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CU graduates unique students

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While all of Columbia's approximately 8,000 graduates are notable in their own special ways, a few have reached this day along paths so unique that they deserve a special mention.

Take Doris Schnelling, for instance, who will receive her bachelor's degree in art history from the School of General Studies (GS) today. She took her first class at Columbia in 1931, more than fifty years ago.

"I guess it's about time. It's the first thing in my life I've ever finished," Schnelling said.

Schnelling took her first Columbia course as a part of the former University Extension Program when she was a full-time music student at the forerunner of the Julliard School in Manhattan. However, she left Julliard without graduating to study French and music in Paris with her two younger sisters.

Schnelling married in 1952 and lived abroad, traveling through Europe, Africa, and Asia, until 1981 when she returned to New York City and began taking art history classes at Columbia.

Schnelling, who made the decision to pursue her bachelor's degree in 1988 at the suggestion of a classmate, said she feels her age has been more of an asset than a hindrance.

"I'm more likely to engage professors in discussion after class. Plus, they aren't likely to forget a kid like me. But truly, I've felt like one of the kids at Columbia. Perhaps more outspoken than most," she said.

After graduating from GS, Schelling said she would like to pursue a master's degree in medieval studies at Columbia.

Twenty-one year-old Welly Yang, on the other hand, is well on his way to seeing his name dazzle in lights on the Great White Way some day.

In addition to his full course load at Columbia College, Yang has been playing several small roles in the Tony Award winning musical "Miss Saigon," as well as understudying one of the lead roles.

Yang, who joined the cast of "Miss Saigon" in October, traces his interest in acting to a drama class he took here three years ago. He has also appeared in the play "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea" in which he played a Brooklyn street brawler.

Yang said he enjoys every aspect of working in the theater and does not find playing the same role each night boring.

“People ask me how I can play the same role all the time. I say, if you let it be boring, it’ll be boring. If you let it be fun, it’ll be fun,” Yang said.

Yang said he feels being an Asian American heightened his chances of succeeding on Broadway at such a young age.

“I doubt I’d be on Broadway if I weren’t Asian American,” Yang said, noting that “Miss Saigon” has opened doors for many Asian American actors, although British actor Jonathan Pryce, who is white, was initially cast in the lead Asian role.

While Yang appeared on Broadway, the efforts of College senior Frank Scaturro over the past two years to initiate renovations of the General Ulysses Grant National

Memorial in Riverside Park at 122nd Street have garnered national media attention.

Scaturro became a National Park Service volunteer in 1991 and was shocked to discover that the memorial was scrawled with graffiti and had reached an advanced stage of disrepair. Scaturro soon took measures to redress this problem.

In his spare time, Scaturro wrote a 325-page report on the conditions of the memorial, which he gave to public officials and the media last fall. Following the release of the report, Scaturro said he was dismissed from his volunteer position.

This spring, the Illinois legislature requested the park service to move Grant's remains to Galenam, Ill., where the general briefly lived. Additionally, Ulysses Grant Deitz, the president's great-great grandson, with Scaturro and other plaintiffs, are seeking a court order directing the government to properly maintain the site.

Scaturro said he plans to attend law school in the future and that his career plans have been shaped by his experiences with the Grant Memorial.

“I feel that whatever I do in my career, it just has to help make government more responsive,” Scaturro said.

And while Scaturro and his undergraduate peers ponder which careers are best for them, two students graduating from the School of Nursing who have reached the age when many people start thinking about retirement are actually in the process of entering new careers.

Suzanne La Croix, a professional singer with the Metropolitan Opera Chorus, made the decision to go to nursing school after looking after a close friend who was dying of cancer.

La Croix, who is now in her fifties, said nursing will be a new identity for her.

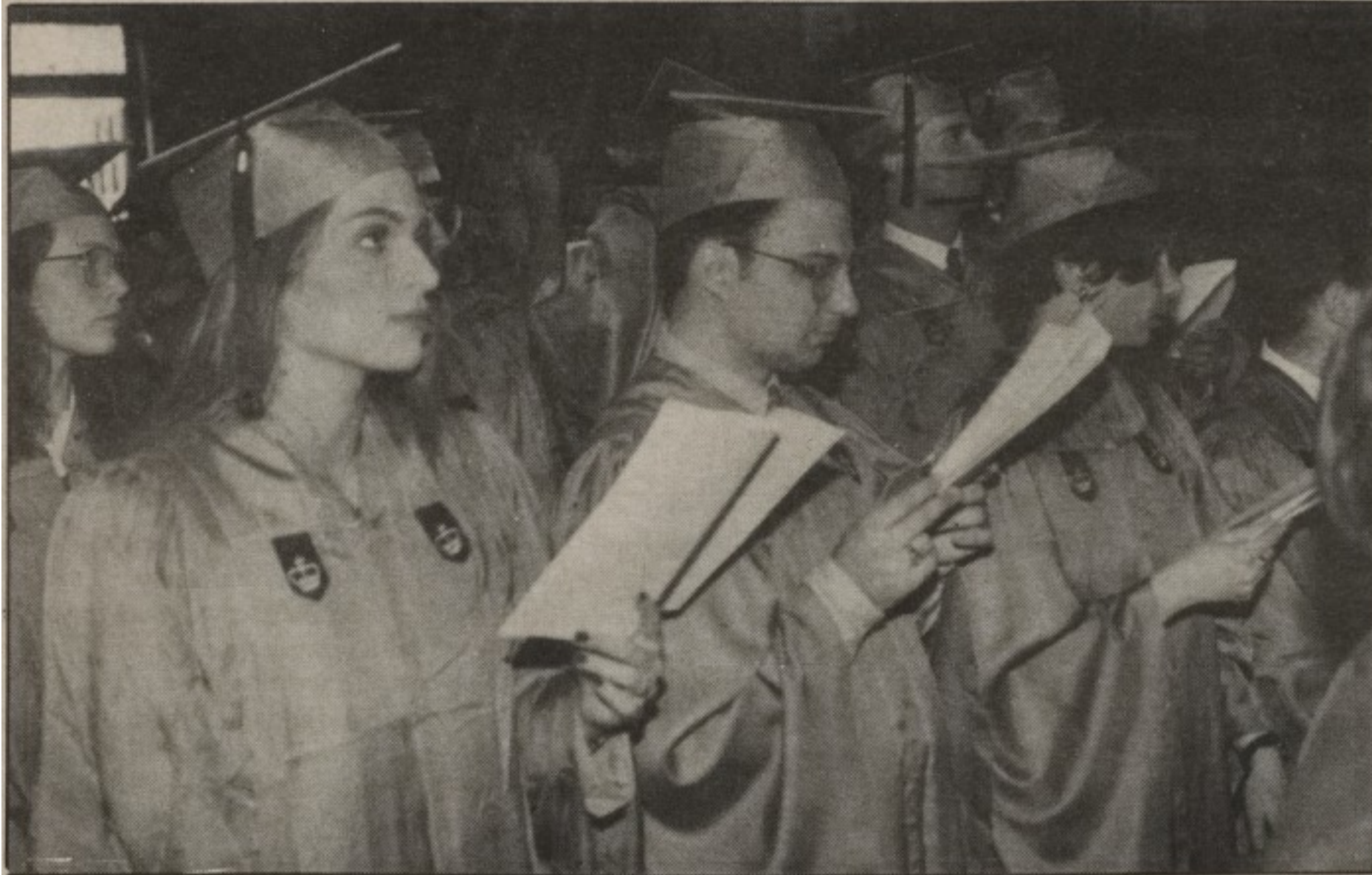
“I’ve lived through a certain number of disasters and lost many friends to AIDS. I think I have an approach to dealing with death and dying that younger people do not have. I want to allow people to talk about their fears,” La Croix said.

In June, La Croix will begin work as a case coordinator with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, where she completed clinical work towards her nursing degree.

“It’s perfect for me. There’s a psychological component, because often you are the only face they see,” La Croix said.

Abraham Berkowitz, a former vice president at Citibank, decided he needed to change his profession because he felt too far removed from humane deeds.

“I’m particularly interested in critical care. I enjoy a fast-paced environment where decisions are quickly implemented. I’m especially interested in anesthesiology. There’s a saying that anesthesia is 90 percent boredom and 10 percent sheer panic -kind of like training,” Berkowitz said.



ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR—RICH ALTMAN

Graduates of Columbia’s 15 schools shared in the message of hope invoked at the University-wide Baccalaureate ceremony held at St. Paul’s Chapel Sunday afternoon.