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(Pictured bottom row, left) Nancy Tom (SNL ‘85) explored issues of social justice and equality by bringing a group of students to 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Read more about her advocacy work on page 9.
Notes from the dean

As we close out our anniversary and celebrate 40 years of student success, we dedicate this entire issue to you, our alumni, to share your stories. While we feature eight individuals who graduated at different times, we know there are many more we could have highlighted, but space on the printed page limits us.

When you were students, our full-time faculty helped contribute to your success in innumerable ways. For 40 years, SNL has employed a diverse group of full-time faculty that teach courses, provide curricular leadership, mentor students, and engage in scholarly activities and creative arts. We have faculty in the humanities, cultural studies, and physical and social sciences, as well as those in business and not-for-profit work. You might not know that we are artists, musicians, writers and actors. We are scholars of healthcare, human origins, French history, psychology and parenting education. We are specialists in economics, the African diaspora, genetics, philanthropy, and adult learning and development. We are experts in community engagement, human-computer interaction, equine-assisted therapy and many other diverse fields. All these concepts and more end up in SNL’s diverse classrooms.

SNL offers classes, books, chapters, articles, novels, short stories and poetry. Our faculty contribute to their fields and a wide range of subfields including Latino studies, African-American studies, online education and international studies. SNL faculty have won awards and received national and international recognition.

You know SNL full-time faculty as your mentors and teachers. You may have taken courses about the Beatles, international business, the global workplace, civil rights, leisure studies or valuing human differences. You may have traveled with faculty to London, Ghana, Tanzania, El Salvador, Mexico, Greece, Jamaica, Cuba or elsewhere. Perhaps you traveled domestically with faculty to New York, Boston or Saranac Lake as part of an internship project.

In addition to their specialties, SNL faculty work as generalists as well, mentoring students with diverse interests. To do this, they must practice lifelong learning. Faculty come to their work not only with a passion for teaching adult students, but also as scholars who work hard to advance their fields. It is the inquisitive natures of our faculty that inform their desire to instill and nurture a passion for lifelong learning and to help develop curiosity, creativity, critical thinking and knowledge of diverse fields in our students.

As dean, I am proud of SNL’s full-time faculty and their tireless work with students, research and teaching. This issue of Common Knowledge could not have been written without them. Let you think I have forgotten the essential and powerful role our part-time faculty and staff play in the college’s work, I will provide an overview in the next issue of part-time faculty expertise and contributions, as well as the staff and advisors who help make the success of our students and alumni possible.

Enjoy this issue and join me in celebrating the accomplishments of this featured group of SNL alumni, as well as those not featured who are making a difference in the world.

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Few would expect a person who has risen to the highest court in Illinois to be shy about discussing her successes, but Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke (SNL ’76, DNL ’05) is humble about her achievements. Burke has had a varied career spanning the most vulnerable members of society but modestly attributes her ability to make a difference to being in the right place at the right time. “I’ve been very fortunate to have had positions where someone felt I could be of help,” she says. “Hopefully I was, but only history will tell.”

While Burke acts as an advocate for the legal system as a whole rather than for specific cases, she has kept close watch on juvenile justice issues throughout the years. “What needs to be done for juveniles is always evolving,” she explains. Through constantly questioning ways to reduce recidivism rates and continually re-evaluating the system, Burke has seen progress, but her work is far from done. “You should always be vigilant,” she says. “You can always improve a system.”

She often tries to facilitate change, but it isn’t always easy. “The biggest challenge in today’s world is getting people to listen to each other with an open mind,” Burke says. She endeavors to help those at all levels think of ways their organizations can be better. “It’s like being Jiminy Cricket on someone’s shoulder—always going back to that person, asking what they’ve done and asking them how I can help,” she adds. No matter what the day brings, Burke tries to do her best. “I always remember that I’m doing the right thing because I’ve based it on a proper due diligence study of the stakeholders,” she says.

Before Burke took the bench, she was a physical education teacher with the Chicago Park District. As a student who struggled with dyslexia, Burke hesitated to return to school to finish her degree. It wasn’t until her husband, Alderman Edward Burke (LAS ’65, JD ’68), showed her an article in the Chicago Tribune about a new school that catered to adult students that Burke decided to take the plunge. “The School for New Learning helped me to understand myself better and taught me how to... study based on my abilities,” she recalls. Burke passed her classes by mastering learning techniques that she carried into her law school studies and beyond.

“The main thing I learned was that I really have a lot of abilities, and I just needed help to find them,” she says. “I think everybody should realize there are no disabilities. It’s just that everyone learns differently, and that’s a good thing because you become more creative in your thinking process.” After all these years, Burke credits SNL with instilling a passion for lifelong learning in her day-to-day life. “I’m taking a sculpting class now,” she says. “So it isn’t like I ever stopped learning.”

Among SNL’s first graduates, Burke stands as a strong testament to what adult learners can achieve. “I would not be here on the Illinois Supreme Court or have accomplished what I have accomplished without the School for New Learning,” she asserts. “There’s no question about it.”

Anne Burke | COMMON KNOWLEDGE

SNL opens doors to the Illinois Supreme Court for one alumna

Marina Alloisio, PhD
Dean, School for New Learning

A brief history of SNL

1972
SNL founded to serve the needs of adult students.

1974
SNL offers classes at first suburban campus in Park Ridge, IL.

1990
SNL launches Adult Bridge Program with City Colleges of Chicago.

SNL receives certificate of merit from the National Academic Advising Association.

1998
SNL develops bachelor’s degree program with International Bank of Asia in Hong Kong.

2001
SNL awards certificate of distance education.

2004
SNL opens graduate degree program in Bangkok.

2007
February – SNL establishes Center to Advance Education for Adults.

2011
SNL founds Men of Color initiative.

2013
SNL Launches Student Success Center.

By the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the American Productivity and Quality Center

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*Notes from the dean | COMMON KNOWLEDGE

1972
SNL founded to serve the needs of adult students.

1974
SNL offers classes at first suburban campus in Park Ridge, IL.

1979
SNL offers classes at Oak Forest campus.

1985
SNL offers first course for credit in the U.S.

1990
SNL launches Adult Bridge Program with City Colleges of Chicago.

1996
SNL awarded certificate of merit by the National Academic Advising Association.

1997
SNL named best practice institution for adults.

2000
SNL offers graduate degree program in Bangkok.

2005
SNL launches baccalaureate degree program with Tonga College in Nairobi, Kenya.

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The course of Wesley Gathings’ (SNL ’13) life changed on the last night of Ellen Benjamin’s nonprofit management class. Assisting at a fundraiser, he and his fellow students served as waiters—and Gathings was not happy to be there. “I practically had my degree from DePaul in my back pocket, and I was still a waiter,” he explains. “I was annoyed, and I almost left the party.” Yet, he found a way to rise above his reservations, and he has never regretted that decision. “I thought, ‘You might not like how you got into the room, but there are people upstairs who have the keys that could unlock your future,’” he recalls. “Not three minutes later, I was having a conversation with Lieutenant Governor Sheila Simon.”

Gathings turned that conversation into an eight-month internship, which led him to his current role as regional programs specialist for North America at Lions Clubs International, the world’s largest service-club organization. During the interview process, Lieutenant Governor Simon wrote him a letter of recommendation that Gathings believes made all the difference. “The competition is crazy to land these types of positions,” he says. “I’m veyr humbled by the fact that I get to impact literally hundreds of thousands of lives and help towns rebuild from all kinds of disasters,” he says.

Having a goal in mind keeps Gathings on track. “That’s how I was able to rise above my reservations, and I have never regretted that decision,” he asserts. “If you invest the time, you literally get out what you put in. I’m doing what I set out to do. I’m helping people.”

At Lions Clubs International, Gathings secures the financial backing for humanitarian projects all across the United States, Canada and select U.S. territories like Puerto Rico. Sample projects include providing vision screening equipment for parts of Wisconsin, cancer research for children’s hospitals in California and a fully handicapped-accessible baseball field in Georgia. In addition, Gathings serves as the liaison for the Special Olympics, coordinates the affordable hearing aid program and supports catastrophe relief initiatives. “I’m very humbled by the fact that I get to impact literally hundreds of thousands of lives and help towns rebuild from all kinds of disasters,” he says.

“Everybody wants to go out and help people, but there are rules to it. There is a lot of red tape and politics behind who gets what, when and how. I’m in a position to learn and do, so I’m going to learn and do.”

Alumnus explores practical applications of the internet of things

On the way to Sensor Expo 2013, Joseph Jesson (SNL MA ’91) tossed a pill bottle into his glove compartment and drove from Trenton, N.J., to Rosemont, Ill. During his presentation on the placement of tracking devices in pharmaceutical and jewelry shipments, Jesson unveiled his piece de résistance: a series of maps that catalogued his nearly 800-mile journey with data transmitted from that single bottle. “By knowing where your assets are from anywhere in the world, you can operate more efficiently and securely,” he explains. In fact, Jesson’s tracking devices can locate any logistics shipment within five meters of accuracy within the United States and Mexico, as well as determine temperature, humidity and radiation levels.

His work with wireless asset monitoring stems from his time at General Electric Co., where he co-founded the business unit Asset Intelligence in 2007. After examining how others were using similar technologies, Jesson developed his own take. “One of our first customers was Wal-Mart,” he says. “Now, most Wal-Mart trailers have a GPS receiver and satellite transceiver so the company can see the actual logistics of the trailers. But the back-up transponder and stores, including load and unload times.” At one point, Jesson and his team were installing 1,000 devices a week to keep up with the demand. Jeff Immelt, chairman and CEO at GE, presented Jesson with a GE Edison Award in 2007 for his efforts, including his patented technological advances.

After GE Asset Intelligence was bought by I.D. Systems in 2010, Jesson left to start his own telematics company, Joseph E. Jesson PC. There, he creates open systems wireless remote sensors that consumers can customize to meet their needs, which can include anything from blood alcohol content monitoring to temperature surveillance for organ transplant coolers. In addition, he consults with companies on various telemetry, machine-to-machine and internet-of-things issues, and serves as chief engineer at XACT Technology LLC. “I like to think of myself as a technological innovator,“ he says. His cutting-edge research has led to more than 15 patents on antennas, GPS technologies and more.

With the ever-evolving nature of technology, Jesson keeps up to date with trends by studying leading research in the field. A lifelong learner, he felt right at home when he discovered SNL. “The program was exactly what I believed in,” he asserts. Among the many lessons he learned, Jesson most appreciates the skills he developed as a professional speaker. “You can be the brightest technological person in the universe, but if you can’t communicate well, it’s lost,” he says. He applies these communication techniques to his students at the College of New Jersey, where he teaches electrical engineering courses.

Throughout his 40-year career, Jesson has seen many changes and believes the field will only continue to grow. “When I worked for Motorola in 1974, we were designing one microcomputer to control the car,” he says. “Now, when you buy a new car, there are more than 50 microcomputers. I see the same for telematics and internet of things. It will become ubiquitous over the next 10 years as devices sense and communicate their local environment to remote portals.”
Michael Johnson (SNL ’02) traversed many roles throughout his 38-year career with UPS. Starting as a part-time package handler, he rose through the ranks to his current position as vice president, chief human resource officer. Through it all, he has remembered the words of UPS founder James E. Casey. He always said it was important to be constructively dissatisfied,” he explains. “That way, you will always stay focused on continuing to learn and apply learning to improve both personally and professionally. He didn’t say be critical about it. Be constructive, but just don’t be satisfied with where you are. Always think about how you can get better.” The first step for Johnson was finishing his degree.

“If I was going to be a candidate for more responsibility, I knew I needed to make sure I had the formal education,” he says. Yet, graduating from college was also important to Johnson on a personal level. “I was always a little remiss about why I never finished school,” he recalls. “I wanted to get it done for me.” After being referred to SNL by several coworkers, Johnson met with John Willets, his former teacher and mentor. Willets’ passion immediately convinced him the program was the perfect fit. “It’s kind of infectious when you meet someone from SNL because they are so excited, engaged and committed to helping you achieve your goals,” he says.

Johnson discovered much about himself during his time at DePaul, including a penchant for post-impressionist painting. Paul Cézanne. His art appreciation class inspired him so much that Johnson and his wife took a trip to Cézanne’s hometown. “That was ignited by taking a class at SNL.” Johnson’s inquisitiveness has extended outside the classroom. "I still find myself being curious about things other SNL. " Johnson's inquisitiveness has extended outside the classroom. "I still find myself being curious about things I didn't even know who Paul Cézanne was at his home in France because I was curious about his life," he remembers. "That was ignited by taking a class at SNL."

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While working at a mental health social service organization, O’Shaughnessy used her acting background to help adults with mental illnesses tell their own stories. Despite the powerful nature of these performances, she noticed a palpable disconnect between the audience and the narrative. “It was then that she was struck with the idea to use professional actors to bring these stories to life. “I felt if we used actors, people would get so swept up in what they were seeing, they would forget they were watching a performance,” she explains. “Instead, they’d think, ‘I’ve felt that. I’ve experienced that.’”

O’Shaughnessy’s organization, Erasing the Distance, seeks to generate awareness about mental health issues by bringing performances to schools, conferences and other venues. “We do that by gathering true stories and using people’s exact words performed by professional actors to start conversations, break down stigma and get the healing process started,” she says. Performances can be about individuals, families or friends—Erasing the Distance will hear any story a person is willing to tell. “We’re not there to diagnose, fix, come up with a treatment plan or offer advice,” she says. “We are really there just to witness, listen and ask powerful questions so that a person feels like they can dive into the depth of their experience.”

Throughout the years, she has encountered a number of responses to her performances. “We are with ourselves all day long, so we don’t realize sometimes the weight that we hold within our own bodies and our own hearts,” she says. “It can be freeing to have an actor hold that for you, even if just for a short while.” Yet, it can also be uncomfortable, which O’Shaughnessy believes to be very powerful. “It’s so cool to see the audience’s response to the stories,” she says. “To look out and see a family sitting together and, during one of the pieces, see one person reach out and hold the other’s hand. That energizes me, because I see what we’re doing is bringing people together. It’s causing conversations.”

Before O’Shaughnessy started Erasing the Distance, she was an actor. “I’m someone with an incredibly varied background,” she says. “I was an actor, a direct care teacher and a life coach. I had done a lot of things with social activism. I knew I wanted to bring all my different interests into something, but I didn’t know what that was going to look like.”

She enrolled in the applied professional studies master’s program with an idea and left as the founder of a nonprofit organization. “SNL was my laboratory,” she laugh. From sharpening grant-writing abilities to developing strong managerial skills, O’Shaughnessy learned much of what she needed to know about running her own not-for-profit at SNL.

Yet, the most important lesson O’Shaughnessy learned is that she can’t do everything herself. “I’ve effected a lot of change on my own,” she says. “But I think the exponential way we’ve been able to grow as an organization and touch more people is through us as a collective taking responsibility. You never know someone’s story.”
SNL inspires lifelong career of social activism

There aren’t enough hours in the day for Nancy Tom (SNL ’85). Though semi-retired, she still produces films, sits on several boards and plans concerts for the community. When she’s not organizing art exhibits, she’s drawing up plans for educational programming at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. With a long and varied career filled with social activism—including starting the Center for Asian Arts and Media at Columbia College—Tom refuses to slow down. “I can’t let injustice go without trying to do something to make it better,” she explains. “I run into disappointments, but I can’t just sit there and complain that it’s not right. I have to at least try to make something better. Even if I take a chance and it doesn’t succeed, at least I tried.”

Tom was formally recognized for her extraordinary efforts by being named an Asian American and Pacific Islander Champion of Change by the Obama administration in May 2013. After working with three presidents—Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush and Barack Obama—on various initiatives and supporting the 2012 formal apology for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Tom appreciates the impact her work can have in society. “I’ve really given everything that I’ve had,” she says. But to Tom, it still feels like yesterday when she was refused a job because she was Chinese. “Little things like that,” she recalls. “They’ve never left me.” That’s why cultural advocacy issues are so close to her heart. “What I’m hoping is that some of the mistakes that were made in the past can be corrected. How can you do that if you don’t know what came before?” she asks.

Tom wasn’t always the social justice advocate she is today. Before her husband passed away, she was a homemaker and a mother. “I was completely clueless of what else was going on except in my home life,” she remembers. That changed when she found herself at SNL. “It gave me the courage to come back into the working world,” she says. Tom appreciated the different approaches to learning, which helped her feel comfortable in her classes. “I’m really a nontraditional person,” she says. “I’m a risk taker. I cannot always follow whatever the traditional way of teaching is. It doesn’t interest me, and I don’t get it. If I can arrive at the same goal in the way I can see, then I can do it.”

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 severely limited the number of Chinese individuals who could immigrate to the United States and prohibited citizenship for Chinese resident aliens. The act was repealed in 1943, though some restrictions remained in place.

From using performing arts to explore traditional Asian cultural issues to producing a documentary following the journey of a young break-dancer, Tom tackles any topic of cultural significance. Yet, of all her endeavors, she values her experience with today’s youth the most. “I’ve worked hard at it, but I enjoy being able to reach so many young people,” she says. “They don’t know how happy they’ve made me.”

Nancy Tom, seated far left, at the Asian American and Pacific Islander Champions of Change ceremony.
Choose Chicago is on a mission to make the city one of the top five U.S. destinations for international travel, and Nina Winston (SNL ’95) is at the helm on the local front. As vice president of strategic partnerships, Winston engages with more than 1,100 businesses and organizations. “I love having the opportunity to make connections with all of our partners,” she says. “There is a tremendous opportunity for our industry and community to join with us in driving Chicago’s growth as a domestic and international destination, and being charged with developing that part of Choose Chicago is incredibly challenging and exciting.”

Since joining the organization in May 2012, Winston’s main priority has been to make Choose Chicago accessible and international destination, and being charged with developing that part of Choose Chicago is incredibly challenging and exciting.”

With the monthly number of new partners joining Choose Chicago more than doubling from the previous membership model, Winston believes she is on the right track. Her efforts are illustrated on choosechicago.com, where she and her team have worked to identify and engage hotels, restaurants, retailers and other partner organizations that are positioned to benefit from tourism. “One of the things that differentiates Chicago from so many other cities is the way each neighborhood has its own identity, and we are very proud of that,” she says. In addition to her industry and community outreach efforts, Winston focuses on expanding corporate relationships as well. “We are actively engaged with reaching out and developing new robust partnerships with the corporate community,” she says. “We are really interested in attracting leading Chicago corporations that understand the importance of tourism to our economy and want to invest in the future of Chicago as a global destination.”

From strategic thinking to sharpened writing abilities, Winston learned many skills at SNL that help her with her day-to-day job—and not just from her teachers. “Even though everybody was in a different situation, we were all in it together,” she recalls. “That was very powerful, helpful and motivating. It really opened me up to understanding the many different ways you learn in an academic program beyond pure instruction.” Attending SNL and understanding the impact of lifelong learning also gave Winston the drive to complete a mid-career master’s academic program beyond pure instruction. “Attending SNL and gaining a deeper understanding of the many different ways you learn is an academic program beyond pure instruction,” she adds. “We were all in it together,” she recalls. “That was very powerful, helpful and motivating. It really opened me up to understanding the many different ways you learn in an academic program beyond pure instruction.”

Winston remains inspired by words often attributed to Benjamin Franklin. When you’re finished changing, you’re finished. “I think that all of us have the opportunity to change and evolve in what we do both personally and professionally,” she says. “As we look to our futures, we should always stay focused on doing things that are important and meaningful to us.”

Kumiko “Kumi” Watanuki passed away on June 30, 2013. She was 80 years old. For 21 years, Watanuki served as a part-time faculty member and professional advisor at SNL. She was an engaging and charismatic instructor, as well as a beloved friend, mentor and colleague to many. Her passion for social justice and service to others inspired all with whom she came into contact.

Born in Saitama, Japan, Watanuki grew up during World War II. After working at a U.S. military base in Japan in the early 1950s, she married an American soldier and moved to the United States. She chronicled her journey to a new land and her challenges overcoming racial, cultural and religious boundaries in her 2007 memoir “East Meets West: Life Story,” which was featured at the 2011 National Education Association Book Exhibit in Chicago. Watanuki had a passion for lifelong learning. She earned a bachelor’s degree in management from Mundelein College, a master’s degree in organizational development from Loyola University Chicago, a master’s degree in social anthropology from the University of London and a doctorate in adult education from National Louis University. Watanuki worked for more than 35 years in corporate planning, marketing, human resources, management training and organizational development in for-profit and nonprofit settings throughout the world, including Poland, Latvia, Iran and Thailand. Fluent in Japanese, she specialized in training executives in international protocol and communications.

Watanuki received the Lifelong Learning Award from SNL in 2003 and the David O. Justice Award in 2012. Every year she worked at DePaul, students and colleagues named Watanuki to be honored with the St. Louise de Marillac Woman of Spirit and Action Award. In addition, she received the Distinguished Alumna Award from National Louis University in 2005, as well as the Spirit of Mundelein Award in 2010 and the Coffey Award in 2012 from Loyola University Chicago.

DePaul and the School for New Learning celebrated Watanuki’s legacy at a memorial service on Sept. 15, 2013. To make a gift in honor of her memory, visit giving.depaul.edu to support the Kumiko Watanuki Endowed Scholarship for SNL.

“Learning is a lifelong process, and every day you learn something, whether you recognize it or not.”

– Kumiko Watanuki
COMMON KNOWLEDGE

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