison. There are also personal and psychological qualitative benefits that cannot be plotted on a graph and are often overlooked. Sam Hamilton and others got a lot more out of higher education than simply avoiding a return to prison.

“I consider having got my real education in prison,” said Hamilton, who finally managed to complete his bachelor’s degree behavioral science in prison with the help of Hudson Link funding. “I worked twice as hard

“I never thought of myself as a prisoner,” he said, adding that his motto was: “Do what you can, right here, right now.” Sam’s thoughts, though, were mainly with his daughter Nykia. She was six months old when he was incarcerated, and 32 years old when he got out.

“I also felt that part of it was my way of trying to motivate her to actually continue with her education,” Sam reflected. “I always tried to be a model. I had already been the model of what not to do. So I tried to give her a different lens to view me and to view life, to try to make her see that one bad decision doesn’t defy who you actually are.”
Hamilton is currently working at a non-profit healthcare center that provides assistance to people affected by HIV and is moving into his first private apartment next week.

Every so often the alumni of several prison college programs meet in a community center near Wall Street. Gregorio Cruz, who goes by the name of Akoko, was the class joker. "I carry around all my degrees with me, in case I run out of toilet paper," he said.

Cruz's resume is prolific: an associates degree in applied science from Bronx Community College, a bachelor's degree in behavioral sciences from Mercy College, an MPS from the New York Theological Seminary — all this while in prison. He came out with thirteen bags of books.

Cruz is currently trying to find work as a paralegal and has recently applied to the New York Theological Seminary to continue his education.

Andre Gates, a friend of Hamilton's who was chatting with Cruz at the get-together, said that college classes in prison gave him his first dose of confidence. "That's like the one thing people can hold on to in prison to give them a sense of worth," he said. "And it's the one thing you can hold on to to help you on the outside."

Gates was released in September 2014 and by December of that year he was already enrolled at Lehman College, studying for a further degree in social work. He is working night shifts at a men's shelter in the Bronx to supplement his studies.

In reaction to Obama's plan to reintroduce Pell grants to prisoners, Gates said: "It makes me feel good to know there are a lot of people who will have more opportunities like I've had, knowing how pivotal education is to re-entry."
Jacob's Pillow Welcomes Havana-Based Malpaso Dance Company This Weekend

by
Dance News Desk
August 5

Related: Jacob's Pillow, Malpaso Dance Company

A charismatic new force in contemporary dance, Havana-based Malpaso Dance Company comes to Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival's intimate Ted Shawn Theatre, this weekend, August 5-9. Defined by power, passion, and spotless technique, the company's program will include a new work by burgeoning choreographer and company Artistic Director Osnel Delgado with live music by GRAMMY Award-winning composer Arturo O'Farrill and the Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble. The company will also perform Under Fire, a new work by the ever-popular choreographer Trey McIntyre set to music by Boise-based singer/songwriter Grandma Kelsey. This engagement marks Malpaso Dance Company's Jacob's Pillow debut.

Malpaso Dance Company brings a diverse program that celebrates cultural collaboration, dazzling dance, and live music. Choreographed by Malpaso Dance Company’s Artistic Director and one of Dance Magazine's "Top 25 to Watch" of 2015, Osnel Delgado’s Despedida is set to an original score by Mexican-American composer Arturo O'Farrill and his Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble, performed live. Taking inspiration from the eponymous poem by the award-winning Argentinian writer and recipient of the French Legion of Honour (1983) Jorge Luis Borges, Despedida showcases the company’s signature virtuosic range in style from Brazilian capoeira to ballet where "agile dancers rise and spill to the floor with resiliency" (Gia Kourlas, The New York Times). O'Farrill’s compositions "traverse pan-American styles and historical eras to draw connections all their own" (Jon Pareles, The New York Times) and his orchestra has been dubbed "the best jazz orchestra in existence" by The New Yorker. The Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble includes Arturo O'Farrill on piano, Vince Cherico (drums), Carlo De
Rosa (bass), Carlos Maldonado (percussion), Rafi Malkiel (trombone), Adam O’Farrill (trumpet), Ivan Renta (tenor saxophone), and Tony Rosa (percussion).

American choreographer Trey McIntyre's "engaging and provocative" (Karen Campbell, The Boston Globe) Under Fire is an intimate portrait of redemption and renewal. Set to popular covers and original works by Boise-based singer/songwriter Grandma Kelsey, the work includes renditions of Dolly Parton's "Jolene" and Ginuwine's "Pony" with "an alternately plaintive and playful air" (Robert Greskovic, The Wall Street Journal). Gia Kourlas of The New York Times states that Under Fire "builds gradually while never relinquishing its silky flow" and possesses a "meditative quality" and "illusion of weightlessness". Costumes are designed by former Lar Lubovitch Dance Company dancer Reid Bartelme, with lighting design by the Alvin Alley American Dance Theater Lighting Director Al Crawford. Under Fire is co-commissioned by The Joyce Theater and Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival.

Founded in 2012 by Osnel Delgado, Daileidy Carrazana, and Fernando Sáez, Malpaso Dance Company is committed to bringing the voice of Cuban contemporary dance into the present and global dance community. The company is based in Havana, Cuba and comprised of ten dancers, many of whom studied at Cuba’s National Ballet School. Following their 2014 U.S. debut at The Joyce Theater, the troupe was praised for their "pristine technique" (Siobhan Burke, The New York Times) and "chameleon-like nature" (Amsterdam News, Charmaine Patricia Warren). Since 2014 and the improvement of Cuba-U.S. relations, Malpaso Dance Company has announced plans to tour across the United States during 2015/2016 including California, Ohio, Washington, Texas, Oregon, and Massachusetts.

Praised for his "finely kneaded movement, which almost makes you want to grab it in fistfuls" (Siobhan Burke, The New York Times), Malpaso Dance Company Artistic Director and co-founder Osnel Delgado serves as the resident choreographer for the company. An alumnus and current professor of the National Dance School in Cuba, Delgado has received prestigious awards for choreography including the Premio a Mejor Coreografia del Concurso Solamente Solos (Award for Best Solo Choreography) and el Premio Ramiro Guerra (Ramiro Guerra Prize). Recently noted as one of Dance Magazine's "25 to Watch" of 2015, Delgado’s choreographic style is "steeped in the island’s distinctive style of modern dance, a blend of Graham and Afro-Cuban techniques" and lauded for his innate "vitality, fluidity, and musicality" (Jordan Levin, Dance Magazine).

Born in Mexico and raised in New York, Arturo O’Farrill is a pianist, composer, educator, and founder of the highly-esteemed nonprofit Afro Latin Jazz Alliance. O’Farrill received his training at the Manhattan School of Music, Brooklyn College Conservatory, and the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College. After playing piano with the Carla Bley Big Band from 1979 through 1983, he developed a career as a solo performer with a wide spectrum of artists including Dizzy Gillespie, Steve Turre, Freddy Cole, The Fort Apache Band, Lester Bowie, Wynton Marsalis, and Harry Belafonte. O’Farrill went on to direct the Chico O’Farrill Afro Cuban Jazz Orchestra in 1995, which recently concluded a 15-year residency at Birdland and preserved much of his father’s music. Jon Pareles of The New York Times extols O’Farrill
for his unparalleled artistry and ambition, "a magnificent player...sharp, splashy, and driving."

In 2002, O’Farrill created the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra for Jazz at Lincoln Center, and received GRAMMY Award nominations with the Orchestra in 2006, 2009, and 2011, earning GRAMMY Awards for Best Latin Jazz Album in both 2009 and 2015.
This Day in Jewish History: The Girl Who Rattled the Rabbi Grows Up, Joins Supreme Court

Elena Kagan wasn't the first Jew or woman on the top bench, but she was surely the first to demand to a proper bat-mitzvah.

David B. Green | Aug 05, 2015 6:00 AM
On August 5, 2010, the U.S. Senate confirmed the nomination of Elena Kagan to the Supreme Court.

Kagan was certainly not the first Jewish justice of the high court—she’s number eight. Nor is she the first female Jewish justice—that distinction went to Ruth Bader Ginsburg, when she joined the court in 1993. But Kagan was surely the first High Court justice to have sparred with her family’s rabbi at age 13, when she wanted to have a real bat mitzvah, not just a party.

Elena Kagan was born in New York City on April 28, 1960. She was the second of the three children of Robert Kagan, a lawyer, and the former Gloria Gittleman, a teacher. Her father specialized in real-estate law, from the point of view of tenants, and was a long-time member of the community planning board of Manhattan’s West Side. Gloria taught at the Hunter College Elementary School, a highly selective New York public primary school.

While Elena was growing up, at 75th St. and West End Ave., her parents were among early members of the nearby Lincoln Square Synagogue, which was then led by the charismatic young Orthodox rabbi Shlomo Riskin.

An uneasy compromise

Riskin was the rabbi in 1973 when Elena Kagan turned 13 and demanded a religious bat mitzvah, on a Shabbat morning, where she could read from the Torah.
"This was really the first formal bat mitzvah we had," Riskin told The New York Times in 2010. Maybe so, but Riskin did not assent to having Kagan read from the Torah (she read from the Book of Ruth), and her ceremony took place on a Friday night.

"I don’t think I satisfied her completely," added Riskin, who a decade later moved to Israel and who has for the past three decades been the chief rabbi of the West Bank settlement of Efrat. But Kagan, he told the Times, "certainly raised my consciousness."

Many years later, Elena’s parents moved next door, to the new, fully egalitarian, Reconstructionist West End Synagogue, where Robert served as president.

Kagan attended Hunter College High School, where she had herself photographed for her senior yearbook in a judge’s robes and holding a gavel.

**Foo on Harvard**

Her academic progress was stellar: She graduated cumma cum laude from Princeton University, where her senior history thesis was on socialism in New York City in the early decades of the 20th century. She also gained a master’s in philosophy from Worcester College, Oxford, before matriculating at Harvard Law School – disappointing her father, a Yale graduate.

When Kagan joined the Supreme Court, it was with no judicial experience. She had clerked for two federal judges, including Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, taught law at the University of Chicago, and, worked in the White House of Bill Clinton, who did nominate her for a vacancy in an appeals court (a nomination that died when the Senate refused to act on it).

In 1999, Kagan joined the faculty at Harvard Law, becoming dean four years later.

At the time, the school was in a rut, in part because of ideological conflicts among faculty, and Kagan was credited with reaching out to all camps, hiring a diverse mix of new teachers, and even improving physical conditions. By 2007, she was a finalist to become the president of the university, a position won by Drew Gilpin Faust.
Instead, Kagan moved back to Washington when, in 2009, President Barack Obama chose her to be solicitor general, the official who represents the U.S. government before the Supreme Court. There, her first case was Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (she lost).

When Justice John Paul Stevens announced his SCOTUS retirement in April 2010, Obama nominated Kagan to replace him. Considering the partisan nature of the Senate, her confirmation went smoothly, with the approval of the Judiciary Committee coming on July 20, and approval of the full Senate, 63-37, two weeks later, on August 5. She was sworn in a private ceremony on August 7, 2010.

Today, when Kagan, who is unmarried, attends shul, it's at Washington, D.C.'s Conservative Adas Israel congregation.

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David B. Green
Haaretz Contributor
On A Hot Streak: Edward Burns Co-Chairs Authors Night, 'Public Morals' In The Wings

By Michelle Trauring
Edward Burns could once mow a mean lawn.

Since 1995—following the success of his film, "The Brothers McMullen"—Mr. Burns has done just that.

First, it was his kitchen in a Wainscott rental, then his home on Gerard Drive in Springs, and, finally, a screened-in porch at his house in East Hampton. There, last summer, he penned the entire first season of his police drama "Public Morals," premiering Tuesday, August 25, on TNT—not to mention a part-memoir, part-textbook, "Independent Ed: Inside a Career of Big Dreams, Little Movies, and the Twelve Best Days of My Life," over the course of several years, with the help of journalist Todd Gold.

The book has landed him a seat among 100 participating writers at Authors Night on Saturday in East Hampton, where he will co-chair the mass signing event alongside Robert A. Caro, Dick Cavett, Tom Clavin, Nelson DeMille, Christina Baker Kline and Lynn Sherr, as well as founders Alec Baldwin and Barbara Goldsmith.

He has his wife, supermodel and fellow author Christy Turlington, to thank for that.

"She had said, 'You keep trying all these different things during your indie film career—you ought to think about writing a book, a how-to guide but also a cautionary tale,'" Mr. Burns recalled. "I thought it was a great idea, but, quite honestly, I did not have the time."

The year was 2007. Mr. Burns was already looking ahead toward his next project, after releasing his film "Purple Violets" via iTunes—the first of its kind to go exclusively digital, he said.

"When we did press for that, 80 percent of the journalists said, 'You're crazy—people are never going to watch movies on their computers,'" he said, a smirk nearly audible through the phone. "It was a time when the writing was on the wall for indie filmmakers, that the golden age was coming to a close. The art house theaters around the country were closing, and people were no longer selling their indie movies at Sundance for millions and millions of dollars."
It was a vastly different climate from the film world he grew to love in the 1980s, even though the Valley Stream native had always planned to be the next great American novelist—a fleeting dream, he realized, when he landed himself on academic probation at SUNY Albany in the fall of 1987. "I was not a great student," Mr. Burns admitted. "My advisor called me and said, 'Look, you have to get your GPA up. If you take a film studies class, watch old movies and write a paper on it, it's a guaranteed easy A.' I said, 'Okay, I'm in.'"

The first film the professor screened was the 1960 comedy "The Apartment," and Mr. Burns was so captivated that he had a revelation: Forget novels—he wanted to write movies. He took every film class the university offered and, just in time for his senior year, transferred to Hunter College's film department.

One day in between classes, Mr. Burns was walking up Sixth Avenue and saw director Spike Lee ahead. He had countless questions for the director, he said, but couldn't work up the nerve to approach him. In the years since, they have crossed paths—Mr. Burns is sure he recounted the story during one of their early meets—and it is a memory Mr. Burns always keeps in mind while addressing his fans and film students, whether it's via Twitter or in a classroom setting.


"I have successes, and I've made some very costly mistakes and I've fallen on my face. I had all these lessons to pass on to young filmmakers," he said. "A number of professors would say, 'These are great stories—have you ever thought about writing a book?' Every time I'd mention it to Christy, she'd say, 'Yeah, I've been telling you that for years!'"

He laughed, and continued, "The credit has to go to Christy. She nudged me in that direction. She's very happy with herself."