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## The World of David Patrick Columbia

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# *The World of* DAVID PATRICK COLUMBIA

A muggy spring afternoon in Manhattan and David Patrick Columbia '62 has just strolled into Michael's, a crisply understated restaurant on West 55th Street, to a round of greetings. The wait staff. The maitre d'. As Columbia crosses to a table heads turn from conversations. Women at window tables nod and smile. A tanned yachty-looking man says hello. He's the publisher of a national tabloid. The women are Betsy McCaughey Ross, former New York lieutenant governor, and Polly Bergen, the star of *Follies* on Broadway.

The maitre d', Steve Millington, stops to take Columbia's order: cappuccino and Pellagrino.

"We've missed you," Millington says. "You must be very busy."

"I am very busy," Columbia says.

Indeed, he is. He has just left the Astaire Awards, a benefit Broadway performance at the Hudson Theatre, where he made several new acquaintances in the dance world. The previous night he attended an awards dinner at The Rainbow Room. That came on the heels of a Literacy Partners benefit at Lincoln Center, where the columnist Liz Smith was the host. "You had what's his name, David Sedaris, and Anne Beattie and Tom Brokaw and Barbara Goldsmith reading from their books," Columbia said. "And then afterward you dine with these people. That's just special. It really is."

And for David Patrick Columbia, it's also all in a day's—or night's—work.

A former actor, stockbroker, clothes-shop owner and autobiographer for hire, Columbia is the premier chronicler of New York society or, as *The New York Observer* put it recently, "society darling and scribe." Editor in chief of *Avenue* magazine, a glossy monthly dedicated to the world of black-tie benefits and celebrity weddings, Columbia is also the creator of NewYorkSocialDiary.com, a daily Web report on the comings and goings of the kind of New Yorkers who get their picture in *The New York Times* when they stroll into parties. It's a Fitzgerald-esque world, and Columbia, who once described his mean and modest western Massachusetts childhood as "Tennessee Williams up north," is an unlikely character to have emerged as its diarist.

Or is he?

*By Gerry Boyle '78*

PHOTOS BY NINA BERMAN

Columbia grew up in Westfield, Mass., the son of a machinist who at one time had been a driver for Black Jack Bouvier, father of Jackie Kennedy Onassis. The Westfield household was a tense one, according to Columbia, except when his parents talked about their early years in New York City.

"The world that they talked about was a very magical world for this little boy who grew up in a very cold house where people were fighting with each other all the time. And we lived on the edge of poverty. This was a world where people lived in very grand houses and grand apartments and had chauffeur-driven cars and sailed on yachts. When my mother and father talked about it, they talked about it with a kind of wonder and a reverence."

A half-century later, their son would, too.

But the route that led Columbia to the world of the wealthy was a circuitous one. Columbia, who acknowledged his homosexuality long after college, recalled himself as an effeminate young boy who always felt like an outsider. He decided early on to cover up that part of his makeup and to behave in a way that would allow him to advance socially. "And I succeeded," Columbia said. "My first success was at Colby."

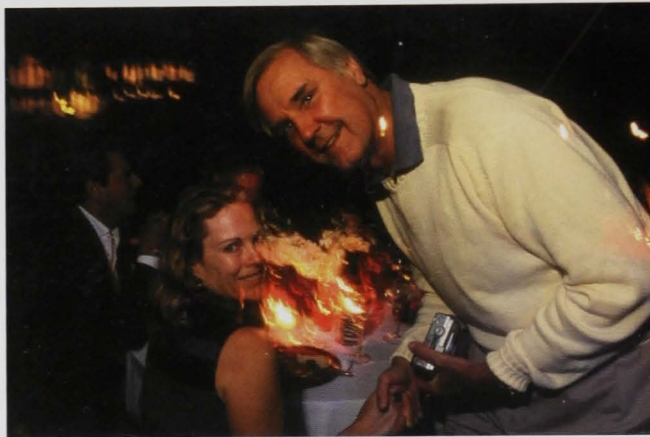
He was rushed by and pledged to Delta Kappa Epsilon, then a fraternity of privileged students and sports captains. Columbia, who was neither, said being a Deke was his first experience of "being inside." It also was a perhaps-chance encounter as a Deke that affirmed his ability as a writer, he said. A fraternity brother and hockey star, Frank Stephenson '62, thrust a paper into Columbia's hand as they passed on the path to the DKE house. The paper was a flyer for a play-writing contest and Stephenson said Columbia should enter. He did, and with Professor James Gillespie in the cast, the play won.

The prize was \$100. Shortly after that, at the end of first semester of his junior year, Columbia added to his string of flunked science courses and was asked to leave Colby. He moved to New York; the \$100 was his seed money. His first stop was a fellow student's mother's apartment—16 rooms on Park Avenue with a maid and cook and Columbia's first look at a world from which he would later forge a career.

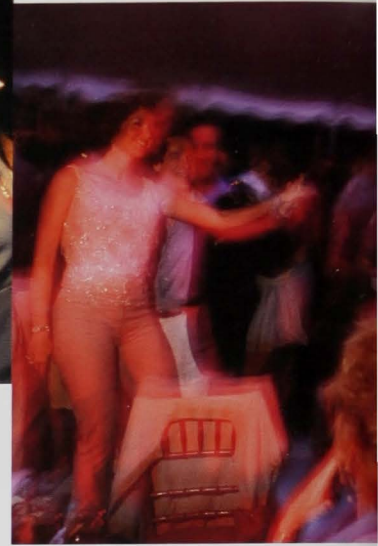
But he spent years floundering, he says. He tried acting but quit after flubbing lines in a summer-stock production in Lake Placid. He married, became a stockbroker. By 1971 he had left Wall Street and opened a head shop in Pound Ridge, N.Y. It was a flop until a friend suggested he sell designer sportswear. "The same mothers who wouldn't buy a T-shirt for three dollars would say, 'Two hundred thirty-nine dollars for a sweater set? How fabulous.'"

Soon Columbia had two stores and a rented estate. But the playwright was still inside Columbia the businessman.

Columbia's anecdotes are full of "names," and by this time in his life the names already smacked of celebrity. Eric Preminger, son of director Otto Preminger and Gypsy Rose Lee, was a good friend. He suggested Columbia pursue his writing. The mother of a friend was married to one of the biggest movie studio heads in Hollywood. Columbia had written a screenplay and the friend got it to Sherry Lansing, then a producer, later chairman of Paramount Pictures. Lansing read the screenplay and told Columbia he should be in Hollywood, he says. He sold the business and headed west. "That's all I needed," he said. "Sherry Lansing never spoke to me again."



David Patrick Columbia '62, above, visits with guests at a benefit party at an estate in Southampton, Long Island, last summer. At right Columbia snaps a digital photo for use on his Web site, *NewYorkSocialDiary.com*. At far right, he catches up with a Southampton friend.



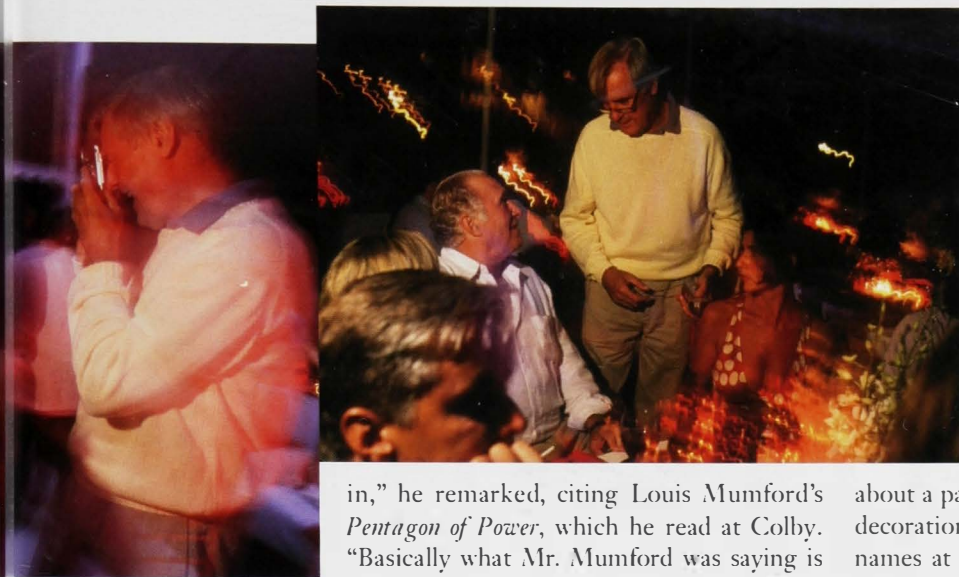
But with Columbia and his serendipitous social contacts, one thing seems to always lead to another. He worked for a movie producer, freelanced (*Esquire* published his firsthand account of one of Truman Capote's "lost weekends" in Hollywood), wrote stories for a movie magazine, scripts for a courtroom television show. In 1986 a book-editor friend pointed him in the direction of another editor looking for a writer to collaborate with Debbie Reynolds on her autobiography. Columbia signed on and the book *Debbie: My Life* was published by William Morrow in 1988. Its success led to contracts to do other celebrity biographies—the Cushing sisters of Boston, a noted jazz singer—though neither of those projects was completed.

Then Columbia's long-time partner left him. It was a bitter breakup, and Columbia packed a few belongings and his dogs into his Volkswagen convertible and drove from L.A. to New York. He still was tinkering with the jazz-singer book when the owner of *Quest* magazine asked him to write for her. Columbia wrote about 50 profiles of society figures from 1994 to 1997, walking out when he felt his editor had become heavy-handed. Eventually he signed on at *Avenue*, another society magazine, but by then Columbia had his eye on a different venue—the Internet.

"I could see that was the future for me," he said. "Because what I write about is not of great interest to everybody, but those who find it interesting are everywhere and they are devoted."

And are there people who are part of this world and people who are merely fascinated by it? "Yeah, and of course the people who are in it are also fascinated by the people who are in it," Columbia said. "There are people who run toward the nearest photographer to make sure their picture is taken. . . . It's really interesting because when I moved to California, if you went to a big party or a big benefit or a premiere, there were always photographers and there were always movie stars and the movie stars were always camera ready. Whenever there was a camera around there was a pose and they looked really good. They just know how to do it. It was just a curious thing for me to see because I had never seen people so attuned to the lens. But when I came back to New York in the early Nineties, I found that everybody in the whole street was like that. Everybody is camera ready."

He readily acknowledges that many of the people who look at his magazine (75,000 circulation) or Web site (400,000 hits a week) look at the pictures and skip his prose. "The nature of the time we're living



in,” he remarked, citing Louis Mumford’s *Pentagon of Power*, which he read at Colby. “Basically what Mr. Mumford was saying is that we’ve become so mechanized that we’re

losing our humanistic qualities,” he said. “And I do think it’s really come to pass.”

If that sounds like someone who longs for another time, it may be. Columbia, who describes himself as a social historian, often looks at the present as a pale imitation of the past. His reading tends toward history (that week he was reading Jacques Barzun’s *From Dawn to Decadence*, and his conversation tends to scurry from George Bush to 17th-century memoirists). Asked by a *New York Times* reporter about prospects for a new magazine, *Gotham*, for younger readers, Columbia sniffed. “I find the young are really boring,” he said. “They don’t know anything and they’re not curious about anything.”

Contrast that with the reverence with which Columbia describes the hostess of a 5th Avenue party organized to kick off a benefit for a cancer center: “Mrs. Petrie loves Casablanca lilies, and their beauty is redolent. They speak for her presence; all part of the whole. Mrs. Petrie is Old School; beauty, discipline, perfection. A creative force called style, which, like its sister, courtesy, is a rare achievement.”

That sort of testimonial will get a writer invitations, though even without one Columbia manages quite well, thank you. At an Oscar de la Renta fashion show he arrived to find that some sort of glitch left him with no seat assignment. Not to worry. Ivana Trump to the rescue.

“I told her my problem,” Columbia recounted in his diary. “She said, in her trilly, European/Czech accent (dahling), not far from the Gabors in their prime, ‘I have an extra ticket because Roffredo (Gaetani, the man in her life) couldn’t make it, so come with me.’” Columbia did, as the crowds parted and photographers snapped. “Ivana was a much better ticket.”

Columbia does occasionally make reference to marriages of convenience, squabbles over inheritances and other items swept out from under the rug. A takeout on a gay man denied membership to a prestigious Newport beach club still has socialites there fuming, he says. And he can be acerbic, as in this summation of Bill Clinton friend Denise Rich and her entrance to New York society, about which Columbia was interviewed by CNN: “As far as Mrs. Rich’s social ascent is concerned, it is not unlike that of many other socially prominent New Yorkers,” he said. “She came to town with a lot of money, bought herself a large and luxurious penthouse triplex, hung out the ham, and they all came running.”

His reporting is largely charitable (as was the Denise Rich commentary), however, cementing his reputation in New York society as a good guy.

“Oh, isn’t he wonderful,” said Nan Kempner, socialite and cookbook author, in a telephone interview from Paris, the telephone number provided by her assistant. “I’m crazy about him. He’s a great pal.”

“He’s just an incredibly charming, likeable fellow,” said the wife of a prominent New York investment banker, dividing her time last summer between Manhattan and Southampton. “He’s good company and in terms of studying society, I mean, what makes David’s writing more special than anybody else’s around I suppose is that he always has a theme. He ties it to the architecture, he ties it to the beautiful boiserie.” When Columbia wrote

about a party at her Manhattan apartment, he tied the Versailles-like decoration to the actual Versailles, she said. “It’s not just a bunch of names at a party,” she said. “When he does his real stories . . . he usually has done a lot of research and he’s usually learned a lot about the family and the history and the architecture. He has a lot of detail.”

For Columbia, who has kept a journal for more than 30 years, detail is a tool used in crafting vivid character portraits, including this paragraph from a profile of Sarah Churchill, a Vanderbilt who was raised at Blenheim. “She was a very elegant woman,” Columbia wrote on the occasion of the death of his long-time friend and confidante last year. “A natural elegance. It wasn’t her figure, which was long and narrow and somewhat ungainly. She had the Churchill legs and gait, long, thin, bowed and delicate. She wasn’t a beauty as she got older and her ample bosom became operatic, which did not impress her. But as bossy and domineering as she was, she was a very feminine woman. A tomboyish girl who was only timid about her alluringness.”

It is a writer’s observation, the perspective of someone standing off to one side, and that is what Columbia has been doing for many years. “When you’re a writer you’re always relating to the world through a kind of prism,” he said, “and you are an outsider even if you’re an insider.”

As the society insider Columbia gets dozens of party invitations every week, is greeted at restaurants like an old friend, is called by the New York media to comment on high society. At Michael’s restaurant that afternoon it was Columbia the insider with whom the tabloid publisher came over to chat. The conversation went like this:

*Publisher:* “See you later. Have a good weekend.”

*Columbia:* “Where are you going?”

*Publisher:* “I’m opening my house on Center Island.”

*Columbia:* “Oh, you’re on Center Island.”

*Publisher:* “By Oyster Bay and Bayville.”

*Columbia:* “Have you been there a long time?”

*Publisher:* “Five years. This is the old north shore of Long Island. It’s a great area. The Howards live there. The Kennedys. David Kennedy owns a big old place. A big group of swells. I have this wonderful house. It was last decorated in 1955 by Billy Baldwin. It was owned by Jack Howard. Scripps Howard.”

*Columbia:* “Yeah. His wife died not long ago.”

*Publisher:* “Pamela Howard.”

*Columbia:* “Yes, Pamela Howard. I’ve met her. Well, good for you. Lucky you.” And like the little boy who only saw this world in magical tales told by his mother and father, David Columbia meant it.