

# NEWS & BLUES

Volume 2, No. 1

The Newspaper of Stony Brook's Graduate Students August 2001

August 2001

## Spotlight on: Jerry Thomsen

Biochemistry Professor Talks About Music, Science and Stony Brook

Chances are, you know who he is. You've probably heard him sing, watched him dance, taken his class, or played softball against him. The number of people who know or know of Jerry Thomsen far outnumber those that he might know or know of. As Associate Professor in the Biochemistry and Cell Biology Department, he comes across a fair number of graduate and undergraduate students. As lead singer for the local and yet ubiquitous Pumice, he's had scores of people shake their respective booties to his wailing voice. As utility player for an intramural softball team, he has played with or against graduate students from departments all over the University.

Jerry Thomsen grew up in a suburb outside Chicago and loves the Cubs. He received his undergraduate degree at the University of Tampa and his graduate training at Rockefeller University. He came to Stony Brook after a post-doc at Harvard University. His research program seeks to better understand the basic principles of vertebrate development. Jerry is currently engaged and his wedding is planned for this winter - so sorry ladies. Jerry gardens ("fighting the weeds" and "planting things and watching them die" are his words) and scuba dives when time allows, and he loves the ocean and aquariums. Though I kind of suspected it beforehand, this interview more clearly revealed to me that he walks to the beat of his own drummer.

We arranged to meet at the Velvet Lounge on one of the hotter days of the year. It might have been more comfortable to hold the interview inside (with air conditioning), but the music is too loud. I figure I'll find us a nice spot in the shade and let the Gin and Tonics cool us off. Plus, maybe the heat will get to him and he'll just snap. Jerry is only a couple of minutes late, but I see him rushing into the parking lot like a bat out of hell.



Photo by Marc Dempsey

Jerry Thomsen in his office trying to see the "music" in the spheres

I think this is indicative of a person who thinks that my time is as valuable as his. Kind of refreshing considering the discrepancy of where he and I sit on the Stony Brook totem pole. He is wearing shorts, sandals, and a t-shirt with some pictures of fish on the front. We get our drinks and sit. I wondered if I had enough questions for the interview to last half an hour. It ended up taking more than an hour, and could have been even longer.

**News & Blues: Any nicknames as a kid?**

Jerry Thomsen: Not really... just Jerry. And as a high schooler, they called me "the Gerald".....my best friends....."the Gerald." I don't

know, because I guess it was.....I had quirkiness to me then. I was a clown, kind of.....a clowning guy.

**N&B: When did you decide to become an academic?**

JT: I think it was in college when I realized that the kind of research I wanted to do.....they wouldn't pay money.....in companies. And it was more or less drilled into me, or suggested that in order to do this stuff, you gotta be like us professors. It gives you freedom and what have you, at a low wage. Although it's not bad, I have to admit. It's not a bad wage. Stony Brook pays pretty well, once you're a professor.

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## On Behalf of the GSO:

Hey graduate people - welcome back to our village by the Brook! In the year ahead, you have wonderful opportunities to expand your horizons, receive one of the best educations available, and let one of the homeless newcomers into your home to make rent!

Hope this year greets you on solid footing, sunkissed skin and a tranquil, healthy outlook. Now back to the "real" world of campus living - that is if you're one of the charmed ones who actually got a hiatus!

In order to make this a fun-filled year in which you don't burn out or lose perspective - might we suggest you use the opportunities given through various graduate clubs, committees, intramural sports, and nightlife (SPOT & Staller Center) to meet people who share interests outside of your field of study. This may enable you to make friends & allies that will hold your hand through the rougher times, give you perspective on your department melodramas - and hey, you might even get lucky!

If you have concerns, conflicts, or ideas & you want to make them known - USE the Graduate Student Organization to the make the best of it. It belongs to all of us. It's our money that funds it, our ideas that fuel it. Without graduate representation, our concerns might often go unheard. So make the most of not only your academic career, but all the opportunities available - and make it a memorable year.

Good Luck!

Pegine Walrad  
GSO President 2001-2002

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## Arriving at Stony Brook: An International Perspective

by Amit C.J. Vas

I would like to start out by apologizing to anyone that this article might offend. I do not want to point fingers at anyone for messing up mainly because I don't have enough fingers to point.

Deciding to go to graduate school is not an easy decision to make. It is a time of high stress and anxiety for most people. For international students this time can be frightening as

well. You have to move to a new country that may be far away from your comfort zone, which in my case was on the other side of the planet. But nevertheless, I was determined to move and start graduate school at Stony Brook. I do not normally embellish the truth, so all the events that I am about to narrate to you are completely true. I may be sketchy at times only because I have been in graduate school for too long now and

my memory is a little fuzzy.

About a month before my imminent departure from home I sent an email to campus residences asking about the status of my housing application, and to inform them that I would be arriving when I started orientation for my graduate program. A couple of days later I finally heard back from them, just when I didn't have any nails left to chew on. I was

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## News & Blues

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*News & Blues is published by the Stony Brook Graduate Student Organization and serves the Graduate Student Community at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. It is currently being published on a monthly basis. We welcome submissions in the form of letters, opinions, poetry, news items, art works, photographs, announcements or anything else that could conceivably be of interest to graduate students and the larger University community. Please include your name and a way that you can be contacted with anything you submit. All submissions are subject to editing for length and content. Items may be submitted directly to the Editors by e-mail at [newsandblues@hotmail.com](mailto:newsandblues@hotmail.com)*

This Newspaper is Printed by WebPro

## From the Editor's Desk

Hello and welcome to the first issue of the 2001-2002 *News and Blues*. To those who have finished their programs and are seeking employment, we wish you the very best. To first year students beginning their long and tiresome quest for a graduate degree, welcome. To those returning to campus to continue their program of study, I would've thought you knew better. To say that there are many new and interesting happenings on campus would be hackneyed at the very best. Construction continues to be an eyesore to all who spend their days on campus. Obtaining housing for graduate and undergraduate students alike is still a messy, if not deeply troublesome endeavor. Most graduate students still don't make enough money to live reasonably without having to take out more student loans. However, it would be unfair to create a long laundry list of what's wrong with USB without creating an appropriate complimentary list of what's right. We have reasonable health care, opportunities for professional advancement, and a campus full of potential friendships. In short, we all chose to be here, and most of us would not trade our lives with those we know in the "regular" workforce.

We at *News and Blues* recognize that the graduate student population at USB is a very diverse one: students come from Australia and Armenia, Spain and Seattle, Thailand and Toms River. Some will scream at the tops of their lungs about seeking

meaning through God, while others will scream at the tops of their lungs that no higher being exists. Some students have memberships at exclusive country clubs, while others have never had a television. Some prefer nothing more than shooting hoops in the gym, while others seek a quiet corner to read ancient philosophy. The goal of *News and Blues* is simple: to give those in our unique circumstance, as different and special we all are, a voice and a sense of community. We're not quite sure how we will fulfill this goal, but we'll give it our "A" effort. Over the course of the next academic year, we will attempt to cover some topic that might interest you in every single issue. In this issue, this may be the review of the Stony Brook Film Festival: the one true gem on campus during the summer. It might be Amit Vas's article about his difficult experience as an incoming international student. Or maybe you'll enjoy learning a little more about Jerry Thomsen in our *Spotlight*. If you find nothing of interest in this issue, instead of dismissing the paper, please let us know how we can serve you better. Or even better, write for us. This is OUR newspaper (there, I said it). What are you passionate about? Write about it and submit it for publication. It's a wonderful opportunity to share your thoughts and opinions - to let everyone know where you stand. And chances are, with as diverse a group as we are, you probably won't be standing alone.

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**Year of study:** going into 4th  
**Hometown:** Southfield, Michigan (Detroit)  
**Undergraduate institution:** Michigan State University  
**Hobbies:** Theater, Jazz, Animal care, Sports - playing not watching



**Name:** Tanya Smith (Vice President)  
**Program of study:** Anthropology  
**Year of study:** 4th  
**Hometown:** Rochester, NY  
**Undergraduate institution:** SUNY Geneseo  
**Hobbies:** camping, reading, watching movies, catchin a good band



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**Program of study:** MFA in Dramaturgy (Theatre Arts Department)  
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**Hometown:** former Yugoslavia  
**Undergraduate institution:** Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA  
**Hobbies:** sleep, graphic design, reading, math (when I have enough time), ...



**Name:** Sherrye Glaser (Secretary)  
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**Year of study:** 4th  
**Hometown:** Dix Hills, NY  
**Undergraduate institution:** SBU (bio/anthro majors)  
**Hobbies:** gardening, cooking

### Guess the GSO Exec?

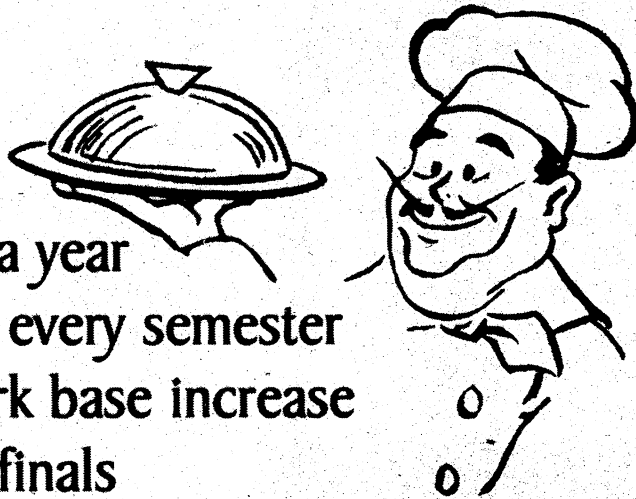
Which TWO members of the executive council scream for N'SYNC?  
 Which member can break world record time running to a coffee sale at Starbucks?  
 Which member was moved recently while reading "Zen for Cats"?  
 Which member(s) have bungee jumped?  
 Which member would start a commune if she wasn't in graduate school?  
 Which member feels that hormones are responsible for fools falling in love?  
 Which member's favorite political figure is Rosa Luxemburg?  
 Which member is a BIG FAN of working with marijuana?  
**Tie-breaker:** Combined height of the GSO Officers?

A \$25 dollar gift-certificate to Borders is the prize for the winning submission.  
 Submit answers to [newsandblues@hotmail.com](mailto:newsandblues@hotmail.com).  
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# Film Fest Lights Up Stony Brook

*The Stony Brook Film Festival at the Staller Center for the Arts Brings Films, Stars, Directors and a Little Glitz to the University*

For those of you who just arrived on campus the bad news is that you just missed 43 films—feature films and shorts— from the countries of Brazil, Canada, the U.S., Sweden, England, France, China, Argentina, Iran and Los Angeles that played the Stony Brook Film Festival. The good news is that some of them will open in theaters in late summer and the fall.

This year's Stony Brook Film Festival at the Staller Center for the Arts—an annual event for the past few years—had a mix of unknown films making their local premieres (the distinctions involved in the classification of premieres have become fine: World, U.S., East Coast, New York, Regional and Long Island) and better known films that were independent in spirit if not financial backing. For a relatively tame local film culture—most students are not here in the summer and the surrounding community is a big part of the fest's audience—this combination of the unknown and off-beat and the well crafted 'art' films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Memento* worked very well. Many of the filmmakers were around for the eleven days of the festival to introduce their films and for question and answer sessions afterwards.

Eleven feature films and eighteen shorts were in competition for both audience choice awards and festival 'jury' prizes. The rest of the films were either small independents that had already played at other festivals, like *The Deep End* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, or "Indie Studio Blockbusters" (no oxymoron there) like *Before Night Falls*, *Memento*, and *Pollock*. I was unable to get together with the festival director, Allen Inkles, (my fault for missing an appointment) and am unsure how the jury prizes were selected but I hope to have the answer to that question and others in an upcoming interview about the festival and what's happening at Staller this coming academic year.

I did attend a good number of the film screenings, Q and A sessions, and 'social' events at the festival. Altogether the event is an oasis in a pretty dry cultural climate out here in Suffolk—as a film lover I think it's the most exciting thing that happens here at Stony Brook, but I am biased towards the cinematic. The fest is very well run—no burning celluloid or torn film here—and from the filmmakers there was nothing but high praise for Mr. Inkles, his staff and the Staller Center facilities. The Staller Center has the biggest movie screen in Suffolk County and holds about a



Goran Visnjic and Tilda Swinton in *The Deep End*

thousand people. Many of the filmmakers were awed by the mostly filled theatre, one commenting, "I never thought 750 people would see my film."

An important function of film festivals like this is to give play to good movies that might otherwise languish in film canisters. Even if their film never gets picked up for distribution the filmmakers have the satisfaction of a packed or almost packed house at the Staller Center, and the audience gets to see some great (and some not so great) films that they wouldn't have a chance to see in commercial theatres. Luckily some of the films are picked up for distribution, sometimes, like the festival grand prize winner, *Diamond Men*, during the festival. When *Diamond Men* writer, director and producer Dan M. Coen stood up to introduce his film he announced that it had just been picked up for distribution.

Some of these films, e.g. *The Deep End*, have already opened in NYC theatres, but I want to point out the festival winners and some films that I think are worth seeing.

**Festival Grand Prize:** *Diamond Men*, directed by Dan Cohen and starring Robert Forster and Donnie Wahlberg. This is a buddy movie about an older diamond salesman breaking in his younger replacement. Robert Forster's understated performance sets the tone for this

film. He has a gravity of character that steadies his younger partner and really keeps the film going. The film has a few unpredictable twists, and the final one is not altogether believable, but it's so easy to get involved with Forster's character that you don't really mind the silliness of the end.



John Cameron Mitchell in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

was by far the most emotionally powerful film of those in competition. Jenna Malone plays a young teenager dying of cystic fibrosis who is taken care of by her older sister (Masterson). The bond between sisters, one sick and the other driven to prostitution and drugs, is drawn vividly in this performance driven film.

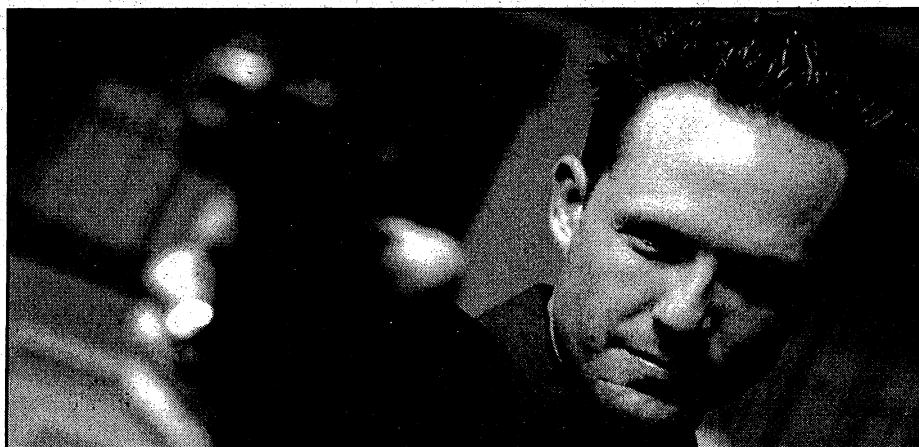
**Best Feature:** *The Book of Stars*, Directed by Michael Miner and starring Mary Stuart Masterson, Jenna Malone and Delroy Lindo. I thought this

## Audience Choice Award – Feature:

*Way Off Broadway*, directed by Dan Kay and starring Brad Beyer, Morena Baccarin, Michael Parducci, Jordan Gelber and Forbes March. I thought that this ensemble piece about young adults after college was a journeyman effort. It was competently directed but except for a few good turns from the cast nothing really stood out.

**Best Short:** *Bullet in the Brain*, directed by David von Ancken and starring Tom Noonan. One of the most enjoyable things about film festivals is that we get to see shorts. These films don't normally get out to commercial theatres and some of them, including this one, are really great. This short is based on a short story by Tobias Wolff that was published in the *New Yorker* a few years ago. The story is only two pages long, but I remember vividly the chill down the spine I got at the end of reading it. I was excited to see a film version and a bit scared that the short might ruin my vision of the story. It didn't. Although von Ancken reworked the story considerably its transcendent ending still worked on film.

Scene from *Bullet in the Brain*, directed by David von Ancken



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# Jerry Thomsen

from page 1

**N&B: What made you decide to come to Stony Brook?**

JT: It was a matter of balancing what the offers were in the job market at the time. So it had the best combination. There were young colleagues coming into the department, a lot of hires were made by our chair.....so that was very attractive. And the location near New York City, I knew I liked it. It's close to Boston. In the heart of it all. So given the choices I had, it was the best. And you know, you have to deal with what you're dealt with. We'd all like the perfect position, but it doesn't exist necessarily. There still a little bit of a compromise. So it was a good deal at the time.

**N&B: Still a good deal?**

JT: Still a good deal, for the most part. I can't complain very much. I've just moved into a new building, and a new office.....the lab is growing, grant money is flowing in.....it's really not too bad. We have to work a little harder to get people to come to the labs out here. I think it's easier to sell the New Yorkers on Long Island than to sell Mid-Westerners, necessarily.....someone who doesn't know the east coast. So you have to, when you get people applying, and especially recruiting for post-docs and graduate students, you have to say, "What do you know about New York so far? What are the rumors? Well, here's the reality." The thing that sells Stony Brook on a lot of people is location.....the beaches. You have to show it in the summer. Winter is a drag here. That's the only thing I don't like. It gets too quiet around here. It's bad too when you're a professor..... you're in that sort of transition zone, and I don't have a family like many of my colleagues. So I tend to congregate more with the graduate students and post-docs. That's where my socializing is easiest and came more naturally. Everyone else has families. I like my friends in the department, my peers. But after worktime is over, they have to go be mom and dad. So that sort of led to the development of the band, and things like that.

**N&B: What do you like least about work?**

JT: I think now, what I don't like about it mostly is.....that there is a lot of fragmentation of your day. It's hard to focus on one thing for an entire day and relax with one topic. There's always something interrupting, or.....not even interrupting. It's just you have to pay attention to a lot of things. It's tends to make one a little scattered. I get scattered more quickly than others sometimes. What happens is that I scattered on one subject and I will follow that and not pay attention to the next thing I should be multi-tasking on. I like to



Jerry Thomsen singing for *Pumice*

focus on one thing and dig into it and not worry about scheduling. I think it's most frustrating trying to balance everything, and feeling like you're doing a half-job at ten things versus a great job at three things a day. And the fact that I don't get to work in lab a lot. I like to work in the lab, I like to spend time doing experiments. It's enjoyable. And it's hard to do that now. There are lots of demands.....all the balances of teaching and managing the people in your lab, and administration, and the phone calls that come in, and e-mail requests for X, Y, or Z, or being on committee A, B, C. It's much better during the summer because there's less demand academically, but during the semesters it's a juggling act. Everyone has to do it. I think many of my colleagues would agree that the number of demands that can be made on you is a lot. You feel like you're getting nothing done by the end of the day. So there's always more to do than time allows. That's frustrating. The positive side though is that you can interact with students. You can get the bonus points of teaching. Teaching is fun. When I'm right there teaching, it's fun. Preparing is not fun. But being in the classroom is fun. The success of your group is a really positive thing. I get a chance to work on 3 or 4 different projects, or oversee them, or at least be told what's happening in the lab on several projects. So in a way, I'm spreading out more than I could ever personally do, so that's very nice. There's a lot of fun stuff constantly to grab onto. I need a lot of stimulation.....(laughs). I need this and that. I need more input, more stuff to pay attention to.....or not pay attention too very long.

**N&B: How did you get involved with *Pumice*?**

JT: *Pumice* was formed 6 years ago, over 6 years ago now, mostly by chance with other graduate students. When I first came here, about a year after I was here.....I had been in bands before.....and so, after arriving, I had a lot of free time other than 12 hour days setting up your lab. Guys across in another lab, some

graduate students heard I had been in a band and invited me to play with them at a jam. That occurred in March of '95, and we did a bit of a jam and said, "Wow! We can form a band. This is cool. We need a drummer." And I happened to have met a guy named Chris Gobler. I had met him and jammed with him.....just drumming at a party.....grabbed some bongos. But he was then independently contacted by some of the guys who are graduate students in the department. Actually, there was a post-doc, four graduate students and myself formed the band. *Pumice* version 1.0. We had our first gig at Old Field, the famous Old Field house where all the Halloween parties happen, in May of '95. So that's how it got started. It just started with a jam at a party, and grew from there. Many people have gone through the ranks.....graduated, retired in various ways, or have been kicked out (laughs). Not really.

**N&B: Band members have come and gone. However, you remain a constant. Could *Pumice* continue without you?**

JT: Probably not as *Pumice*. The guys, I think, would go on in other bands or reform in some way. I think if I left, I'd request *Pumice* be retired as a name. The other person that's been in the band all the time is the drummer, too. Losing him would be a major blow, and I think the band would consider renaming itself if we lost him. I think as the frontman, you get associated with the band's personality, you are the band's person-

ality, essentially. As a constant goes, I'm definitely the constant, and I'm aware of that. I think if I left, they could just rename themselves, like, "Slate" or something.

**N&B: What quality do you like about yourself most?**

JT: I think that the quality I like the most about myself.....I'm pretty friendly and.....humorous. I accept a lot of situations. I like to experience a lot of different things, and I have. I think being open and friendly and humorous about stuff.....you get to see more of life if you don't close out and be strongly opinionated about things.

**N&B: What quality do you like least?**

JT: I think.....the least.....uh....well, I'm not smart enough (laughs). I think a little bit too nice sometimes. You know there's a fine line, but mostly I find myself not satisfied. It frustrates me. I think that is what frustrates me a lot..... is that for some reason, very often not satisfied with a present situation, or even large successes sometimes don't register as they should. The self-critical and less satisfied about things I do feel satisfied about, but I feel that I am often hyper-critical of myself and situations where I should just chill out and be happier. So in one sense, I enjoy being a nice person open to a lot of things and experiencing a lot of things. But then I'm not satisfied with the things I experience.....a little bit of frustration or self-critical about "oh, I didn't do that well enough" or "that didn't turn out good enough, it wasn't good enough." Logically, it doesn't make sense. I know there are plenty of things I've done really well, and continue to. But then self-doubt. That's it in a word: self-doubt. Self-criticism is what I dislike the most. But I think a lot of people in science kinda have that nagging, "it's not good enough, I gotta drive more".....I think some people are only like that and they're driven and nothing will satisfy them. And they accomplish great things, and they're not happy in the end. And I see that in me. It's not overwhelming, but it's there. I'm aware of it, which I guess is a good thing.

Continued on page 9



Jerry and *Pumice* rock The Spot, the on-campus graduate student lounge



# Where On Campus Can I Find???



*The Seawolf MarketPlace*

**Health:** Aspirin, cold medicines, cough drops, first-aid items, contact lens solutions, toothbrushes, toothpastes, feminine products, and more.

**Beauty:** Soap, body wash, shampoo, hair gel, skin lotion, nail care, and much more.

**Household:** Laundry detergent and cleaning supplies, air fresheners, electric fans, mattress pads, extra-long sheets.

**Snacks:** Wise chips, candy and gum, large assortment of protein and nutrition bars, soda, juice, ice cream, fresh muffins, fresh cookies, and more yummys.

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# Jerry Thomsen

from page 7

Sure it could be better...everything could be better. So coming to balance with that – that's taken a long time.

**N&B: Favorite part of playing IM softball?**

JT: Definitely the conversations around the cooler following the game. Other than that, the ability to get in there and get abused by grad students. You know, they can give it back to me. "Watch him miss that fly ball. He dropped the fucker." (laughs) Still.....being able to play first. And mixing it up with guys and girls. I love baseball.....I've played it most of my life, and so it's good to be able to get an outlet. But really, it's hanging out with the graduate students and still feeling young.....it's good. Everyone says, "Oh, it's going to be so different when I'm a professor." It doesn't change. The same motivations are there. You still want the same sort of life. You change because of professional responsibilities, but being in academics is a really good way to stay young. It's the best thing about it. You don't have to fall into the cliches of standard life as you get older. You could fight against it and still fit in pretty well, with a good sense of independence.

**N&B: Would you prefer to front a band with a sold-out gig at Madison Square Garden, be the star player in a World Series Game, or win the Nobel prize?**

JT:(laughs) Ugh.....Well, the world series.....probably not. Nobel prize is really tempting, but a sold out gig at Madison Square.....Uh, I'll be a geek. I have to pick the Nobel prize. It's a real close one with Madison Square Garden. When it's a party with your friends, it's actually better than a sold-out gig at Madison Square in a sense, because you know that all those people are into you and you know them. Madison Square Garden.....you may be a rock-god, but it's anonymous. You're there to just show yourself off, but with your pals out on the dance floor.....that's great. I'll go with the Nobel prize with a close second for the gig.

**N&B: Best way to cure a hang-over?**

JT: Well, seriously, lots of water. And/or another drink. Another drink definitely helps. Aspirin.....water, water is the best. Hydrate yourself ladies and gentlemen. Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. That's what I've learned over these years.

**N&B: What do you think of Lizzie Grubman?**

JT: Well, she should get a job, a

real job. Not just be a publicist. I think her Hampton days are over. She's got to start dealing with reality. I think the whole Hamptons have to.....a bunch of rich people hating each other. She's got to fess up and.....and change the hair.

**N&B: Most embarrassing thing you've ever done?**

JT: I think I once in college, I stood up when someone else was awarded something. I thought they said my name, and I stood, and I looked around and I went "Oh fuck! That wasn't my name." That was embarrassing.

**N&B: What's a good pick-up line?**

JT: Never had one.

**N&B: Favorite Spice Girl?**

JT: That catty spice.....clawed one. I think it's like.....Crazy Spice. As I recall just the images, it's that Crazy Spice, the one that's like a cat woman.

## TEN QUESTIONS

**N&B: What is your favorite word?**

JT: Swear word or just a word? It's probably "excellence."

**N&B: What's your least favorite word?**

JT: No

**N&B: What turns you on creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?**

JT: Spontaneity and Humor

**N&B: What turns you off?**

JT: Bad attitudes.....closed-mindedness

**N&B: What sound or noise do you love?**

JT: Fireworks. The sound of exploding fireworks.

**N&B: What sound or noise do you hate?**

JT: People yelling.....annoying yelling. That grating sound.....whining. Angry and whining.

**N&B: What is your favorite curse word?**

JT: Fuck

**N&B: What profession other than yours would you like to attempt?**

JT: Well, if it wasn't music.....certainly it's music. I've attempted that but not as a profession. Honestly, I think that would be the profession if I was trained, I'd probably be more successful in music than in science.

**N&B: What profession would you not like to do?**

JT: Any kind of service.....like janitorial or cleaning. Things like that.

**N&B: If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the Pearly Gates?**

JT: You're cool!

# International Perspective

from page 1

informed that I would not have housing at the University until a week from the date of my arrival and even that was doubtful. Well, I'm not the kind of person that will roll over and play dead when I hear something like this. I was determined to get housing even if I had to e-mail every administrator at the University in the process. I then sent an email to the international students office and they replied very promptly. I can't remember the exact content of the email, but I do remember that it bordered on being rude. In the e-mail was a list of hotels that I could stay at. I remember gasping at the amount of money I would have to spend to stay at any one of them for a week. Luckily, my program has an extremely good secretary that solved this problem for me. She promised that I would have housing when I arrived at Stony Brook.

But that was only the first problem that I was going to have to tackle. If I only knew what lay ahead of me, I might have decided to stay home. I arrived at Stony Brook about an hour before I was supposed to be at orientation. I went straight to the campus residence office, and after filling in some paperwork, was given a key to my room. I would like to remind you at this point that I was joining a graduate program and would be a graduate student for the next five or more years. I was under the impression that graduate students were housed separately from the undergraduates. The key I was given fit a door to a two person room in one of the dormitories on campus. I remember walking down the corridor to my room and being appalled at the toilet paper and the crude graffiti that decorated the walls. It was only a couple of weeks later that I learned that the dorms at the north end of campus were not so lovingly referred to as the projects. But I got housing.

A week later I lost that. I was told I had to move to another dorm on the other side of campus until they could find space in Chapin (the graduate apartment complex). I understood that these things happen and so I accepted my fate and was willing to move. I was also told that there would be a van that would take my bags to the new place for me. When I went to check out of my room and check into the new room, I was told that I had to move myself and was given the yellow pages and told to call a cab, take the infrequent campus bus, or walk. My two bags at this point had become three and the thought of taking the bus or walking didn't appeal to my out of shape body. So I called a cab and moved to the new room. But that wasn't the end.

I knew that this housing was temporary. I would eventually have to move to Chapin, though when that was supposed to happen, I did not know. On checking into my new room, I found out that this housing was temporary and I would have to move to another dorm before the

move to Chapin. At this point, I didn't care. A couple of weeks later I was moved again, and this time had my own room in one of the nicer dorms on campus. I stayed there for a couple of months before I finally moved into a single room in Chapin, which I shared with three other people until the end of the spring semester.

Now, do you think that what I went through was painful? Well, I haven't even told you the painful part yet. I agree, I am in one of the best paid graduate programs at the University. But graduate students all over are still underpaid. So while I was happily dorm hopping, I did not know that I was running up a big tab. I had to pay for all the various dorms that I stayed in, which were much more expensive than living in Chapin. Then to make matters worse, I was forcibly put on the meal plan because somewhere along the way, I was in a "compulsory meal plan dorm." Maybe that was an advantage since I had never cooked in my life and at least I was being well fed. You can't go wrong with Burger King or Taco Bell every night. But the meal plan was expensive too. To cut short my long story here, I ended up paying the university more than \$700 a month for housing alone. Two months later, when I finally started to get paid, I realized that all my money was gone. Due to restrictions on the amount of money I take out of my home country, my parents gave me \$2000 which was supposed to be used as savings, for a cheap car, or for a plane ticket back home if I hated Stony Brook that much. Only I used it to pay the University instead. Thinking about the money I could have saved if I lived in Chapin is depressing, so I still do not think about it.

What irks me about the whole situation is not what happened. I don't care that I had to move all over campus like a dog without a home, or that I also had no money in my ever dwindling bank account. What irks me most is that quite a number of the people I had to deal with through all of this were callous, unfriendly and rude. It is difficult enough when you have to deal with moving to a new place in a new country. We are not immune to the fear, anxiety, and uncertainty that anyone might feel when displacing him/herself into a whole new world. We are also smart enough to know when you are not doing right by us. We are somebody's daughter or son, brother or sister, husband or wife, mother or father. Please remember that when you are dealing with us. Graduate students, like professors, undergraduates, janitors, groundskeepers, and food-service workers, are an integral part of this University. Just like every other group, the University would cease to exist without us. And international students are an integral part of the graduate student population. Treat us right not because we'll threaten this or that. Treat us right because it's how you'd like to be treated.

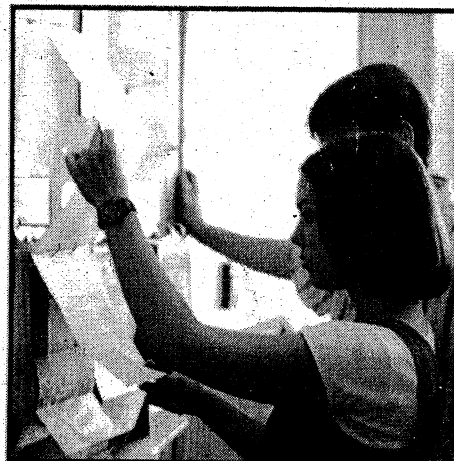
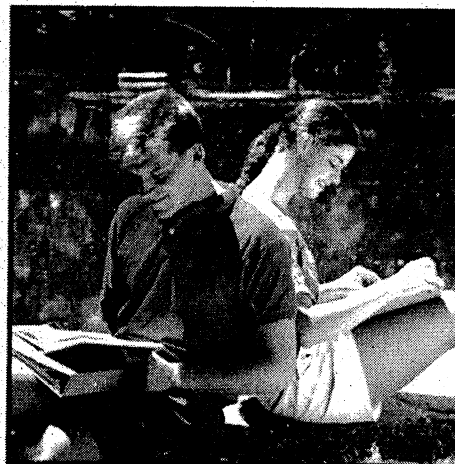
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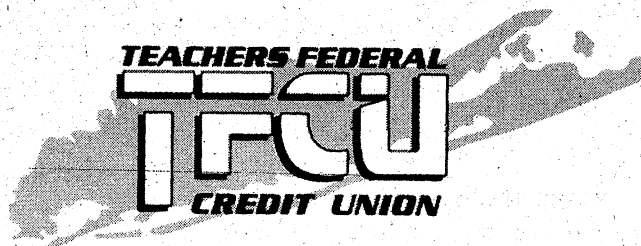
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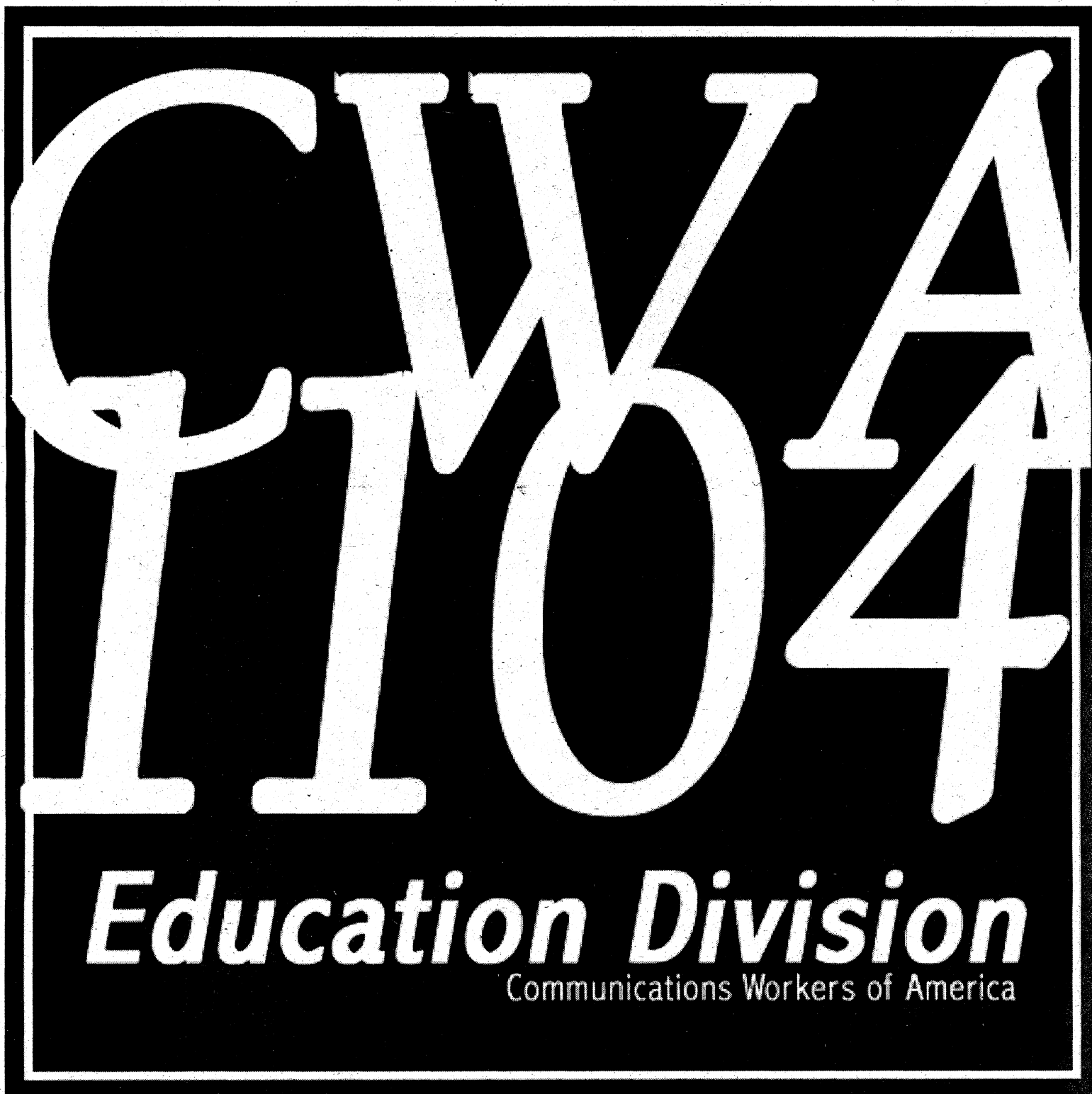


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# Is "Reality T.V." So Bad?

"Reality: the quality or state of being actual or true." —Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

by Sue Denim

Ten years from now as we review the passing of the first decade of the 21st century, "reality television" will be remembered as one of the most overused phrases of the G.W. Bush era (otherwise known as the "celebration of mediocrity"). All too often television is criticized as a medium that provides programming purely for commercial exploitation that has little or no redeeming educational or intellectual value. Far be it for me to attempt to prove otherwise, but it does strike me as extraordinary that the latest network bandwagon of churning out so-called "reality T.V." in favor of more expensive scripted dramas and comedies has been so widely castigated. Surely it's just good business sense to give the people what they want?! Isn't the religious adherence to the Nielsen Ratings proving that despite the networks' reliance on corporate advertising revenues, the hard-sell is really in persuading the masses that what they want to see is idiots just like themselves living out their own pathetic "reality", vicariously and voyeuristically, for the chance at a brief taste of fame and fortune? Who am I really mad at? The suits who create these shows, or the people who watch them? No, I'm mad at myself because I'm ashamed to say, I'm helplessly addicted to reality T.V.

Being a graduate student is, I've decided, a perilous position to occupy in contemporary American life. We're meant to be incredibly smart and sophisticated, rising above the plebs to develop our intellectual and analytical skills, and spend all our time in splendid isolation, reading and researching, working feverishly to join the ranks of the well-paid. Grad students have neither the spending power of undergrads to slack off or party all the time, nor the financial security of tenured professors to enjoy the finer things in life. We gain little respect for wasting time on the minutiae of existence, and many don't believe that being at the University constitutes "work". So on a limited budget, with that familiar feeling of guilt about all the studying I should be doing through the lazy days of summer, I must confess that I have found myself curiously drawn to a number of television shows that I really should know better than to waste my time watching. Call it a sociological experiment, but I've joined the masses.

Evidently the country's taste for watching "real-life" stories on talk shows has grown more salacious over time as Oprah and Donahue gave rise to the likes of Jerry Springer. Is it not enough to see the lower end of America's gene pool fighting and shouting about their dysfunctional lives that we now need to be flies on the wall and watch them in action too? Or better still, audition hoards of fame-hungry wannabes and put them in formatted games? The term "reality T.V." is actually a misnomer, since there really aren't too many people who can honestly claim that



The "cast" of *Survivor 2*

crawling around in the Australian outback (a.k.a. *Survivor 2*), and periodically succumbing to make-up artists before dramatically snuffing out torches to oust fellow competitors constitutes any semblance of normal existence. Is it another form of escapist fantasy? Is it a cultural trend that reflects the increasingly "democratic" connectedness of the population via the internet, digital television and cellular phones, where watching is only one element of entertainment? Blurring the lines between reality and fiction serves to involve millions of Americans in the lives of these reality T.V. characters.

Take a break from the books and see for yourselves. Aside from the game show powerhouses *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?* and *Weakest Link*, CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox are currently dueling over a whole slew of these (virtual) reality series. Already on our screens we have the Candid Camera-influenced *Spy TV*, while *Murder in Small Town X* and *Fear Factor* seem to work with the premise that it's fun to watch people being very scared. Then there is the action / military genre that will soon include *Boot Camp*, *Amazing Race*, *Jailbreak*, *Destination Mir*, *Lost*, *The Runner*, *Spy Wars*, *Lost in the USA*, *Manhunt*, *Combat Missions*, *Cannonball Run*, *Break In*, *Worst Case Scenario*, and *RealityRun*. (I predict a real drain on my reading time!) The other variant is the genre that focuses on sex. The show *Temptation Island* put couples on an island inhabited by beautiful people (they weren't exactly a representative sample of the general population, shall we say) to test how faithful they could be. More lessons in love will soon be available from *Single Girls*, *Love Stories*, *I Want A Divorce*, *Love Cruise*, *Sexiest Bachelor Contest*, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire* (what a clever play on the familiar game show!! Regis, call your lawyer!!), *Chains of Love*, *Cheaters*, and by far

the most appealing title, *Who Wants to Date a Hooters Girl*. I am not even joking. MTV, responsible for originating the genre, is currently celebrating its 10-year anniversary of *Real World* and *Road Rules*, while recently introducing its World Wrestling Federation saga *Tough Enough* to train a group of WWF fans in competition for a professional wrestling contract.

*Big Brother 2* is the current CBS flagship while *Survivor 3* prepares itself for the Fall season. Here the format, taken from the successful Dutch and British shows, is to incarcerate 12 people in a house for 3 months, surrounding them with cameras and microphones, offering them no privacy and hoping that sparks will fly. I find this strangely compelling, and I think it's because I'm convinced *Big Brother* offers the perfect analogy to Grad school. (Ok, it would be nice if grad programs also lasted 3 months, but stay with me on this one!) *Big Brother* is obviously the University, and our selection to enter a Ph.D. program is predicated on persuasive application forms and suitability to the "format" (i.e. tortuous repetition of the same tasks). The contestants in the *Big Brother* house are all extremely conscious that they are competing, despite the need for alliances and friendships along the way. As with Grad school, random individuals are brought together with a common goal — claiming a bundle of cash or a doctoral degree. As the pressure builds in this isolated environment (the *Big Brother* house or your academic department), it is the gossip, politicking and undercurrent about "who belongs" and "who should go" that motivate action and behavior. So television can connect us to real life! Experience for yourself a dose of "reality T.V.". Get used to it — you're being watched right now.