Message from the University Scholars Team

Dear Scholars,

To say that this has been a challenging semester would be a drastic understatement. It’s been a semester like none of us have ever experienced before, and you should all be very proud of yourselves for making it through the Fall term. On behalf of our Faculty Director, Dr. Brian Colle, and our Program Coordinator, Dr. Nancy Puchner, I would like to extend sincere thanks to the SCH 101 Instructors this semester, as well as our Fellows and PALs, who all did an amazing job assisting our new freshmen transition to their first semester of college. The Fellows and PALs (all while dealing with their own coursework and making the adjustment to remote learning) went above and beyond to ensure that the new students felt a strong support system within University Scholars, and we could not be more grateful.

While we were unable to host many of our annual events due to COVID, we were very pleased to be able to offer the Faculty Panel this semester via Zoom (you can read more about this event in this edition of The Torch) so that our students were able to benefit from the knowledge and expertise of some of Stony Brook’s finest faculty members. We were also quite proud that we were able to begin one of our newest initiatives, our Course Assistance Review Groups, which is an added layer of support where upperclassmen host review sessions on courses that have, historically, been most-challenging for new students. We will be continuing with this initiative in the Spring, but will be opening it up to all Scholars, not just freshmen. I would like to give a special thank you to the team of students who ran these sessions, as well as those students who were part of the planning committee, for their work in making this initiative a reality this semester.

We know this has not been an easy time for anyone, but please remember that you always have a support system for you here within the University Scholars Program, and many resources at the University to assist you. Take care of yourselves over the winter break and be sure to take some time to recharge before the start of the Spring term. Please also be sure that you are checking your Stony Brook email on a regular basis over the break for updates regarding the COVID situation, as well as any changes/announcements that may affect the Spring semester.

Be well, have a happy holiday season, and we look forward to seeing you in the Spring.

Best wishes,
Jeremy, Brian, and Nancy
Two crimes took place in NYC’s Central Park in 1989. A young woman was assaulted and raped on a jog with no memory of the event. Five teenage boys were wrongfully accused. These teenagers were prosecuted, coerced into inconsistent confessions, and convicted with no evidence, while those in power maintained that no innocent person would confess to a crime they did not commit. Dr. Charles Robbins, former Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Executive Director of the Center for Changing Systems of Power, engaged in a discussion with Dr. Yusef Salaam, who was one of the five wrongfully convicted teenagers.

One of the topics Dr. Salaam discussed was how false confessions were obtained. It was explained that the boys were interrogated in such a way to force a confession. An example of this force would include the maximization technique, where policemen are allowed to bluff - saying that they have fingerprint evidence, or something along those lines - to induce the confession.

Another topic the Dr. Salaam discussed was his connection with Donald Trump. Two weeks before the trial began, Donald Trump took out a full-page ad in major newspapers calling for New York state to adopt the death penalty. This advertisement is credited with prejudicing public opinion against the four boys. Dr. Salaam also shared how Trump’s refusal to recognize the innocence of the ‘Central Park Five’ to this day, has negatively affected him.

During the time that Dr. Salaam had to spend in prison, he learned that his full name translates to “God will increase the teacher with honorable peace,” which is what made him realize the importance of who he is. He made the choice to accept his purpose and grow from this experience.

Dr. Yusef Salaam is now an advocate fighting against false confessions and police brutality. He shared that talking about his experiences, previously on stages, and now through Zoom, helps to heal him from the trauma.

It was clear that Dr. Salaam is a beacon of resilience with the drive to convey his story and message. He spoke eloquently, and his words touched myself and every person in attendance. To learn more about the case and the Exonerated Five, Salaam suggested watching the Netflix miniseries When They See Us for an accurate depiction of the people and events that occurred.
Dr. Puchner then brought the discussion full circle by returning to Winslow Homer’s David Pharaoh, The Last of the Montauk, presenting various interpretations of it based on Homer’s other works as well as his contemporary critics. One perspective was that Winslow Homer was trying to depict Pharaoh as a “noble savage.” While Pharaoh’s face is similar to that of the subject of Homer’s A Huntsman and Dogs, which was received by critics as wild and unsettling, Puchner noted the contrast with his clothing, similar to that of nobles. Other critics believed that the piece embodied the “vanishing tribe” theme, with one commenting that Chief Pharaoh seemed quiet and grave, as if contemplating the changing of the world. But Dr. Puchner favored a more positive interpretation: that Winslow was simply trying to capture the great burden the Chief possessed while he fought to support his people and reclaim tribal land from the government.

The perspective that caught my attention the most was Pharaoh’s own response to Winslow’s sketch. Though it wasn’t certain that David Pharaoh was referring to this painting, he deterred people from capturing his state on his deathbed by mentioning an “insulting sketch” made of him in the past. I wonder how he must have felt; a leader respected by his people, but degraded by others. It is clear that he and many Native Americans felt the strain of protecting their tribes while being dislocated by the government and facing people’s harsh judgments of them.

I’m sure everyone in attendance would agree that Dr. Puchner did an amazing job in not only educating us on this topic, but keeping us thoroughly engaged. I definitely learned so much about common misconceptions and the generalizations made about Native Americans through art. Those interested in the webinar or other art related events can go to https://theatelieratflowerfield.org/ for more information.

At the center of the canvas stands a ruminative man, facing away from the audience with a downcast gaze and his arms crossed upon his chest. The subject of this painting is the Sachem (or chief) of the Montauk tribe in the 19th century, referred to in the title of the work: David Pharaoh, The Last of the Montauk. On October 29th, The Atelier at Flowerfield held a webinar with Stony Brook’s own Dr. Nancy Puchner, who analyzed this Winslow Homer piece through historical works of indigenous art.

Dr. Puchner started off the webinar by explaining the history of indigenous art. She emphasized three common stereotypes used by many including the media, government, and local white residents to describe Native Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries: the “noble savage,” “vicious people,” and the “vanishing tribe.” Works such as Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees embodied the “noble savage” aspect, associating Native Americans with a savagery that could only be tamed by the nobility of white people. The second stereotype was exemplified by the piece Death of Jane McCrea, which portrayed Native Americans as a single mindedly violent race. The “vanishing tribe” stereotype was seen in The Last of the Race, a tragic depiction of Native Americans sitting at the very edge of their land, almost resigned to their relocation. According to Dr. Puchner, these were all attempts at justifying and romanticising the process of removing the Native Americans from their land by the U.S. Government.

She compared these themes to David Pharaoh’s portrayals in other paintings. For example, Dr. Puchner explained, the Harper’s New Monthly Magazine offered a softer likeness of Pharaoh making him out to be an industrious and respectable figure in his own right. Most Long Island residents at the time did not agree with this view, however: white landowners claimed he was “shiftless in his habits” and faced an early death due to the vices of his indigenous background (David Pharaoh actually died from pulmonary tuberculosis). Still, this put into perspective how people at the time habitually viewed biological inferiority as the cause of the Native Americans’ disappearance in an attempt to vindicate the shameful actions of the government.
With COVID-19 still affecting our ability to hold in-person events, our annual Scholars Faculty Panel was held by faculty members of Stony Brook on Thursday, October 22nd, using Zoom. Though it was an unconventional situation, faculty members were ready to share their wisdom, and University Scholars were ready to listen.

The panel opened with Dr. Brian Colle, Faulty Director of University Scholars. He expressed his gratitude to be able to hold the panel virtually. After further welcome, we were introduced to this year’s panelists: Dr. Heather Lynch, Dr. Reuben Kline, Dr. Barbara Frank, and Dr. Jon Longtin.

Dr. Heather Lynch, Professor in Ecology and Evolution, as well as endowed chair of the department through the Institute for Advanced Computational Science, was the first to share. She is currently studying penguins, seals, and whales in Antarctica. When she came to Stony Brook, she started to work closely with computer science focusing on computer vision, software development, and high-performance computing. After sharing her story, she emphasized that “it’s perfectly fine if it takes you a little bit of time to figure out what it is that you want to study.” She pointed out how she has an unusual background since she has an undergraduate degree in physics, a minor in material science engineering, a Master’s Degree in physics, a Ph.D in biology, and is now involved in a computing department. She believes that having experience in multiple areas can be beneficial. She also mentioned that students often aren’t sure what they want to do because they love everything, not because they dislike what they study.

Dr. Reuben Kline, Associate Professor in Political Science and Director for the Center for Behavioral Political Economy was our next panelist. When doing his Master’s in economics, he realized a growing interest in politics. He used his knowledge in economics to learn about political topics. He is currently studying climate change and people’s cooperation in climate mitigation. In the Center for Behavioral Political Economy, Dr. Kline and others focus on similar topics. When a student asked about staying motivated, both during this time in which we are mainly learning online and in the future, Dr. Kline added to Dr. Lynch’s point that virtual learning is difficult for professors as well. For him, it is harder to tell when someone doesn’t understand what he is saying, since he originally relied on facial expression. In regards to motivation, Dr. Kline highlighted that we need to remind ourselves that the current situation is temporary, and eventually we will go back to normalcy. He also encouraged students to reach out to professors and attend office hours.

Dr. Barbara Frank, Associate Professor of the Department of Art, was the following panelist. Her field is African Art. After the only staff member that taught art history at Illinois Wesleyan University was let go, Dr. Frank started to take a course on African Art at Illinois State University. She eventually went to Indiana University because of their African studies and language program. She did her dissertation research in Mali, her project being on leatherworking and the Trans Saharan Trade. She later returned to Mali and did a research project with women and pottery, around the time she joined Stony Brook. Her current project is regarding mud architecture. With the knowledge that her four brothers are in the medical field, a student asked if it was difficult to research art with a science-oriented family, and asked for advice for those torn between doing what they want to do and doing what their family wants them to do. Dr. Frank believes that you “need to be doing something that you love, and it takes a while to figure out what that is.” She also mentioned that our options should be kept open.

Our final panelist was Dr. Jon Longtin, Professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering and Associate Dean for Research and Entrepreneurship. He was a small engine mechanic in high school, working on things like lawn mowers. He pursued mechanical engineering, earning a Bachelor’s and, subsequently, a Master’s Degree. Later he earned his Ph.D. in engineering in California, and afterwards went to Japan for a year. In 1996, he came to Stony Brook. He often changes his area of study, having a history of working with lasers, advanced sensors, and energy. He plans to work with medical technology. Dr. Longtin highlighted that feelings of insecurity in your studies and not knowing whether you made the right choices is normal. He has experienced these feelings, questioning his field of study, and he emphasized that people experience them more than we realize.

Thank you to Dr. Heather Lynch, Dr. Reuben Kline, Dr. Barbara Frank, and Dr. Jon Longtin for their dedication in sharing their experiences and advice to further the success of Stony Brook University students.
The coronavirus pandemic posed many challenges for Stony Brook students, especially those in their first year at the University. For Scholar Kimberly Mestizo, the pandemic paved the way for her to find her passion – social work.

Kimberly, a Levittown resident, came to Stony Brook in the Fall of 2019 as a biochemistry major. The more classes she took, the more she found herself longing for something different. After talking to her Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (CSTEP) advisor and peers, Kimberly decided to switch her major.

“There’s so many different applications for the major of social work,” she said. “But to make real change within a community, and to see that lasting change for generations, I think would be absolutely amazing. And that is something I really want to do.”

Over the summer, Kimberly petitioned the Superintendent of the Levittown school district to implement anti-racist curriculums, diversify its faculty and create safe spaces for students experiencing racism. In September, she co-founded the Levittown chapter for “Diversify Our Narrative,” an initiative lobbying for anti-racist literature in school curriculums.

Kimberly’s efforts were inspired by the recent momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement.

“When I reflected back on my education in the Levittown district, I realized it was not up to par with everything that I was learning now,” she said. “It was like, how could you not even teach me this? You know, this is something that at least everybody should be educated on so that you can be an informed person as you grow older.”

After advocating for anti-racist curriculums in the Levittown school district, Kimberly and her co-founder merged with the Levittown Coalition for Change (LCC), an organization dedicated to eradicating racism in Levittown.

“I’m glad to say that, so far, there has been lots of progress with the district,” Kimberly said, citing the enactment of an equity team and the implementation of an auditor tasked with improving Levittown’s curriculum.

“When the district announced that they would be implementing these changes, they received a great deal of backlash from parents, who were calling and saying, ‘Oh, you’re succumbing to the leftist agenda,’ and, you know, ‘You can’t do that,’” she said. “They were really, really angry just that we were hoping to improve the education curriculum, so there’s a lot of work that needs to be done here.”

Kimberly’s passion for social justice is shared by her fellow students in the LCC, many of whom are people of color who’ve experienced racism themselves. Through activism, hard work and perseverance, she’s confident that the LCC will continue making a difference in the Levittown community and beyond.

“It takes constant effort,” Kimberly said. “And you’ve gotta keep up the effort, keep the pressure, and keep the enthusiasm going. And that’s how you make major change.”
Feature 2: Xena Pirzada
Ammara Mehkri

“I came from Pakistan two years ago: I never imagined I’d be here and I’d make it this far.” Despite all the challenges she faced moving from a different country, Xena Pirzada was determined to work hard and make her dreams come true.

Adjusting to life in a place with completely different traditions and values is never easy. Xena had much to learn about her new home, including the reality of employment, minimum wage, and handling money properly. She also had to get used to the more cultural aspects of living in the United States such as the best places to eat or shop.

Xena was committed to making the best of all the opportunities presented to her and connecting with her fellow classmates. She joined a variety of clubs and went on to represent her class as Student Ambassador during her senior year of high school.

Xena’s work ethic has always been one of determination and dedication. She started off without any sense of direction about where she wanted to go to college. In high school, she got a part-time job and started saving up money for the future. With the help of her parents and guidance counselor, she put her all into her studies and work. Xena was accepted into the University Scholars Program and is currently a freshman majoring in English and Studio Art.

While the pandemic has brought the world to a halt, Xena used it as her opportunity to prepare herself for college. She didn’t let it get in the way of forming new connections and utilizing all the facilities Stony Brook had to offer. According to Xena, she has since met so many people who speak the same language she does, love watching Bollywood movies, and are familiar with the history of her native country, allowing her to form valuable friendships. She is also Treasurer for Hall Council, a copy-editor for The Statesman, and a writer for Rhetorical Composition, a student-run blog. Some of her artwork has been included in the Reckoning Mural, as well.

For fellow students, Xena recommends getting involved in school—whether that’s through hall council, classes, or clubs. Some tips she offers are to reach out to your classmates— if you’re in a Zoom meeting, go to the chat and just start talking with others—and ask your professors and advisors questions! Stay productive by working at a desk or going to the library to study.

In her own words, Xena affirms that “coming to Stony Brook was one of the best decisions I made.”

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