

BARD COLLEGE

ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-FIRST

COMMENCEMENT



The Bard College Awards Ceremony

Friday
the twenty-eighth of May
two thousand twenty-one
5:30 p.m.

*Sosnoff Theater, Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York*

PROGRAM

Welcome

Jane Andromache Brien '89
Director, Alumni/ae Affairs, Bard College

Remarks

KC Serota '04
President, Board of Governors, Bard College Alumni/ae Association

Leon Botstein
President, Bard College

James C. Chambers '81
Chair, Board of Trustees, Bard College

Introduction of Awards

Mollie Meikle '03
Vice President, Board of Governors, Bard College Alumni/ae Association

The Bard Medal

Charles S. Johnson III '70

Brandon Weber '97
Trustee Sponsor

Dumaine Williams '03
Faculty Sponsor

The John and Samuel Bard Award in Medicine and Science

Brianna Norton '00

Elizabeth Ely '65
Trustee Sponsor

Michael Tibbetts
Faculty Sponsor

The Charles Flint Kellogg Award in Arts and Letters

Paul Chan MFA '03

Leon Botstein
Trustee Sponsor

Hannah Barrett
Faculty Sponsor

The John Dewey Award for Distinguished Public Service

Nsikan Akpan '06

Elizabeth Ely '65
Trustee Sponsor

Brooke Jude
Faculty Sponsor

The Mary McCarthy Award

Claudia Rankine

Leon Botstein
Trustee Sponsor

Dinaw Mengestu
Faculty Sponsor

The Bardian Award

Peggy Florin

Brandon Weber '97
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Maria Q. Simpson
Faculty Sponsor

Medrie MacPhee

Elizabeth Ely '65
Trustee Sponsor

Ellen Driscoll
Faculty Sponsor

Amie McEvoy

Brandon Weber '97
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Matthew Deady
Faculty Sponsor

Closing

Mollie Meikle '03

THE BARD MEDAL

Charles S. Johnson III '70

On June 6, 1967, the eve of Bard's student government senate elections, the *Bard Observer* newspaper featured a candidate statement from first-year student Charles S. Johnson III. The statement read, "There has been a lot of talk recently about a need for 'rules we can live under' without difficulty and without offending our own sense of fairness. Neither the old social regulations nor the 'new, expanded' ones fulfill this need. Neither the old constitution nor the new one is yet satisfactory." Johnson did not win that election, but went on to be involved in student government at Bard; not surprisingly, he later dedicated his career to advocacy for civil rights through public policy, health care law, and education policy, among many other areas.

Johnson majored in political studies at Bard before going on to earn his juris doctor degree from Boston College Law School. While there, he served as president of the Boston College Black Law Students Association. Following law school, he began his career as an antitrust lawyer in Georgia. Johnson's early livelihood included serving as a principal antitrust counsel for a major automobile manufacturer and as adjunct professor of antitrust law at the University of Georgia School of Law. Over time, Johnson's litigation practice—which spans nearly fifty years—grew to include cases involving commercial disputes, tax law, employment law, and securities, in addition to health and education policy.

Whether he was advising Morehouse College in securing the Martin Luther King Jr. Collection, assisting in the development of Georgia's first tax-allocation districts (a method for directing revenues toward neighborhood improvements), or helping to create the Fulton County Library System, Johnson served the Atlanta community as a consistent voice for equity within public policy. His litigation record includes cases that petitioned for vigorous enforcement of the federal Fair Housing Act as well as for courts to consider the quality of education when crafting a remedy for school segregation. These choices echo Johnson's commitment to the implementation of equitable, just policies.

Johnson, a longtime Bard trustee, has served in leadership capacities for a variety of organizations, including as president of the Atlanta Legal Aid Society and Gate City Bar Association, as vice president of the National Bar Association, and as a member of the board of the Atlanta Bar Association. Among his many honors and recognitions, Johnson received the Randolph Thrower Lifetime Achievement Award from the State Bar of Georgia. He has been inducted into the halls of fame for both the National Bar Association and Gate City Bar Association.

Ever the advocate, Johnson continues to be a champion for education through his current work as vice president for external affairs and general counsel for Tuskegee University, his service as a Bard trustee, and his support for and engagement with the Bard Early Colleges. This activism, as envisioned by the self-aware first-year Charles S. Johnson III, challenges us, as a community, to institute “‘rules we can live under’ without difficulty and without offending our own sense of fairness.”

Brandon Weber '97
Trustee Sponsor

Dumaine Williams '03
Faculty Sponsor

The Bard Medal honors individuals whose efforts on behalf of Bard and whose achievements have significantly advanced the welfare of the College. The Bard Medal was the inspiration of Charles Flint Kellogg '31, who believed that Bard should establish an award recognizing outstanding service to the College.

THE JOHN AND SAMUEL BARD AWARD IN MEDICINE AND SCIENCE

Brianna Norton '00

Brianna Norton is a physician with a dedication to social justice. After earning a degree in chemistry from Bard, she worked in research labs for two summers. “I was passionate about it and wanted to pursue it,” she says, “but unfortunately chemistry didn’t have the human aspect, the social justice aspect, and the political content I wanted.”

She saw in medicine the potential to have the impact she desired. Norton attended the New York College of Osteopathic Medicine. After earning her DO degree, she received a master of public health degree from the University of North Carolina and held a fellowship in infectious disease at Duke University Medical Center. Now she is assistant professor in the Department of Medicine at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and attending physician at Montefiore Medical Group’s Comprehensive Health Care Center.

Norton’s interest in making a difference developed out of her interactions at Bard. “The conversations I had were always political. They were about activism and advocacy, about the systemic problems of the world and the ways in which we could help. Even my conversations about literature and history were extremely important to the kind of doctor I wanted to be.”

The focus of Norton’s work is HIV and hepatitis C infection, and opioid dependence. Demonstrating her concern for individuals addicted to intravenous drug use, Norton is also medical director of New York Harm Reduction Educators, a nonprofit organization focused on the health and safety of low-income people addicted to drugs, which runs a syringe exchange program in East Harlem and the South Bronx. She has received a five-year National Institutes of Health grant to test the efficacy of group treatment for intravenous drug users with hepatitis C in a primary care setting.

Her work is important on both economic and human scales. According to a 2013 study, the total cost associated with chronic hepatitis C infection is between \$4.3 and \$8.4 billion. Norton says, “Some people say, ‘Why treat drug users? They’re just going to get infected again.’ But drug users are the main ones spreading the disease, so you need to treat them in order to bring down transmission rates.” On a human level, large numbers of previously ignored people will get a chance to live healthy lives. “I don’t think I could have predicted I was going to be a hepatitis C provider, but as soon as I realized I could incorporate activism and advocacy into my medical practice, that’s what I wanted to do.”

In addition to her duties as a faculty member, physician, and research mentor to students, residents, and fellows, Norton has authored twenty-nine research articles and several reviews and book chapters, all of them patient-centered treatises that evaluate therapies, access to care, and preventive measures for people at risk for hepatitis C and HIV, particularly intravenous drug users. She regularly presents her work at conferences and as an invited speaker at medical institutions. We are proud to call Brianna Norton one of our own, and to honor her today.

Elizabeth Ely ’65
Trustee Sponsor

Michael Tibbetts
Faculty Sponsor

The John and Samuel Bard Award in Medicine and Science is named after two 18th-century physicians, father and son, whose descendant, John Bard, was the founder of Bard College. This award honors scientists whose achievements demonstrate the breadth of concern and depth of commitment that characterized these pioneer physicians.

THE CHARLES FLINT KELLOGG AWARD IN ARTS AND LETTERS

Paul Chan MFA '03

Paul Chan is an artist, writer, and publisher whose practice is rooted in an expansive sense of drawing, thinking, and technology that exemplifies the interdisciplinary framework of Bard's Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts. Immersed in central questions of current events, from the global influence of U.S. policies to the impact of devices and media, Chan's work has a timely urgency.

Born in Hong Kong, Chan emigrated with his family as a child and grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. He attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago before coming to Bard. After he graduated, Chan's art and activism came to prominence through his long-format video animations and his involvement in post-Katrina recovery and against the war in Iraq. Chan traveled to both Iraq and New Orleans; his engagement in these places and issues generated several video animations, as well as a staging of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* on the streets of the New Orleans neighborhoods most affected by the hurricane.

During a break from video from 2010 to 2014, Chan founded the publishing company Badlands Unlimited, which pushed the frontier of what books could be by issuing highly experimental works; it also salvaged manuscripts that had languished in obscurity. Badlands went on to publish more than fifty books, e-books, and artists' editions.

Chan also developed a body of work called *Breathers*, large, inflated nylon shells that move; Chan describes them as being "animated by breath." In motion, the Breathers flutter and gyrate like embodied gestural drawings, or like spirits. Works from this series have been exhibited at Greene Naftali Gallery in New York, as well as in Greece and Canada, and will be a focal point of a solo exhibition at the Walker Art Center in 2022.

Chan has shown at Greene Naftali since 2003 and has also exhibited at the Guggenheim and New Museums in New York, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and Serpentine Gallery in London. Chan’s work is in many public collections, in these museums and others, including the Brooklyn Museum, Museum Ludwig in Cologne, and Bard’s own Hessel Museum of Art. He won the 2014 Hugo Boss Prize.

Throughout his career Chan also has made significant contributions to art writing, in publications such as *Artforum*, *October*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and *Frieze*. His writing is direct and erudite; it embraces many topics, including aesthetics, philosophy, and politics, and such diverse individuals as Henry Darger, John Cage, and the Marquis de Sade, to name a few. Chan’s “Letter to Young Artists during a Global Pandemic,” a speech originally given to Hunter College MFA students in April 2020, has been one of the most loved and widely circulated pieces of art writing of the pandemic. “What is new in art is a reminder of what is worth renewing in life,” he said. In November 2020, Badlands Unlimited published the first English translation of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Word Book*, with Chan’s original drawings.

We are pleased to offer this prestigious award to our staggeringly accomplished and industrious alumnus Paul Chan.

Leon Botstein
Trustee Sponsor

Hannah Barrett
Faculty Sponsor

The Charles Flint Kellogg Award in Arts and Letters is given in recognition of significant contributions to the American artistic or literary heritage. It honors Charles Flint Kellogg ’31, an internationally respected historian and educator, and Bard College trustee. Kellogg was instrumental in establishing the award, which, before his death, was given in the name of noted journalist and biographer Albert Jay Nock (class of 1892), who was also a College faculty member.

THE JOHN DEWEY AWARD FOR DISTINGUISHED PUBLIC SERVICE

Nsikan Akpan '06

Clear communication of science complexity to the world at large: this has been the goal and career path of award-winning science journalist Nsikan Akpan, during his time at Bard and since. Nsikan has created a multidisciplinary portfolio that spans intricate science disciplines. In his new role as the health and science editor at New York Public Radio (WNYC), Nsikan returns to New York and is reaching worldwide audiences.

Nsikan gained scientific expertise through his collegiate and postgraduate training. He earned an associate in arts degree at Bard College at Simon's Rock: The Early College before coming to Bard, where he moderated into the Biology Program. His adviser was Michael Tibbetts, who taught him about zebrafish biology and from whom he gained research skills. In his graduate school recommendation, Tibbetts wrote, "Nsikan has a quick mind and can rapidly transition from learning background material to engaging in a critical analysis of the subject." For such academic distinction, Nsikan received the Dr. Marian Eisenberg Rudnick Dunn '60 Scholarship.

His current breadth of reporting is based on his wide array of laboratory experiences. Alongside work for his Senior Project, Nsikan was awarded a summer research fellowship at The Rockefeller University and a research assistantship at Tufts University. He went on to Columbia University for his PhD in pathobiology, followed by postgraduate study at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in science communication.

Throughout his academic career, Nsikan immersed himself in research projects that included stress on and resilience of the brain, work on neurobiological molecules in zebrafish, insight into mechanisms of a rare infectious disease, and in-depth studies into the processes of cell death during a stroke and in Alzheimer's disease. His curiosity over a variety of fields has translated into a talent for sharing his knowledge with others.

This impressive body of work is not limited to one communication medium but spans print journalism, for both science (*Science* magazine, *Scientific American*) and nonscience outlets; digital and TV production at *PBS Newshour*; science editing at *National Geographic* after PBS; and now in his role at WNYC, in the top tier of public radio stations in the United States.

Nsikan's excellence in his field is marked by its recognition, earning awards at the highest level. His *PBS NewsHour* video series *ScienceScope* and the segment entitled "What a Smell Looks Like" earned an AAAS Kavli Science Journalism Award for him and the *NewsHour* in 2016. His five-part documentary with an environmental focus, "The Plastic Problem," won a coveted George Foster Peabody award in 2019. Most recently, the prescient, three-episode arc "Stopping a Killer Pandemic" won an Emmy Award for outstanding science, medical, and environmental reporting in 2020. This pandemic-themed coverage and expertise could not have been better timed, providing a reassuring source of knowledge and insight during the COVID-19 pandemic, through his work at both *NewsHour* and *National Geographic*.

We will continue to look toward Nsikan Akpan as a trusted resource to help us understand the complexity of the science in the world around us.

Elizabeth Ely '65
Trustee Sponsor

Brooke Jude
Faculty Sponsor

The John Dewey Award for Distinguished Public Service was established in 1990 to recognize extraordinary contributions by Bard alumni/ae and others to the public sector or in the public interest. It continues Bard's tradition of honoring public service embodied in the Episcopal Layman Award, which was given until 1983. The Dewey Award honors the eminent philosopher and educator John Dewey, the father of progressive education and an outspoken advocate of a system of universal learning to support and advance this country's democratic traditions.

THE MARY McCARTHY AWARD

Claudia Rankine

Near the beginning of Claudia Rankine’s newest work, *Just Us: An American Conversation*, she writes, “What if what I want from you is new, newly made / a new sentence in response to all my questions.” It’s the last in a series of queries on race that poet, essayist, and playwright Rankine poses throughout the text, which, like much of her work, disturbs the normally stable borders of poetic expression. In *Just Us*, Rankine folds, into the interrogation of race, artifacts from a public discourse that is often overlooked or conveniently forgotten: tweets, interviews with politicians, television commercials. Rankine curates these fragments from our cultural and political archives, assembling a portrait of a nation acutely aware of the role race plays in nearly every aspect of our public lives—yet, despite that knowledge, is resistant and often hostile to engaging that very reality. In *Just Us*, as in Rankine’s previous collection, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, the author peels away the thinly veiled layer of what Toni Morrison called a “substitute language in which the issues are encoded.” Rankine, like Morrison before her, is explicit in her intent, and through her work has become the leading architect for a discourse that has the intellectual and moral courage to respect the part that race continues to play in our public and private lives.

Anyone who has read Rankine’s work has witnessed the ever-expanding depth and breadth of these concerns, evident across six volumes of poetry, including *The End of the Alphabet*; *Plot*; *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, which made the *New York Times* best-seller list; and *Citizen*, the first book to be nominated in two categories—poetry (which it won) and criticism—for a National Book Critics Circle Award, as well as winning the NAACP Image Award, PEN Open Book Award, and Los Angeles Times Book Prize for poetry. She summons us, as citizens, to see beyond the veneer of our coded discourse by asking the questions that we are often too afraid, too reticent, or too blind to pose ourselves. Her growing oeuvre includes the plays *The White Card* and *Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue*.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Rankine earned her BA at Williams College and MFA at Columbia University. She is Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry at Yale University; this summer she joins New York University as professor of creative writing. As cofounder of the Racial Imaginary Institute, Rankine has targeted her work as a writer and artist toward a civic organization that fosters an extraordinary range of artistic collaborations on the subject of race. For all of this, Rankine has received such prestigious awards as the Poets & Writers' Jackson Poetry Prize, fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts, Lannan Literary Award for Poetry, and a 2016 MacArthur Fellowship.

Claudia Rankine's singular voice in American literature has altered the shape of our public dialogue, giving us a glimpse into the difficult but urgent conversations into which she has invited us, as readers, to join her.

Leon Botstein
Trustee Sponsor

Dinaw Mengestu
Faculty Sponsor

The Mary McCarthy Award is given in recognition of engagement in the public sphere by an intellectual, artist, or writer. Mary McCarthy taught at Bard from 1946 to 1947 and again in the 1980s. The award honors the combination of political and cultural commitment exemplified by this fearless, eloquent writer and teacher.

THE BARDIAN AWARD

Peggy Florin

When Peggy Florin enters a dance studio (or anywhere else for that matter) she seems to float. Part of that attribute probably has something to do with her early training at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School, where she studied with Margaret Craske and Antony Tudor. But anyone who has worked alongside or performed with Peggy knows that she tends to occupy an artistic plane where delicacy, strength, articulation, and nuance all meet. Oh—and a bit of clown.

After attending The Juilliard School in the 1970s, Peggy moved to Canada. She lived there for seven years, performing and creating dances in Toronto and Vancouver. When she returned to New York, Peggy took clowning classes and joined Eric Trules’s Cumeezi Bozo Ensemble. As “Penelope,” she toured the city, sometimes performing at a party at Studio 54 or on New Year’s Eve at the Waldorf Astoria, and other times in guerilla-style mimetic street theater at places like the American Museum of Natural History and Staten Island Ferry. “We would get in the way. It was slightly dangerous. Some people didn’t appreciate it.” Eventually Peggy decided to stop: “I never felt quite skilled enough and I didn’t really have the nerve you needed to do it. I also started to hate Penelope—a part of myself I didn’t really like; she wasn’t very grounded.”

Peggy’s dance career features work with illustrious names in ballet and modern dance such as the Atlanta Ballet, Neil Greenberg, Jon Kinzel, Phyllis Lamhut, Janet Panetta, and Jean Churchill. A prolific choreographer, Peggy has seen her work performed in Canada; at Danspace, Dance Theater Workshop, and other New York City venues; and at colleges and universities (including Bennington College and Bard College).

Upon receiving her MFA from Bennington, Peggy joined the faculty there while simultaneously beginning part-time teaching at Bard, thanks to then-faculty member Albert Reid, with whom she was performing. In 2008 Peggy shifted all of her teaching to Bard. She has taught all levels of ballet, modern dance, dance composition, embodied anatomy, and, most recently, a favorite class called “Moving Consciously.”

In 2014 Peggy became a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique; since then, Alexander principles have seeped into much of her teaching. “Moving Consciously” synthesizes the many areas in dance and somatic work that Peggy has explored in her forty-plus-year career—a class where “new information joins old information.”

“I am discovering a method for guiding students to unwind the inside of the experience of dance, where there can be thinking and tension that limit movement,” she says. “I want them to discover the essential energy needed to move. After all these years, I want a class to feel like a party. The ‘academy’ in the way that I experienced it, particularly at Bennington College and Bard College, gave me free rein to investigate as I taught, and this is why I grew to love teaching.”

We are delighted to honor Peggy Florin for that love, and have high hopes for her continuing investigations.

Brandon Weber '97
Trustee Sponsor

Maria Q. Simpson
Faculty Sponsor

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THE BARDIAN AWARD

Medrie MacPhee

“Medrie’s materials are as modest as her handling of material is brilliant.”

This observation by the distinguished artist Nicole Eisenman is from the essay “Med School,” in which she describes getting to know fellow artist and painter Medrie MacPhee during long car rides while both were teaching at Bard.

As their friendship grew, studio visits followed, and each would critique the other’s work. After one such visit from Medrie, Eisenman observed, “She is an uncanny diagnostician. It’s almost supernatural how quickly, how adroitly, she can point out a painting’s problem. She knows what a painting needs to bring it into harmony with itself.”

Since Medrie—now Sherri Burt Hennessey Artist in Residence—first came to Bard in 1991, she has brought this keen and unfaltering insight into the classroom, where she has taught beginning and advanced painting and drawing, and supervised advanced studio projects. Says former student and Visiting Artist in Residence Tschabalala Self ’12, “Medrie is a wonderful teacher and mentor who has always showed genuine love and support to her students. I admire her as a teacher, artist, and woman.”

Over a career that includes more than thirty solo exhibitions and seventy group exhibitions in the United States, Canada, and Europe, and honors including a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as Anonymous Was a Woman and Pollock-Krasner Foundation grants, Medrie has shown art that has evolved through significant and distinct phases: from early paintings *The Industrial Series*, *The Floating World*, *Future Species*, derived from a wide vocabulary of forms, to recent works that combine oil paint and cut-up pieces of clothing from discount stores in her Queens, New York, neighborhood. In these witty, elusive, imaginative compositions, clothing is disassembled, flattened, and covered in monochrome paint before being brought to new life with meticulously applied color. Buttons, zippers, belt loops, and shirt hems assert their buried origin with

elegant precision and send viewers past the envelope of cloth on their own skin to an aerial, forensic perspective on terra incognita.

Medrie’s masterful creations mine the quotidian and mundane for a direct route to what is alien and unknown, to what is present in absence, to off-key discovery and surprise. With wry humor and a graceful and practiced sleight of hand, her paintings take us to what is new and strange—and hidden in plain sight. *New York Times* co-chief art critic Roberta Smith wrote of Medrie’s recent solo exhibition *Words Fail Me*, “In the majestic [painting] *Take Me to the River*, the entire surface is a deep oceanic blue and the dividing seams are picked out in white. . . . But plenty of seams are left lurking in the blue, creating a ghostly infrastructure whose depths have a horizontal pull—perhaps out to sea.”

As Medrie MacPhee leaves the classroom behind, the legions of former students who have benefited from her rigorous and unswerving eye carry her legacy forward in their lives and their own artistic practices. Her Bard colleagues and friends will miss her greatly, but we know that a new and exciting chapter in Medrie’s stellar career awaits.

Elizabeth Ely ’65
Trustee Sponsor

Ellen Driscoll
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THE BARDIAN AWARD

Amie McEvoy

“She was stronger alone; and her own good sense so well supported her, that her firmness was as unshaken, her appearance of cheerfulness as invariable, as . . . it was possible for them to be.” So Jane Austen wrote of Elinor Dashwood, and so she could have written about Amie McEvoy, right down to the proper use of the semicolon. Amie has been the rock upon which Ludlow (Bard’s administrative hub) and so much else at the College have stood for four decades, making sure that what should happen did, and that what shouldn’t happen didn’t.

After an administrative career at the New World Foundation and Trinity Church, Amie came to Bard in 1981. Her application for the position of administrative assistant to the president showed that she knew herself well and that she was prescient about the talents she would need to draw upon at Bard: “I work with dedication and discretion, am highly motivated, and maintain a strong commitment to excellence. Because of the positions I have held, I am well adapted to the need for flexibility both in diversity of responsibilities and working hours.”

Her original duty list is lost in the mists of time, but she undoubtedly made it obsolete at once. As an assistant to an ambitious president at an ambitious institution, she assumed responsibilities as needed, with no decrease in overall effectiveness. Official functions at the College—memorial services, lecture series, visits from dignitaries—happened as well as they did due to her careful attention to detail and procedure. A colleague wrote, “Her letters—of invitation, congratulation, and especially condolence—were masterly, the work of a writer of unusual intelligence, tact, and good taste.” As secretary to undergraduate faculty meetings and the Board of Trustees, she composed the written record of the business of the College. If we took for granted her elegant distillations of our less-than-cogent discussions, then shame on us. She brought her eagle eye and unerring ear to whatever prose came her way, polishing it to heighten its clarity and its communicative effectiveness.

Countless programs benefited from her stewardship. A sense of her reach can be found in a partial list of just her musical responsibilities: Olin Hall concerts, the *Musical Quarterly*, Conductor's Institute, Graduate Conducting Program, Aston Magna Music Festival, and Hudson Valley Chamber Music Circle. She had similar impacts across the College, as we all can attest.

This 2021 Commencement is the first to occur without her steady hand at the helm, but everyone involved surely draws on the structures that she put in to place to make our ship sail smoothly. As Bard's Commencement grew in size and complexity, her oversight of all of its aspects never faltered. Faculty marshals and other officers came and went; Amie persevered.

We will miss her ability to remain unflustered under duress, her respect for coworkers at all times, and her daily acts of human kindness, as we strive to meet the example she set.

Brandon Weber '97
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Matthew Deady
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Bard