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Senior Citizens

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Senior Citizens

Three senior students already have made an important imprint on the world

If one didn't know better, one might assume Miguel Leff's story is fiction. A blond-haired, blue-eyed Jew from Mexico comes to Colby and in four years, while earning virtually straight A's as a double major in mathematics and government, becomes an actor and a debate champion, helps prosecute cases in San Diego courtrooms, writes speeches for a California congressman and works at Merrill Lynch while studying at the London School of Economics. As humorist Dave Barry would say, I am not making this up.

Leff left his native Mexico City in 1994 and a year later applied to Colby despite not knowing where Maine was. "My mom and I flew to Augusta and drove to Waterville. It was the first time my mom ever saw snow and we were driving in a blizzard," he recalled. The admissions office was closed when they arrived, so Leff and his mother decided to make snow angels in a drift nearby. It was the beginning of a love affair with Colby. Linda Cotter, associate director of off-campus studies, remembers meeting Leff at a reception for first-year students the following fall. "His openness, his warmth, his delight in being here were immediately evident," she said.

Leff attacked his studies with fervor in his first semester, earning a 3.85 GPA. "But, I thought, this is not what Colby's about," he said. "You need to find a balance." That semester he became a U.S. citizen, decided to take Japanese (he eventually minored in it) and received a prestigious internship with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. He worked that summer as an aide and speech writer for Congressman Bob Filner from Chula Vista, the California city where Leff's family relocated. "He did so well in the internship," said Cotter, "that the congressman tried to persuade him to accept a full-time position."

The following summer Leff secured a position with the deputy city attorney of San Diego, Makini Hammond. He worked in the criminal division, translating documents, writing briefs and being part of a team responsible for several convictions. "One time I was in court and we were trying to prosecute this guy who had driven three times under the influence of alcohol," Leff said. "I was

sitting next to the attorney, but of course I couldn't speak because I didn't have a license, and I was passing notes like crazy. I just felt this rage and passion to stand up and prosecute this guy, and I thought, 'Maybe I'd like a law degree.'"

Leff decided in his junior year, despite his conviction that law was his destiny, to experience life in the business world. He studied at the London School of Economics and in November was a guest speaker at a Colby fund-raising event in London, where he exchanged greetings with Colby alumnus Charles Hogan '73, vice president of investments at Merrill Lynch. "I wrote a very aggressive letter telling him that I wanted an internship. I told him that I would call in ten days to confirm that he received the letter and to see if he wanted to give me an interview," Leff said. Ten days passed, Leff called, got his interview—and the internship. He worked in portfolio management at Merrill Lynch, and though he enjoyed it immensely, he says, the experience did not dissuade him from a career in law.

"Thank God I got into law school," said Leff, who plans to attend Vanderbilt next fall. "I want to do something for this legal system. Though it's not perfect, we can work with it and fix it. I'm now struggling with whether I want to become an international lawyer or a criminal lawyer. I can see myself someday being an attorney general or Supreme Court justice."

Lofty goals, but if his Colby experience is any indication, Leff is on the right track. He has allies and fans in virtually every department at Colby. Assistant Professor of Mathematics Leo Livshits, who also happens to be Leff's favorite professor, calls him, "the mathematical equivalent of a pit bull." Leff says Livshits "is my friend, my professor and the guy who's most influenced my life here."

"The best part about Colby is the professors and the staff. They know you, they want to help you, they have faith in you," Leff said. "I think the decision to come to Colby was the wisest decision I've made in my life. Colby has helped me decide what I want from my professional and personal life, what I want for values. That's something I'm going to carry with me."—Jodi Beznoska '98

Busyness, As Usual



Miguel Leff

All Over the Map



Abby Lambert

When Associate Professor of Economics and International Studies Patrice Franko needed a student to help organize an outreach program to raise awareness on international issues, Abby Lambert '98 was the obvious choice. The Mid-Maine Global Forum, a Waterville community group, seeks "to bring the international experience of Colby students to the Waterville classrooms," said Franko, a member of the board. "When I spoke to my co-board members about getting this up and running this semester, despite a very short turnaround time, I said, 'If anyone can do it, Abby Lambert can.' I didn't know how right I was." The acronym for the new program, Global Outreach, is an appropriate one-word summary of Lambert's college experience—GO.

During her Colby career, Lambert has enjoyed two years on the varsity ski team and been a COOT leader, chair of the International Studies Student Advisory Board, a Colby dancer and head of the Adults Reading to Children program at the Colby Volunteer Center. She's been an intern with UNESCO in Toulouse, France, and with the U.S. State Department Mission to the United Nations in New York City, and she participated in the pilot program for the Ford Foundation research program that sent her for three weeks into Cameroon to study the progress of democratic change.

Associate Professor of Government Guilain Denoeux, who coordinated Lambert's trip to Cameroon, says that her energy and enthusiasm for learning are infectious. "Abby is clearly the kind of student who makes teaching at a place like this rewarding; she is intellectually curious, extremely articulate, engaging and dynamic and thinks fast on her feet. By taking herself to Cameroon in January, and by conducting independent research there, she demonstrated that she does not hesitate to take on intellectual challenges that go far beyond the classroom."

While in Cameroon, the first developing country she'd ever visited, Lambert interviewed newspaper executives, dissident leaders and political officials. She lived with a local family and conducted all of her research independently, aided by her fluency in French. "I really thought I was crazy about a week beforehand," she said, laughing. "But then I just got there and hit the ground and was like, 'Alright, I'm here, I'd better go find people to interview.' About halfway through that I realized that I hadn't hit any severe culture shock. I just got focused."

However, she did get a taste of what it was like to be a minority person. "Every once in a while, if I happened to see another white person in town,

I'd realize how ridiculous I looked. . . . There were always people calling 'La Blanche, La Blanche!' which means 'white woman' in French. It was a fantastic experience. It's so huge for Colby to be able to allow students to do this kind of research."

Lambert also has had her share of cosmopolitan experiences. During the summer of 1997 she interned at the State Department, where she served on the security advance team for a presidential visit and met President Clinton. "The most interesting thing was writing letters [to answer queries]," she said. "We would get everything from . . . university professors suggesting policies on Iraq . . . to two girls in seventh grade asking for our support in helping end apartheid in South Africa. We didn't want to have to tell the girls that there was a black president [in South Africa] so we just included a picture of Nelson Mandela."

Lambert, who transferred from Wellesley in the spring of her first year, has never regretted the decision. "One of the strongest points about Colby is that there isn't an intense competition among the students. I think that's the thing I most enjoyed here, just being able to work hard and have everybody else working hard," she said.

Even in her job hunt, she says, she found a sense of camaraderie. "I was expecting everybody to be cutthroat. There's a group of people applying to management consulting firms, and I was afraid that no one would tell anyone anything, but we've all been helping each other," she said. Lambert will join the Carson Group, a financial analysis firm in New York, after she graduates.

David Nugent, associate professor of anthropology, says that Lambert is one of the finest students he has taught at Colby. "[Lambert's] combination of intellectual gifts and individual integrity made her virtually unique among the many exceptional students that I have had," he said.

Associate Professor of French Adrianna Paliyenko agrees. "Abigail is the kind of person who fosters a sense of community with her professors and with her peers. She engages easily with people and has a delightful sense of humor. Abby is a joyous human being whom I will remember fondly," she said.

Perhaps Franko best characterized Lambert in the following anecdote: "Surrounding the overseers visit [for the International Studies Program], Abby solicited input from IS majors and helped get the troops out for the lunch and reception to meet with the visiting committee. At the end of the reception I was left alone with the overseers team. I asked what they thought of our students. One overseer captured it well. 'Abby Lambert,' he said. 'Graduating seniors don't come any better than that.'" —Jodi Beznoska '98

Imagine the impertinence. A college student writes to *The Wall Street Journal* challenging its interpretation of a debate between environmentalists and supporters of a dam in nearby Augusta. The paper responds with a letter of its own, saying, essentially, "nice try, kid."

"I think they were a little ticked off that some college kid poked holes in their analysis," said Geoff Bennett '98, the author of the letter, who subsequently had a similar letter accepted for publication by *The New York Times*. The controversy over whether the Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River should be closed was the subject of a thesis written by Bennett, who concluded that reclaiming the fishery destroyed by the dam's presence more than offset the cost of removing it.

The thesis was the culmination of an exhaustive research project that involved a pile of documents "literally as high as my head," Bennett said. It also was a capstone to an extraordinary college career.

Bennett could be a poster boy for the liberal arts. A double major in classics and economics, he also was a captain of the men's squash team for two years and founded a fly fishing club on campus. Bennett says he sees his interests, in and out of the classroom, as complementary. "Each has been a good foil for the other," he said. "When I get tired of the numbers in economics, the classics study provides a good balance. The classics requires that you break down a piece into its component parts, then put it back together to try to understand it. The same process works in economics. The analysis brings a more full-bodied perspective."

Ultimately, Bennett says, all of his college activities have been studies of human nature. In that respect, he says, squash has been as educational as any of his classes. A co-captain his junior and senior seasons, Bennett was "a tremendous asset off the court" as well as a fine player, says men's squash coach Fred Brussel. Bennett received a special commendation as a scholar-athlete at the national championships, where Colby finished in the top 12 in the country. "The athletics have been very important to me developmentally," Bennett said. "The experience of working with a group of people—resolving conflicts, moving everybody toward a common goal—is something that I can apply in my professional life."

Bennett is a passionate fly fisherman and that, too, influenced his college path. During the summer after his freshman year Bennett and a couple of high school buddies decided to explore the western United States. They settled in a remote

section of southwestern Montana near the Madison River, 45 miles from the nearest town. Bennett lived there in a small cabin for about two months, fishing during the day and working as a night cook at the local Grizzly Bar & Grill to pay expenses. The experience solidified his love of fishing and the confidence that he could overcome age and logistical barriers to achieve a goal, he says.

He organized a fly fishing club the next fall at Colby. The club attracted about 40 members "and, to my amazement, we ended the first year with about three hundred dollars," Bennett said. He solicited a corporate sponsor, the fishing equipment manufacturer Orvis, secured college recognition and ensured that the club would prosper beyond his graduation. "The club is solid. It will go on without me," he said.

The idea for his thesis came while he was fishing on the Kennebec River below the Edwards Dam, Bennett says. The dam, built in 1837, is no longer useful as a power source but significantly reduces the habitat for seven species of fish, he says. "I didn't want to write a thesis like 'GNP: Friend or Foe,'" Bennett joked. "Professor [Michael] Donihue encouraged me to do it on a subject that interested me. It would never have occurred to me that I could write a thesis that involved fly fishing."

His research included dozens of hours of interviews with local fishermen, hydrogeologists, state officials, environmental experts and industrial representatives. Using a sophisticated cost/benefit analysis that includes the valuation of the fishery affected by the dam, Bennett concluded that removing the dam made sense economically and environmentally. "High natural valuations result from the fact that Edwards Dam blocks the passage of anadromous fish species. . . . The removal of the dam would allow this habitat to be repossessed and would greatly increase their numbers," Bennett wrote in his thesis. "The potential use of natural resource economics, which could set many precedents in this case, makes this dilemma one of national import. Indeed, the valuation of natural resources is what makes removal of Edwards Dam the most compelling option."

In addition to producing the letter in the *Times*, Bennett and his thesis drew the praise of the *Portland Press Herald*. In an op-ed article, the paper's editorial page editor, George Neavoll, said Bennett's findings were thoroughly persuasive. "I'm not sure how theses are graded," Neavoll wrote, "but in my judgment this one deserves an 'A.'"—Kevin Cool

Fishing For Answers



Geoff Bennett