Defying Expectations in Education

Technology for Sustainable Farming

ALUMNI IN MYANMAR

Simón's Rock Magazine
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cover: Kyaw Moe Tun ’05, Founder of Parami Institute

We welcome your feedback! Please send your suggestions, corrections, and responses to editors@simons-rock.edu.

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from the provost

Dear Friends,

I began this year in Yangon, Myanmar with Professor Chris Coggins, visiting Simon’s Rock alumni Kyaw Moe Tun ’05 and Ella Geismar ’13 and their students at Parami Institute, which, as you will read in these pages, is the newest Bard-affiliated program where the liberal arts and sciences are activated in the service of civic engagement and social change. As Ella relates in her article, our long attempts to establish such a campus in Myanmar, led by my predecessor as provost, U Ba Win, were also the occasion of my own first steps into program-building and campus leadership. There is for me, therefore, a remarkable oscillation of energies between the fruition of efforts at Parami, reflected in the engagement and optimism that characterize its student community, and our conviction at Simon’s Rock that small places need not be small in impact.

At Parami, I saw this conviction affirmed in two ways: in Kyaw Moe Tun and Ella’s educational and pedagogical values, deeply informed by their own education at a small liberal arts college in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and in the promise of a small cohort of ambitious Myanmar students to make dramatic change in their country. Simon’s Rock from this vantage seems less like a location than a radius, with a widening reach. That reach is the subject of this edition of the Simon’s Rock Magazine. You will recognize it in the accomplishments of Phyu Hninn Nyein ’05, also from Myanmar, who is now working there to harness big data in support of small farmers; in class of ’93 Meghan Kirksey’s personal and professional arc; and in our list of recently released media by faculty and alumni, including Brendan Mathews, Asma Abbas, Veronica Chambers ’87, Ronan Farrow ’99, John McWhorter ’81, and others. And you will recognize it especially in the work of our current students and their incredible will to understand their world and capacity to improve it.

We are additionally honored to republish an excerpt from historian and former Harvard University president Drew Gilpin Faust’s reflections on her years studying under Elizabeth Blodgett Hall at Concord Academy. Mrs. Hall’s focus on “Big Questions,” including “democracy, freedom, war, love,” continues to resonate at Simon’s Rock, as does her genius for rethinking the structures of high school and college. Our students come to us all asking some version of the same question: “Why wait?” That question radiates into other, multiplying questions, commencing a process in which big questions lead to bold actions.

Thank you for continuing to ask questions with us, for encouraging and empowering each other’s actions, and for supporting today’s students in their own asking, acting, and reaching.

Sincerely,

Ian Bickford ’95
Provost and Vice President
CNN’s April Ryan Gave 2018 Commencement Address

“There’s nothing wrong with asking questions. Questions can change policy. Questions can change a dynamic. It can bring an issue to people even for your parents. It can bring something to the forefront that was never thought of before. There’s nothing wrong with asking a question. But also as you ask the question, what is going to be the end result? That’s something you got to think about. And as we look at a time such as this, what is the end result for the brightest here today at Bard College at Simon’s Rock . . . ? What’s the end result today and what can you do?”

— April Ryan

“Don’t ever think that your voice, that your experiences are not enough. You are more than enough. You’re a Rocker.”

— April Ryan
Everyone Swims
At the Kilpatrick Athletic Center, people of all levels are developing and strengthening their skills in the water. Whether you’re learning how to jump in water over your head, swim with bilateral breathing, or become a swim instructor, the Everyone Swims initiative is creating a community focused on water safety and fun. Throughout April, the college hosts free swimming lessons for children and adults.

Andre Green ’97
Leading Efforts to End Misuse and Flaws in Standardized Testing
Andre Green was named the executive director of FairTest: The National Center for Fair & Open Testing. The organization works to improve evaluations in education while eliminating racial, class, gender, and cultural barriers to equal opportunity posed by standardized tests.

New Academic Programs
Students have new opportunities for academic study. Students can now concentrate in Mind & Brain Studies, an interdisciplinary neuroscience program. The program is accompanied by a lecture series and internship opportunities with regional partners. Simon’s Rock is also partnering with Upstate Medical University to offer a BA/MD program. Simon’s Rock students apply to the MD program in their third semester—as part of sophomore planning. After their BA from Simon’s Rock, they matriculate directly into Upstate Medical’s MD program. No MCAT is required.

Tate Coleman A’18 Advocates for Better Public Transit
Tate Coleman is building support for expanded service and decreased travel times in the southern part of Berkshire County. Tate presented his public transit proposal at the Great Barrington Selectboard and his efforts have been covered by The Berkshire Eagle and NPR affiliate WAMC.

Simon’s Rock Gets High Marks on Campus Pride
Campus Pride, the nation’s leading organization working to create a safer college environment for LGBTQ students, has rated Simon’s Rock four out of five stars on its national listing of LGBTQ-friendly colleges and universities.

New bathroom signs on campus describe the facility, not the gender.
community

Edward “Ted” Siedle ’74 Blows the Whistle and Wins
Ted Siedle, an independent financial investigator, reported that JPMorgan Chase had not disclosed a conflict of interest that led the bank to pay a $367 million settlement in 2015. In 2017, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission Office of the Whistleblower, which awards whistleblowers with a portion of monetary sanctions, awarded Ted $48 million, the largest whistleblower award in history. In 2018, Ted was awarded an additional $30 million.

Ronan Farrow ’99 Speaks Truth to Power
In several high-profile exposés, Ronan Farrow detailed how powerful men have committed sexual assault and harassment. His reporting earned a Pulitzer Prize, and he was included on both Time’s 100 Most Influential People and GQ’s Man of the Year lists. He told GQ: “It’s pretty hard work, but harder for the sources... And anytime one of those sources feels that I’m a person that they can trust and come to if they have a significant story, and anytime someone knows that I will work carefully and meticulously to interrogate those claims but also create a space where they feel safe in coming forward with them, those are things I’m deeply grateful for.”

Asma Abbas Named Dean at Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture
Politics and Philosophy Professor Asma Abbas was named dean of academics at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, one of the most prestigious colleges in Pakistan. The university “strives to motivate and guide students to think, be curious, to keep themselves open to sources of experience and learning, to be politically aware and socially responsive and take an independent position, respecting knowledge and people of knowledge, with humility.” Asma will return to Simon’s Rock, and while on leave, she continues to work with students and colleagues remotely.

Simon’s Rock Goes Green
Recent initiatives at Simon’s Rock demonstrate the College’s commitment to environmental sustainability. Through net metering arrangements at two off-campus solar farms and the installation of solar panels on the Daniel Arts Center and the Kilpatrick Athletic Center, along with energy savings initiatives, more than 50 percent of the College’s electricity use is now supported by solar energy.

Peer-to-Peer Support
In its second year, Rockers for Intervention, Support, and Education (RISE) continues to grow and shape campus culture. With training and ongoing assistance from a licensed clinical social worker, RISE students run a call center and organize events.

From Academy to Thesis
Part of the inaugural class of Bard Academy, Gigi Janko ’16 is the first to write a thesis. “Sports Medicine” is an alchemical intercourse defined by post-meaningful gestures in sculpture, photography, dance, text, performance, tennis, and the thermodynamic byproduct.
Bard High School Early College to Open in DC

Opening in fall 2019, the tuition-free, four-year high school early college will be operated jointly by Bard College and DC Public Schools. Students earn college credit and an associate degree from Bard College while earning their high school diploma.

Bard’s Acclaimed Oklahoma! Revival Is Coming to Broadway

A darkly revisionist revival of Oklahoma! enjoyed a critically acclaimed and sold-out off-Broadway run—and now it’s moving to Broadway. The production originated in 2015 at Bard College’s SummerScape festival.

New Center Tackles Regional Environmental Problems

The Bard Center for the Study of Land, Air, and Water is an interdisciplinary platform to create effective solutions to complex environmental problems. A Land Lab will serve regional agricultural communities and offer rigorous scientific testing. The Water Lab engages students, faculty, and community members to research water quality and habitats.

Rethinking Dance Education

The Bard College Dance Program is partnering with the American Dance Festival to challenge the way dance is taught in higher education. Uniting critical inquiry and professional practice, the new program contextualizes students’ training with an annual focus on a pressing contemporary topic.

Bard College Appoints Award-Winning Author Valeria Luiselli as Writer in Residence

Luiselli is the author of La historia de mis dientes (The Story of My Teeth), which won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and was named one of The New York Times 100 Notable Books of 2015. In 2014, she was named one of the 5 Under 35 by the National Book Foundation, an annual award honoring young and promising fiction writers. Her recent book Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions was a finalist for the Kirkus Prize in Nonfiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism.

New Study: Wildlife Conservation and Ranching

Bard professor Felicia Keesing was the lead author of a study of wildlife in Kenya. Scientific American reports, “[I]n a rare win-win situation for humans and nature, researchers have now shown that livestock and wildlife can benefit from each other’s presence.”
Parami Institute, founded by Kyaw Moe Tun ’05, is the newest in a long line of Bard College-affiliated campuses and partnerships created to serve student populations in some of the most difficult areas in the world. by Ella Geismar ’13
The above piece, which was written by a young woman named Stella Htetel, was created under similar circumstances. And, in fact, reading these few lines, it would be easy to imagine them being penned by any incoming first-year student at Simon’s Rock, or any of Bard College’s other campuses. For the author, however, the implications of these questions feel especially close at hand. Stella, who is from one of Myanmar’s minority ethnic regions, Kayah State, has personally witnessed the impacts of the development process in question. In the pages of her writing, Stella lays out firsthand experiences with deforestation of massive teak forests, the creation of three hydroelectric power plants in her hometown, and agricultural decline due to climate change and the introduction of monoculture. As is often the case in Writing & Thinking, Stella’s essay blurs the lines between the political and the personal, embracing the complexities of that relationship with confidence.

Stella grew up in a convent, where rules were strict and opportunities limited. However, after high school, she had the chance to move to Yangon (formerly Rangoon), where she studied under a teacher who...
encouraged her to pursue new modes of thinking and self-expression. After a year in Yangon, she opted to continue her education and enrolled in a distance university, a popular model of schooling in Myanmar that only requires students to be on campus for final exams. Given the flexibility of the model, she knew that she could continue to pursue more meaningful, nontraditional educational opportunities in her own time. So, she enrolled in the Parami Leadership Program (PLP), a small but increasingly influential program located in Yangon. Geared toward recent university graduates (most of the students are between the ages of 20 and 26), PLP is an intensive, year-long academic program in the liberal arts and sciences.

Now in her second month at PLP, Stella reports that her greatest challenge has been breaking out of her comfort zone and pushing herself to think in new ways. But her goals are coming into focus: in light of her own educational trajectory, Stella hopes to create an educational center for disadvantaged students in her hometown, sharing the styles of learning she’s learned at PLP.

CREATING OPPORTUNITY

Dr. Kyaw Moe Tun ’05 (known as Freddy while a Simon’s Rock student) founded Parami Institute in 2017. Parami is the newest in a long line of Bard College-affiliated campuses and partnerships created to serve students like Stella in some of the most difficult areas in the world.

“I feel compelled to create and share similar education opportunities that I once received at Simon’s Rock,” says Kyaw Moe Tun. “This education is highly needed to empower the Myanmar youth in critical thinking, interdisciplinary analysis, and articulate communication, to become future leaders of this country.”

Focusing on providing and improving higher education opportunities across the country through both programming and policy advocacy, Parami is working unabashedly to bring the liberal arts—with all of its rigor, complexity, and challenge to norms and conventions—to a country with a long history of oppressive rule and poor educational opportunities.

In PLP, which serves the core educational initiative of Parami Institute, students from across Myanmar’s vast ethno-linguistic spectrum study under internationally educated faculty, taking courses in the arts, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. Classes are student-driven, emphasizing collective learning through discussion of ideas, texts, and opinions. In fact, the classroom would be immediately recognizable to any Simon’s Rocker—a small group of students, seated in a circle, sharing ideas with enthusiasm. Parami structures its curriculum to broaden exploration through engaging discussions and uncompromising freedom of thought. And, as is the case at every Bard College campus across the world, the foundations for this way of being in the classroom are established in the Writing & Thinking Workshop.

WRITING & THINKING WORKSHOP

At the start of this year, Parami Institute welcomed Simon’s Rock professor Dr. Chris Coggins as our Writing & Thinking Workshop leader. An expert in Chinese geopolitical studies, Chris has been teaching, traveling, and studying in the East and Southeast Asian
region for years, but had never been to Myanmar before he joined us in January. But as an experienced and adept workshop leader, Chris recognized something that lies at the heart of the workshop: wherever in the world it may take place, Writing & Thinking has the potential to shake the foundations of expectations and precedents in dramatic ways, shifting thinking and reframing understanding for students and teachers alike.

Over the course of two weeks, Chris guided students through texts and exercises that spanned Writing & Thinking standbys—including Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” and T. S. Eliot’s “Preludes”—to Myanmar-specific ones, including poems in Burmese and a writing exercise about locally foraged plants and leaves. For their final “PPPs,” students were asked to write “auto-ethnographies,” personal essays that shared personal and cultural anecdotes through descriptions of land and space. Over half of the students in the current cohort are from ethnic minority groups, and they represent every major region in Myanmar. Sharing these stories was an exercise in recognizing both shared commonalities—like the widespread economic growth and globalization that has reached nearly every corner of the country—as well as major differences in language, culture, climate, and beyond.

Though transformative for students anywhere, the invitation to openness and freedom of thought is distinctly radical here at Parami. Decades of military rule have left even younger generations hesitant to speak out, fearful of censorship or worse. Myanmar’s education system—a product of an oppressive military regime—continues to promote a culture of silence and conformity. From a very young age, students are punished for asking questions and rewarded for memo-

“At first it seemed easy because there are no rules. But . . . because there are no rules, it’s very difficult. There’s so much to think. There’s no limit, no boundary.”

Nan Sanda Kue

above: Students work in small groups during Writing & Thinking

left top: Nang Te’ Phyu, a young Pa-O woman from Southern Shan State, presenting her “auto-ethnography” on the final day of Writing & Thinking

left bottom: Chris and students on the ferry ride to the nearby town of Dala as part of Writing & Thinking

At first it seemed easy because there are no rules. But . . . because there are no rules, it’s very difficult. There’s so much to think. There’s no limit, no boundary.”

Nan Sanda Kue

simons-rock.edu
The curiosity and vulnerability of ideas that Writing & Thinking necessitates is such a departure from the norm of Myanmar’s public school system that it can often be overwhelming for our students when they first arrive. The week after Writing & Thinking ended, I was sitting in a tea shop with Stella and a few other students. I asked what they thought of the experience. A young woman named Nan Sanda Kue immediately responded enthusiastically: “At first it seemed easy because there are no rules. But actually, because there are no rules, it’s very difficult. There’s so much to think. There’s no limit, no boundary.”

And thinking—thinking without limits, without boundaries—is more crucial here than ever before. In the wake of rapid and recent democratization after decades of isolation and military rule, the country is teetering on a familiar ledge—on one side, a dangerous backslide into xenophobia and dictatorship; on the other, meaningful economic development and a growing democratic process that represents all of Myanmar’s citizens. Empowering students to vocalize their thoughts has always been the stated goal of Writing & Thinking, but in a country scarred by violent silencing, the stakes are significantly higher and the impact significantly greater.

“I knew that this was a critical moment in the country’s history,” Chris wrote to me in an email after returning to Great Barrington. “I was eager to learn what smart, young students who hailed from many parts of the country … would have to say about their lives, the state of their nation, and their own goals and aspirations in the face of daunting collective and individual hardship. What better way to do this than through writing and thinking exercises that simultaneously challenge, engage, and, often, captivate both the teacher and the students, as all become more self-aware, more aware of the lives and hopes of others, and, arguably, more committed to the pursuit of communication by any means possible to amplify the communicative capacities of our collective communities?”

This need for cross-cultural understanding is central to Parami’s mission. Violent conflicts in Rakhine State have underscored deep-seated insecurities in Myanmar’s efforts toward legitimate democratization and peace-building processes that are necessary for long-term sustainability. Indeed, the plight of the Rohingya is part of a long history of violent military campaigns against Myanmar’s many minority ethnic and religious groups. Oppression of minority groups in Myanmar, often violent, is in no small measure the product of isolation, which in turn fuels prejudice and closed-mindedness. In this context, the classroom is one of the few spaces equipped to lay the necessary foundations for positive change, and the work happening at Parami, to students and faculty alike, feels pressing, not in spite of, but because of, the conflicts happening here.

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above: Students purchasing snacks from a street vendor
L-R: Wah Wah Khine, Soe Myat Noe Oo, Wai Phyo Oo

left: Ba Win talking with students

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THE FOUNDING AND FUTURE OF PARAMI

Officially opened in 2017, Parami Institute’s history and ties with Simon’s Rock began in 2011, when U Ba Win, former dean of students and provost at Simon’s Rock, and later Bard College’s Vice President for Early Colleges, was leading an initiative to open a four-year, residential liberal arts college near Mandalay, Myanmar’s other, more northerly metropolis. Ba Win had recruited Ian Bickford, then faculty in literature at Bard High School Early College Queens, to serve as the new institution’s academic dean, and together they approached Kyaw Moe Tun, who was finishing his PhD in chemistry at Yale, to serve as a founding member of the faculty. As an alumnus
of Simon’s Rock who was born and raised in Yangon, Kyaw Moe Tun was a clear choice.

He was the first and also, it turned out, the last prospective faculty member to be offered a job at Bard’s notional Myanmar campus. Despite the momentum behind the school, key influencers in Myanmar retracted their support unceremoniously, effectively ending the project. They felt the country wasn’t ready for the kinds of open discourse produced in liberal arts classrooms. Kyaw Moe Tun disagreed, and he remained in Myanmar to continue the work, driven by the importance of the mission and his own ability to give back. “The major challenges were twofold,” says Kyaw Moe Tun. “One was convincing the Myanmar people to pursue liberal arts and sciences education. The second was development and fundraising.” He looked to his community to meet these challenges, and launching the school was a collaborative effort. Friends and connections from Myanmar-based organizations helped secure the space, design the classrooms, and publicize the program.

“It was not a given that he would come back,” says Ba Win. “It’s important to remember that things were really bleak when Freddy [was here] … There was no end in sight … Certainly, very few Burmese students in that era returned. Because what would they return to? A military government that was, at the very least, suspicious of them, and not at all inclined to give them any position of authority.” Kyaw Moe Tun had been on a research team at Yale that was making important medical breakthroughs, and he knew he had a clear path to a major research position at a prominent lab. He also knew that returning to Myanmar was something he wanted to do, but wasn’t sure in what form. “But then in 2011,” he recalled, “U Ba Win sent me an email asking me to come back to teach in Myanmar. That really set off my decision to come back. None of this would really have been inspired without Ba Win.”

Kyaw Moe Tun’s ultimate goal is to create the residential, four-year school that Ba Win envisioned, accredited as a satellite campus of Bard College. President Leon Botstein has given his approval to the idea, noting that “Bard is proud to expand [the partnership] even further with the establishment of Parami University, an initiative that will offer a Bard-styled education to Myanmar’s young people.” For now, though, the PLP has served as an excellent and, despite its small size, high-impact educational program in Myanmar. In its current form, the PLP may only be a one-year program. But the enthusiasm and curiosity that pervade the Parami campus are no less present or intense than the same energies at Simon’s Rock, in the classrooms, the library, the studios, the laboratories, or the Interpretive Trail.

In this way, Parami has come to embody the ethos—I will call it the heart and soul—of the Simon’s Rock education that Kyaw Moe Tun and I both received, but in a wholly new and exciting context. Just last week, students petitioned to create a new weekly time slot for “knowledge sharing,” a time for one student to share expertise on something beyond the classroom with fellow classmates, the first speaker, who just graduated from a technological university, discussed data privacy. Named as an ode to the conversational atmosphere of Burmese tea shops, these “Tea Talks” embody an unadulterated enthusiasm for learning that only feels comparable to the attitude that defines the Simon’s Rock community.

At first, I had imagined these similarities to be due to the broad strengths of the liberal arts. But that only seems to be part of the equation. There are hundreds of liberal arts programs in the world, many teaching in the same way that our own schools do. But at Parami, as at Simon’s Rock, there is an additional, radical quality to the education our students receive: whether it comes from starting at a younger age or transcending political contexts, these learners are defying expectations and transgressing norms in order to access life-changing educational opportunities. In both places, nothing is taken for granted, and every moment in the classroom is recognized as important.

“As a geographer in a liberal arts institution,” Chris wrote at the end of his note to me, “I was struck by the effectiveness of combining liberal arts pedagogy with the worldly concerns that seem to burden our discipline to the breaking point … [but] working with the students in Parami helped me realize that the right kinds of changes begin with thoughtful conversations. These conversations are best preceded by a little writing and thinking. I emerged with a deep sense that these students will change the world for the better.”

Ella Geismar is an alumna of both Simon’s Rock and Bard High School Early College Queens. She currently serves as the programs director at Parami Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences.
Leading the Way in STEM

Southeast Asia Women of the Future Awardee Uses Technology to Support Sustainable Farming

Phyu Hninn Nyein ’05 is helping rural farmers in Myanmar build a sustainable future. As a big data analyst for the country’s largest agricultural services platform, she is part of an advisory team of agronomists, soil scientists, farmers, and technologists who support farmers nationwide. Seventy percent of the population of Myanmar is involved in agricultural activities.

In 2012, Hninn joined Proximity Designs, which offers farmers technology, finance, and advisory services. She was the first female member of the organization’s farm advisory team and is now the team’s general manager.

Applying scientific methods and thinking to modern agriculture, Hninn’s team advises 150,000 small farms in 21 townships. They aim to eventually reach all 300,000 farms in the region. Hninn credits recent widespread accessibility to technology—smartphones have been available in Myanmar only since 2014—for helping her team get information about market prices, climate change, and government policies to farmers so their businesses can succeed and families can continue to farm for generations to come.

Hninn’s business unit launched a first-of-its-kind soil test service for paddy farmers in Myanmar that will ultimately help restore the health of their soil and improve their crop yields. “There is no other soil testing facility in Myanmar,” she says, “so we are very proud of it.”

In recognition of her community spirit and public service in Myanmar, Hninn was presented with a Women of the Future Award, which gives a platform to emerging leaders who are driving positive impactful change. “I would like to point out that there are a lot of good people who are doing their best to move [Myanmar] forward,” Hninn said in her acceptance speech. “I am really humble and very proud to be representing all of those people here tonight.”

Hninn’s work at Proximity Designs is directly related to her studies at Simon’s Rock, where she was a math-biology double concentration. “Both math and biology are quite relevant in my work right now,” says Hninn. Beyond the classroom, she was involved in environmental conservation work along the Housatonic River in Great Barrington and conducted research in molecular biology with biology professor Susan Mechanic-Meyers. After obtaining her BA from Simon’s Rock, Hninn earned her MA in biostatistics at Boston University, a certificate in social entrepreneurship from INSEAD, and a postgraduate diploma in strategy and innovation from the Saïd Business School of the University of Oxford.

South East Asia Community & Public Service award winner
Phyu Hninn Nyein ’05
Access to Opportunity

Meghan Kirksey ’94 Reflects on the Simon’s Rock Experience

**At age 15, Meghan Kirksey ’94** was a talented and successful student at a prestigious high school. She’d never heard of Simon’s Rock. But when a flyer came in the mail about the college, she and her parents decided to explore it. She visited the campus and then enrolled on a full scholarship. Meghan’s time at Simon’s Rock changed her path and transformed her life.

“I went to excellent schools while growing up, but Simon’s Rock is the first place that expected and encouraged me to think.” Meghan has a clear memory of sitting in a class early on when her professor turned to her and asked, “What do you think about...” This was shocking to her. “I don’t remember the rest of the question because what shook me was the expectation that I, a 16-year-old, was expected to have insights and ideas worthy of sharing with a professor and my class. He wasn’t asking for information; he was asking for my thoughts. I was no longer in class to simply learn. This was a paradigm shift that changed my life and my approach to academics. This was the key that led me down the path from my interest in science to my passion for research and discovery.”

**After Simon’s Rock,** Meghan continued to pursue her academic interests. She earned a PhD at Rockefeller University and an MD from Weill Medical College of Cornell University. She is now board certified in critical care and anesthesiology. She is still passionate about discovery and is actively involved in clinical and database research to elucidate physiologic and clinical determinants of postoperative outcomes.

Meghan, and her spouse, Tynisha Wynder, now fund The Alida Kirksey and Samantha Wynder Scholarship. “It’s a blessing to give back to this community,” says Meghan. “This scholarship is our way of giving another student access to the opportunities that Simon’s Rock opened up to me.”

“At Simon’s Rock, the expectation that younger scholars can be thoughtful and creative and must learn effective communication is unique and a gift,” says Meghan. “The independence, respect, and safety I felt as a young person coming into myself were invaluable. It was lonely being the only queer, black woman on campus. But it was loneliness I experienced with the support of friends and allies. What I appreciate about going through those experiences while at Simon’s Rock is that we had a voice that was respected, and most of the adults around us acknowledged, understood, and cared that our lives extended beyond the academic.”

Meghan returned to campus for the 2019 Annual Fund Scholars Retreat. She addressed the Simon’s Rock scholarship recipients: “Some of you will excel along traditional routes and some will tread paths never considered by those who came before you. I hope that Simon’s Rock will continue to empower you—the future alumni—who will continue to change the world in ways big and small. We’re proud to invest in you like others invested in us.”

**Access to Opportunity**

Meghan Kirksey ’94 Reflects on the Simon’s Rock Experience

“...the key that led me from my interest in science to my passion for research and discovery.”

Meghan Kirksey ’94
Retiring Faculty
Three professors that helped shape the academics and culture of Simon’s Rock.

Retired chemistry professor Patty Dooley, PhD, will be pursuing a nuclear engineering degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute on the post-9/11 GI Bill. She taught at Simon’s Rock from 2008 to 2018 following her retirement from a 30-year career with the United States Army. “What I want to point out to students I taught is the commitment to lifelong learning. I’m not done being educated,” she said. “Whatever you’re doing, do it as long as you’re happy—but it doesn’t define you in terms of who you are. You can be whatever you want to be.”

Art history professor Joan Delplato, PhD, is retiring after 32 years. While at Simon’s Rock, she has been affiliated with programs in art history, modern studies, visual studies, Asian studies, contemporary critical theory, and photography. In addition to teaching, she is a former Emily H. Fisher Faculty Fellow and former director of the Writing & Thinking Workshop. Joan has held several prestigious research and fellowship positions during her career, and is the author of numerous publications, including her award-winning book, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800–1875*.

Classics professor Chris Callanan is retiring to Göttingen, Germany, where he earned his PhD and started his teaching career. While at Simon’s Rock, he established and taught the first-year Latin program and taught Seminar 1. “It’s been a good time,” he says, crediting his colleagues and then-Dean Bernie Rodgers for recruiting him in 2003 from his teaching position at Bard’s Annandale campus. In retirement, he plans to spend at least the first year doing what he feels like doing each day, without set projects or deadlines. That, he says, will certainly include lots of reading, cycling the German countryside, and connecting with friends and colleagues in Göttingen. He said his coursework with Livingston Hall Chair in Music Larry Wallach has also given him much sustenance for retirement.
The Botanical Origins of Honey
For biomedical engineering student Isabella Cho ’17, a summer research internship with chemistry professor David Myers and environmental science professor Donald McClelland was a sweet experience. The project—exploring the botanical origins of honey—identified fingerprint compounds unique to certain types of honey. By analyzing unifloral honey sold on the market, they could help detect fraudulent honey sources and affect true market valuations of the product.

Exploring Grid-Based Puzzles
Rockers Jonathan Gabor ’16, Addison Allen ’15, Sophia White ’15, and Daniel Packer ’14 presented their work at the 30th Canadian Conference on Computational Geometry in Manitoba, an international event for the dissemination of new results in the field. Exploring grid-based paper-and-pencil puzzle games developed by the Japanese publisher Nikoli, Sophia and Daniel’s work focused on Pencils and Addison’s on Sto-Stone. Jonathan presented on Switches, a game he invented while in high school.

Water Security and Civilian Casualty Minimization
At the 10th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities held at Princeton, Darcy Pollard ’16 presented research on water security and civilian casualty minimization in Yemen, while Carla Hamida ’16 presented on the lack of decentralization of data.

Neuroscience Research
Rifah Tasnim ’16 presented her neuroscience research at the American Physical Society Conference for Undergraduate Women in Physics at the University of Massachusetts. She is programming artificial neurons in order to explore double diffusion and two-way channels.

Narcissism, Psychopathy, Addiction
In researching his senior thesis, Kai Naor ’12 explored the idea that narcissism, psychopathy, and addiction share a common etiology and common symptoms, both behaviorally and internally. With the help of his advisor, psychology professor and director of institutional research Anne O’Dwyer, he became a research assistant for staff psychologist Dr. Marilyn Charles of the Austen Riggs Center—a therapeutic community, open psychiatric hospital, and center for education and research in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

A Musical about Long-Distance Relationships
Danielle Pendleton ’14 scripted, scored, directed, and starred in A Heart Knows When It’s Come Home. The musical is the story of four individuals in long-distance relationships. Her creative process included reading psychological studies on long-distance relationships, researching how musicals are written, and keeping a journal.

Mayan Women and the Guatemalan War
Mikaela Dalessio ’14 presented her senior thesis on Guatemala’s civil war and the personal stories of indigenous Mayan women who lived through it. Inspired by a woman whom Mikaela had met while visiting Guatemala, the thesis grounds first-person accounts of Mayan women within a larger historical context.

What if the Universe Didn’t Have Three Dimensions
In a recent senior thesis, Conor Rowan ’14 explored how physics and engineering would be different if the universe had more or fewer than three space dimensions. “I thought I knew a lot about these problems, but my conversations with Conor kept finding new surprises,” said physics professor Eric Kramer. “It was the most fun I ever had on a thesis.”

A Closer Look at Cannibalism
Sam Scott ’13 wrote his senior thesis about cannibalism and what it means to have one’s life sustained through the sacrifice of another. Anthropology professor Katie Boswell, who guided Sam through his thesis process, said that in addition to his incredibly distinct voice as a writer, “It represented what a thesis is supposed to be: soul searching.”
Du Bois’ Legacy Lives On with Rockers’ Help

Recently, Gwendolyn Hampton VanSant ’87 and history professor Justin Jackson helped create the W.E.B. Du Bois Legacy Committee in the Town of Great Barrington.

“As we move ahead together in community may we heed Du Bois’ teachings and grow in solidarity and purpose as a town and with our neighbors,” Gwendolyn wrote shortly after the town voted to create the committee.

This 12-member committee exists to preserve and promote the legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois, a scholar, social critic, and civil rights leader whose life and writing still resonate today, more than 150 years since his birth two miles from the Simon’s Rock campus. It sponsors education programming and events, including the annual, month-long Du Bois Legacy Festival.

For Gwendolyn, the committee is an extension of her work as an advocate for diversity and inclusion. Last year, she co-chaired the W.E.B. Du Bois 150th Festival Committee, a partnership between the town of Great Barrington, Simon’s Rock, and area organizations. As a student, she studied Du Bois in class and worked at The Du Bois Center, located a few miles from campus. And she is founder of Multicultural BRIDGE, a nonprofit that promotes mutual understanding and acceptance among diverse groups in Western Massachusetts.

“I’ve been proud to join celebrations acknowledging the 150th birth anniversary of my town’s most accomplished native son, W.E.B. Du Bois,” Justin writes in a three-part series for The Berkshire Edge. “Undoubtedly the greatest African-American intellectual in U.S. history and an activist who pioneered the modern civil rights movement and worked tirelessly for African peoples’ freedom throughout the world, Du Bois is long overdue for public recognition in Great Barrington and the nation.”

This year’s festival comprised a series of readings, performances, and lectures, including one by Justin.

Mural in Great Barrington depicting the history of Du Bois and his family.

Jamaica Kincaid will address the graduates of Bard College at Simon’s Rock

Kincaid is the author of a dozen seminal works of fiction and nonfiction and winner of the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction, Prix Femina Étranger, Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and the Clifton Fadiman Medal.

“Professor Kincaid’s work has been taught in many courses at Simon’s Rock,” says Provost Ian Bickford. “Her experimental way of proceeding in language, commitment to questioning the super- and sub-structures of political and social authority, and perspective as an Antiguan-American immigrant and intellectual will resonate, I believe, with the values we hope to emphasize in our community, especially on this celebratory occasion.”

Learn more at simons-rock.edu/commencement
What Did You Stand Up For?

Throughout its history, the Simon’s Rock community has answered the call of social justice through activism. *Students Stand Up: Activism at Simon’s Rock*, a recent art exhibit presented by the Hillman-Jackson Gallery and Simon’s Rock Archive, showcased a collection of historical photographs, student publications, and other archival materials from generations of Rockers who have engaged with their community and raised their voices for a cause. An interactive space gave visitors a chance to add their own activist artwork to the gallery and bring attention and awareness to issues of concern.

**2004**

In 2004, students mobilized to support the builders of the Daniel Arts Center, who had been treated unfairly by an outside contractor. Thanks to the efforts of students, faculty, and union representatives, the workers achieved more favorable conditions.

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**2003**

Students protest the invasion of Iraq.

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**2000**

Feminist Zine from Jennifer Browdy’s Intro to Women’s Studies Class. Published in 2000

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**2009**

Costume from Moonchildren, directed by Karen Allen in 2009.

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Do you have an activism story to share? We want to hear it! Send your memories to alumni@simons-rock.edu.
Head Mischief: How Mrs. Hall Changed My Life and Shaped Yours

Elizabeth Blodgett Hall reviewing plans for the Simon’s Rock campus.
Drew Gilpin Faust was president of Harvard University from 2007 to 2018. She attended Concord Academy while Simon’s Rock founder Elizabeth Blodgett Hall served as headmistress. The following is an excerpt from remarks on the occasion of Concord Academy’s 90th anniversary, Friday, November 2, 2012, Concord, MA.

I am a historian. I believe that the present is a product of the past. Just as childhoods shape who we are as adults, so origins shape institutions and what they become. And so as I anticipated my remarks here today, to celebrate this place that so profoundly influenced me, I asked myself, what in Concord Academy’s past has made it distinctive? What about its history makes it the Concord Academy of today?

Concord originated as a girls’ school. That is what it was when I attended, and what it remained until 26 boys enrolled in the fall of 1971. Much of its remarkable character was set during this time by a woman named Elizabeth Blodgett Hall, its headmistress for 14 years, from 1949 to 1963. She is familiar to many of you as the name on the Elizabeth B. Hall Chapel. It was a good thing her name wound up on the chapel, she observed, since it relieved the school of having to name a building “Hall Hall.” She was known to many as Mrs. Livingston Hall; to her friends and colleagues as Betty Hall; and to us students as Mrs. Hall and “Toad of Toad Hall,” because that is what she named her house—close by on the Sudbury river. And perhaps most tellingly, she often referred to herself not as headmistress but as “Head Mischief,” an example of the gently self-mocking stance toward life she once called “being simply true.”

Mrs. Hall put on no airs. She cautioned us against them—against what she called putting up a “keep out” sign, a temptation for those at Concord Academy and elsewhere who, in her words, “would like to believe that they are . . . better people than those who are not here.” She was herself completely matter-of-fact and down-to-earth—one admirer called it her “utter naturalness.”

She was clearly an athlete, the captain of her high school hockey team decades before Title IX, and she was awarded the cup for school spirit. On any given day we might see her donning a tool belt or carving a wooden sign. She drove a tractor named Beulah, and gave students a turn at the wheel, to clear away brush for the skating pond she built during her first year as headmistress.

She awed us with her fearlessness and her can-do spirit. As one longtime faculty member put it, “Betty was willing to risk . . . . She took chances, all the time [that] [n]ot many people do, or are willing to.”

At the same time, Mrs. Hall talked to us about the Big Questions—democracy, freedom, war, love.

Students wrote notes to her like this one—in pencil preserved in the collection of her papers: “Dear Mrs. Hall, Could you please talk about revolutions on Friday. On Wednesday could you talk about life. Thank you.”

She once recalled a scene involving two fifteen-year-old students—and you have to picture it in those more formal times—who came into her office apparently to exchange pleasantries about the weather and ask after her health, until, after a moment of settling uneasily into their chairs, the braver one of the two finally said something like, “We wondered if you could tell us why life is worth living?” “How much time do you have?” Mrs. Hall replied. They said, “Ten minutes.” And she welcomed it—in fact, she prized such questions above all other aspects of her work at the school.

How did she develop the capacity that teaching and learning demands? Mrs. Hall described her own preparation for the job as “bizarre”—indeed, when asked what qualifications she had for the job of headmistress, her selection committee said none, except that she was a born leader. But she also found her background fitting, since, as she put it, “so much of teaching is knowing how to select material, how to use the facts, how to interpret them.”

I remember a talk she gave about the terms “Shoe and Galosh”—then-Concord Academy slang for “popular” (shoe) and “unpopular” (galosh). She told us, do not be afraid not to conform. She asked us to examine ourselves: “Are you wearing a circle pin because everybody is doing it, or because you like the pin? . . . Are you trying to be popular because you are a victory addict whose successive victory creates a craving for another? Or are you trying to be popular because you’re human, because you want to join the human race, and, by belonging, SERVE? . . . Don’t be afraid of popularity but do be afraid of corruption. And beware! Popularity is power. And power can corrupt.”

Mrs. Hall embraced woman’s sphere and turned it into a domain of compelling purpose and force—and liberation from narrow ambitions of achievement or recognition—from what she regarded as “victory addiction.” Those values suffused the school and, I believe, defined the school. Now, freed from their gendered meanings—though not, I would argue, from their gendered origins—they define it still—now for boys as well as girls, for men and women alike. Education is meant to change the world; it is not about what college you get into or what honors you may achieve. It is about truth, justice, mercy, service, love. Mrs. Hall knew that. She taught it to me. Her school teaches it still. 

Elizabeth Blodgett Hall and her mother, Margaret Kendrick Blodgett, breaking ground on the Simon’s Rock campus, 1964

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Did we miss your latest publication? Please be sure to share your news with us!
editors@simons-rock.edu.
Elizabeth Blodgett Hall earned a reputation as a capable educational administrator devoted to the betterment of young people and an innovator who was able to successfully translate her vision into a sustainable institution with her philanthropy.

The BETTY HALL LEGACY SOCIETY

Simon’s Rock established The Betty Hall Legacy Society to recognize the devotion and generosity of those who make provisions in their estate plans to sustain Simon’s Rock as the unique and innovative institution that allows bright, highly motivated adolescents to fully realize their intellectual and creative potential. You can help ensure the future of Simon’s Rock, while you secure your own finances in ways tailored to your age, your income and assets, and your vision of giving.

If you’d like more information, please contact the Office of Institutional Advancement at advancement@simons-rock.edu.
Save the Date

Make plans to visit campus with your friends and family!

Get in touch with former classmates and faculty today. All alumni are invited!


Join the Reunion Committee to help plan the weekend. Contact Cathy Ingram, Director of Alumni & Parent Engagement at cingram@simons-rock.edu or 413-528-7266 for more info.

Reunion 2019
July 5–7