In the wee hours of morning during Week Nine of the 2011 season, lightning flashes violently across the heavens. Storms bring torrential downpours that flood down the narrow streets around the Amp and wash into low-lying areas. This is the kind of storm that causes Chautauqua’s operations manager Doug Conroe to lose sleep, though most everyone on the grounds is probably wide awake on this raucous night.

By Conroe’s estimation, the Institution has one of the largest storm sewer networks on Chautauqua Lake, one of the primary reasons his team has been engaged in testing how best to capture and remove the pollutants that are carried by storm water into one of the region’s most precious natural resources, Chautauqua Lake. This series of tests and a number of demonstration projects are part of the Institution’s comprehensive approach to environmental management as outlined in Chautauqua’s latest strategic plan.

Often called the number one fishing lake in New York, Chautauqua’s waters are famous for muskellunge, bass, walleye, and pan fish. At more than 1,300 feet above sea level, it is one of the highest navigable lakes in the nation. Once pristine, this extraordinary reservoir was the primary draw for native peoples who first named and populated the region. Later, for the Jesuits and French explorers who came here in the 1760s, the lake became an important means of transit for goods and people. By the 1800s, the beauty of the waters brought a fleet of steamships and a flourishing tourist business. Those Victorian-era visitors included, of course, the Sunday school teachers whose camp meetings on Fair Point would eventually become Chautauqua Institution.

According to the nonprofit Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy, ninety percent of Chautauqua Lake’s shore is now developed, meaning only 10 percent of the shoreline still has the benefit of natural vegetation to hold back soil erosion and silt build-up, while also filtering surplus nutrients such as phosphorous and nitrogen, the primary cause of the algae bloom along its shores. The prolific plant growth and algae bloom seen this summer—both in the lake and in dark green mounds of twisted plant material painstakingly pulled from the waters and set out to dry along the roadsides—indicates the presence of excess nutrients carried from the roads, farms, buildings, and storm drains on shore. The resulting algae gobbles up oxygen in the water, a condition that, left unchecked, can lead to water that is green, slimy, and smelly, while putting human health, domestic pets, fish, and other aquatic plants in jeopardy.

EPA data have proved that strategically-placed rain gardens can remove a high percentage of the phosphorus and nitrogen contained in storm water runoff. With properly chosen plants and filter bed preparation, a rain garden captures rainfall, stores it to nurture its plants, cleanses runoff, and removes pollutants. Even harmful metals such as zinc, copper, and lead can be absorbed by plants and filtered through the organic matter in rain garden soil. This gardening practice is taking hold across the country as communities have begun to reckon with the fact that all the water our planet will ever have is already here in some form and must therefore be protected.

Chautauqua Lake’s unfortunate designation as “impaired waters” under the Clean Water Act was the impetus for the Institution to apply this year for two highly competitive, federally funded state grants distributed through the New York State Green Innovation Grant and Green Infrastructure Planning Programs. The Institution had already been collecting data on “Maximum Daily Load” — an EPA benchmark for acceptable levels of nutrients in storm water discharge.

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“Our current nutrient levels will help us establish goals for reduction and inform the overall design for an extensive network of rain gardens and other mediation techniques on the grounds,” Doug Conroe says. “The rain gardens only represent the beginning of planning and implementation of 21st century eco-friendly water management policies for the entire Institution.”

Two grants totaling $696,000 were awarded this spring by the State of New York and approved by the Chautauqua Board of Trustees at their August meeting. The fulfillment of the grants will require at least a 10 percent matching investment by the Institution.

Even as rain gardens have been established in several sites across the grounds, plant selection was not a simple matter, says Conroe. Government guidelines call for native plants, which, as it turns out, are not so easy to find. “There is no greenhouse for native species in the entire state,” Conroe explains. Chautauqua’s landscaping staff was forced to turn to a greenhouse in Ohio. But in many cases, only thumb-sized native plants were available. More mature plants were required to do the job, which meant selecting some “exotics” or plants not native to the region.

As a veteran of conservation efforts with a number of associations around the lake and as husband to an inveterate gardener, Conroe says he’s learned more than he ever expected about the popularity and dangers of so-called exotic plants that, when allowed to spread and multiply, confuse the insect population. “Today it’s mostly hybrids that nurseries are selling, and the bug community is having a hard time adapting,” Conroe says, “but that’s a whole different lecture.” He smiles.

Beyond storm water mitigation, pets also pose a significant problem for the Institution, and bag dispensers have now been set about the grounds to encourage clean up. “Pet waste needs to be disposed of as a part of household garbage. We are checking bacteria levels and doing some DNA testing of lake water coming from the drainage way creek bed for the impact of animal wastes,” Conroe says. One beach was closed for a time this season as a result of this testing. The offender in that case, however, might have been geese, Conroe explains.

Another test project this year has involved removing grass and creating a bank of plants and a roughly textured landscape down to the lakefront beyond the President’s Cottage to hold back storm water. Says Conroe: “We can no longer accept mowed lawns down to the water’s edge. We also need to avoid solid break walls. We need to get used to the rough, more natural shoreline. It is not debatable in terms of water quality.”

Greener Greens

Meanwhile, up the slope from the Main Gate, the Chautauqua Golf Club has tackled an environmental project following guidelines established by Audubon International’s Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses. Jack Voelker, Director of Recreation and Youth Services and the General Manager of the Chautauqua Golf Club, has moved the Club to a more environmentally friendly approach.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the primary sources of nitrogen and phosphorous in lakes and streams are:

- Agricultural row crops and livestock activities, including livestock waste, excess fertilizer and soil erosion
- Yard/garden and pet waste, such as the use of herbicides, pesticides and the improper disposal of pet waste
- Home and vehicle runoff, including roof shingles, use of detergents and soaps, garbage disposals, run off from car washing and vehicles in operation that leave oil grease and antifreeze on roadways
- Storm water that flows into storm drain systems and from construction sites
- Wastewater including septic and municipal wastewater systems

"The rain gardens only represent the beginning of planning and implementation of 21st century eco-friendly water management policies for the entire Institution." —Doug Conroe

(Top) The rain garden in front of Lenna Hall was one of the first on the grounds and was planted by participants of the 2006 New York State Conference on the Environment. (Above) A new rain garden at the intersection of Peck and South Lake.
Remembering Why

“Most of us arrive on these grounds with our own version of a tired soul. The world around us is increasingly complex and, for the most part, our sources of information about that world are inadequate to the task. We need exposure to the humanity within the global experience. We need renewal; including our sense of hope.”

— Chautauqua President Tom Becker, at the opening of the 2011 season

For those of us who have been traversing the grounds of Chautauqua for most or all of our lives, it can be easy to take for granted the role of the Institution in helping to shape our habits of learning and relaxation, the way we approach political discourse or religious controversy, and our preferences in art, music, and recreation. Why Chautauqua is valuable varies with each individual, which is part of the challenge of explaining Chautauqua to others who have not been here.

In its strategic planning process, the Institution’s trustees have not only developed objectives to enhance the value of Chautauqua to individuals who know this place well, but the trustees have also considered what role the Institution can play in the larger arena of American discourse and global understanding. These two aspects of our work are, of course, intertwined and inseparable. As this dual aspect of Chautauqua relates to donors, it means that gifts to the Institution, for whatever purpose, have an impact that is both internal and external.

In this issue of Pillars several stories demonstrate this phenomenon. Our lead story on environmental leadership plainly illustrates the Institution’s ability to influence the health and safety of the communities surrounding Chautauqua Lake. Another story explains how two of our partners—National Geographic and The International Spy Museum—have benefited (as has Chautauqua) by our associations. With each successive collaboration, our circles of mutual influence have broadened in powerful ways.

Why do we seek to broaden our sphere of influence? Because, as Chautauqua lecturer Richard Louv, the founder of the Children and Nature Network, explains in his leadership role with Youth Services, “Golf courses provide important wildlife habitat.”

Chautauqua already pumps treated wastewater up the hill to help keep nutrient rich effluent out of the lake and to provide 75 percent of the irrigation needs for the golf course. (The other 25 percent comes from rainfall.) Multiple retention ponds also slow the passage of sediments and nutrients to the lake, but the Audubon certification process will require the creation of additional wetlands and a further reduction of chemical use.

In his leadership role with Youth Services, Voelker has also taken to heart the message of 2009 Chautauqua lecturer Richard Louv, author of Last Child in the Woods and the founder of the Children and Nature Network. “To address the very real concern of what Louv calls ‘nature deficit disorder,’ we have built sensory gardens behind the Children’s School, where kids have a chance to touch, smell, and taste various plants,” Voelker explains. A full-time nature counselor now works in the Nature Classroom at the Girls’ Club, which extends into the woods out beyond the pergola.

An inviting play space on the opposite side of the grounds has also been inconspicuously constructed just north of the Tennis Center. Instead of a brightly colored jungle gym that sticks out in the landscape, black cables are attached to dark green stanchions for climbing that literally puts kids up in the trees,” Voelker says. A graphic about native birds is also set inconspicuously in the grove.

Despite all these efforts and the application of highly prized federal dollars toward storm water mitigation, “the magnitude of the challenge is such that the grants will only get us a third of the way there with our goals,” says Doug Conroe. “Philanthropy has a significant role to play in our environmental management,” says George Snyder, the chairman of the Institution’s Board of Trustees. “One of the central loci of our strategic plan is sustainability, and that brings in a huge set of responsibilities. To me the importance is to chart the course that allows the institution to survive for another 130-some years. And so, within that simple phrase, there’s wonderful opportunity and wonderful challenges for us. The natural environment and the lake are the basis upon which all of this is built. How can we not invest in their protection?”

Gifts made to the Institution’s Endowment for Public Spaces may be applied to various environmental projects, including storm water management and tree preservation. Outright gifts to create new rain gardens at strategic locations around the grounds are also welcome. Contact Linda Steckley, lsteckley@ciweb.org for more information.
Two of the most significant inventions of the twentieth century are surely air conditioning and the Internet. The two share a downside. These innovations have played a powerful role in changing our social patterns, isolating people from one another, sending them indoors, off their porches, to live their lives in cool solitude and virtual relationship. Many would say—at least as far north as Chautauqua—that life was better before these breakthroughs. It’s an easy argument to make with Chautauquans who delight in their porch culture and may yet be a bit sheepish in their use of wireless devices. But try making the argument with someone in his or her teens or early twenties—particularly the Summer School students who live in Bellinger Hall.

As Chautauqua buildings go, Bellinger is not so old. It was dedicated in 1974 to the memory of Geraldine Gebbie Bellinger, a local philanthropist, avid arts supporter, Chautauqua trustee, and original member of the board of the Chautauqua Foundation, serving until her death in 1963. Like other buildings of its vintage, it was not outfitted with air conditioning, and the present wiring cannot accommodate a retrofit with individual window units. Only one wireless hot spot, in the Bellinger dining room, provides reliable wireless Internet connectivity. In the regular season, Bellinger is the primary housing option for ages 12 to 30, who are selected from around the world. “We have a system,” says Malinoski-Umberger, now in her eighth year as Chautauqua’s coordinator of student services, “we do have parents who worry about leaving their 12-year-old here when it is stifling hot.” Students these days also come with more food requirements, she says. “We have students who are vegans, can’t eat gluten, or have other restrictions, which makes it more expensive to feed them. Our kitchen facilities in Bellinger are challenged by this reality.”

Despite its shortcomings, however, Bellinger provides a special component of Chautauqua’s educational experience because students from across arts disciplines live here and in nearby Lincoln Dorm, take their meals together, and learn about their peers. “They appreciate each other and go to each other’s performances to cheer their new friends on,” says Brad Nunn, a retired public school principal who has served as chief counselor at Bellinger for a number of years and loves the mix of students from around the world. “We have students, for example, from eastern European countries who talk about how grateful they are to be here and how different the environment is from their experiences,” he says. “We recently had a young lady from Israel who dove to the ground when the fire whistle started up. That was poignant.”

However, managing so many students with such a wide range of ages and backgrounds is a challenge, Nunn suggests. Bellinger has one males-only wing, two female wings, and one co-ed wing for older students. No student under 18 is ever allowed in a dorm room occupied by the students over 18. “No nose or toes are allowed across the threshold,” Nunn says, smiling. “No lights are allowed across the threshold. We have a system.” Students are available to help students manage the rigors of the Chautauqua program.

“We have a system,” says Malinoski-Umberger, now in her eighth year as chief counselor at Bellinger. “We can pretty much predict how the summer will go. The first two weeks, students are very dedicated to their work. In Weeks Three and Four they tend to get more social. In Weeks Five and Six the pressure is on for their final critiques. To these students, craft is so important, it overrides everything else, even romance. They realize how precious the time is and how much they can learn.”

Alfonso Hernandez is a twenty-year-old piano student from Guatemala who is studying with Rebecca Penney. He offers to show his digs to the visitors from Pillars. The room is small and stuffy. Four men share a single bathroom between their rooms. Air circulation is poor because of the awning windows that only open partway. “You need to get a bigger fan,” Nunn tells Hernandez. Down a hall with dismal lighting in the female wing of the dorm, the rooms are more fully decorated than the men’s, but the oppressive heat is the same. Two fans sit back to back on the floor, blowing air toward...
In the first of nine sessions conducted over the summer to inform and engage Chautauquans in discussions around the rehabilitation of the Amphitheater, one community member stood up and declared that the building is "Chautauqua’s front porch." Former Institution vice president Charlie Heinz, now a volunteer who led the sessions, quoted the phrase in every subsequent meeting as capturing the essence of the Amphitheater experience.

“It’s a perfect description,” Heinz said. “The Amp is the signature feature, the heart of this community.” Throughout the discussions, he said, the topic arose again and again about how the Amp is permeable—it is not a traditional container like most other public buildings on the grounds. People spill out around the edges. They come and go seamlessly. It is also totally and centrally embedded in the community, as seen in the aerial photos that Heinz shared. “We learned that these are the features that the community most highly values.”

Heinz also reported that the Institution does not yet have a definite plan in mind for the Amp, but was still in the process of developing a list of goals, opportunities, and constraints to hand to the designers, who will address these concerns in a plan for renovation.

Heinz also provided context for the discussions, including old photos and information about the various modifications to the Amp that have been made over the decades. “The building we have now is certainly not the original by any means,” he explained. “This structure has evolved over the years. It has been changed, added to, and rebuilt over time, and not all the changes have been good. The hard and heavy benches and steeply ramped aisles now pose safety concerns both for audience members and for the Amp crew. And the acoustics are not optimal for all of the various events held in the building. The historic preservation concerns center on not only what is old, but what is both old and valuable to us as we look ahead to modify the building so that it will serve us another 100 years.”

Bestor and Daugherty Society members also had a chance to tour backstage, said Heinz, and they were struck by the contrast between the age and shabbiness of the accommodations for performers, even as they were surrounded by walls covered in photographs of the distinguished talents who have graced the Amp stage over the years.

As a part of its research, the Amp Study Group, comprised of volunteer design professionals, long-time Chautauquans, performing artists, and institution staff, measured the actual seating capacity of the Amp by contemporary standards, which, as it turns out, is 4,000 persons. “What we have discovered is that there is a real opportunity of both bringing the building up to code in terms of safety and accessibility and further enhancing the audience’s connectivity to the surrounding environment,” Heinz explained.

The Study Group will submit its hefty report to the Chautauqua Board of Trustees in November. A substantive discussion of the findings will take place at both the Board’s February and November meetings. The next phase of the project would be to initiate a schematic design that addresses the goals, opportunities, and constraints identified in the year-long study. The design concept which is developed will be shared with the community at the commencement of the 2012 season.
More than a bit of intrigue dominated Week Three this season as the Chautauqua grounds teemed with authentic and aspiring spies. A former KGB agent, a bestselling novelist and expert on Nazi Germany, and the retired CIA operative who invented the lipstick camera were spotted sharing hors d’oeuvres on the porch of Hagan-Wensley House, while the retired director general of the British Security Service (MI5) was escorting her granddaughter up to the Main Gate to rent a bicycle. Every day around noon Chautauquans of all ages were found lurking around the fountain in Bestor Plaza, trying to identify the mole in their midst. Meanwhile, the former director of the CIA was having a quiet lunch in the Athenaeum dining room.

The two o’clock lecture series, sponsored by the Department of Religion, tackled the topic “Spies for God,” which prompted the week’s featured preacher, Reverend Tony Compolo, to comment on how extraordinary it was “to go from the morning lecture where we learned about high-tech American intelligence techniques and the crucial need to know our enemies, to being conversely challenged by the afternoon speakers to cast safety to the winds, love our enemies, and trust in a higher power.”

Such were the energetic responses to one of the most memorable weeks of 2011, a week that engaged multiple generations in a bit of fun through a Special Studies course on spy techniques while also broaching the deadly serious topic of national security.

The week also represented a further widening of the circle of Chautauqua’s national partnerships with peer institutions. In fact, the collaboration with the International Spy Museum initially came about because of the Institution’s 2009 partnership with National Geographic, called “Explore Our World with National Geographic.” Milton and Tamar Maltz, the philanthropists who founded the International Spy Museum, had come to Chautauqua that week with Geographic’s Travel Expedition Program. They stayed in the Athenaeum Hotel and began getting acquainted with the Institution. Susan Norton, Director of the National Geographic Museum, met the Maltzes during this week and introduced them to Chautauqua president Tom Becker and later suggested to Chautauqua Vice-President of Education Sherra Babcock that she contact the Maltzes about being involved with CI’s 2011 week on espionage.

As such interpersonal intrigue tends to go at Chautauqua, Norton herself had first visited Chautauqua in 2006 as a guest of Bill and Dorothy McSweeny, parents of the Chautauqua Theater Company’s co-artistic director Ethan McSweeny. In 2007, Norton met Tom Becker, thanks to the McSweenys and longtime Chautauquans Don and Kathy Greenhouse, which was the genesis of the Geographic 2009 partnership with National Geographic.
partnership that was launched in 2008 during Global Health Week with a photographic exhibition called IMPACT and with two National Geographic speakers – photographer and conservationist Mattias Klum and geneticist Dr. Spencer Wells. The National Geographic Museum has a longterm partnership with Chautauqua to provide outdoor photographic exhibitions. The larger Geographic partnership will continue in 2012 with a theme week called “Water Matters.”

Says Norton, who was on the grounds this year for Weeks Four, Eight and Nine, “UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and others have warned that while wars in the past have been fought over oil, future wars could be fought over water.” She is particularly excited over plans for programming tied to design solutions for the developing world that relate to water storage, transport, and purification in next year’s theme week.

Likewise, as a result of their stellar week at Chautauqua this season, the Chautauqua also continued its extraordinarily popular partnership with Colonial Williamsburg this past season during the Week Nine examination of the forces that led to the Civil War. Actors portrayed George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in the Hall of Philosophy, and a world premier performance of “A Wolf by the Ear” also featuring Thomas Jefferson’s words was presented in the Amp. This specially commissioned piece had also been debuted in Washington, DC and Williamsburg in February as a part of the partnership. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture participated with Chautauqua and Colonial Williamsburg in the programming partnership.

International Spy Museum’s director Peter Earnest and staff are already dreaming of a second collaboration with Chautauqua. “We had a learning curve here in adapting and customizing our programs to such a thoroughly integrated set of venues and audiences,” Earnest admits. “I don’t think anyone on our staff had ever been to Chautauqua, and now, to a person, we are ready to come back and do more!”

As a 36-year veteran of the CIA who became the first director of the International Spy Museum in 2002, Earnest said he is used to the creative energy of Museum founder Milton Maltz, who is always surprising the staff with his fresh ideas. In addition to linking the Museum to Chautauqua, Maltz provided major philanthropic support for the theme week. “Milt is a catalyst,” Earnest explains. “He made the museum happen—though Congress did write the legislation—and he made this partnership happen.”

Maltz, now a regular Chautauquan after that first visit with the National Geographic group, is also one of the founders of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland and the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Beachwood, Ohio. For the Spy Museum, he assembled a stellar board from the start, including Dame Stella Rimington of MI5, former CIA director James Woolsey (both of whom lectured at Chautauqua during the theme week), and Judge William H. Webster, the only person to serve as director of both the CIA and FBI. Maltz also insisted that the Spy Museum—which has served five million visitors over its first ten years—be a self-supporting, for-profit institution that does not engage in fundraising. Through exhibits that are educational but also give a nod to the glamour and mystique of fictional spies such as James Bond, the museum has flourished. Earnest gave a personal tour to President Obama and his family soon after the president took office. “It is Sasha and Malia’s favorite museum in Washington,” he says.

Chautauqua also continued its series of exhibitions called Albright Knox at Chautauqua—will continue after the very-well-received presentation at the Strohl Art Center of works on paper from American artists who worked in the decades of the nineteen forties through the sixties. Philanthropic support from Buffalo’s Oishei Foundation launched this partnership and will continue for two more seasons—another example of the dynamic possibilities of collaborations with friends from across the region and world that are fueled by philanthropy.
A film crew set out in May to interview seven notable Chautauquans on behalf of the Foundation. One central question was at the heart of the enterprise: What is the promise of Chautauqua going forward in the 21st century?

The crew began in mid-town Manhattan in the board room of TIME Magazine where Executive Editor Nancy Gibbs sat surrounded on four sides by a dramatic display of covers from the magazine’s earliest issues to the present. Gibbs had been especially busy in the last few days as TIME published three issues in the span of a week, including one on the Royal Wedding, another on the killing of Osama bin Laden, and its regularly scheduled issue.

Gibbs is a lifelong Chautauquan whose mother came to the Institution as a Juilliard piano student and made her concert debut with the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra. She and her brother would spend every summer at Chautauqua as children.

As a Yale undergraduate, Gibbs landed her first job in journalism as an intern for The Chautauquan Daily, interviewing platform speakers such as Alger Hiss and William Westmoreland and writing back enthusiastically to her professors in New Haven about how her history major was playing out on the Amp stage right before her eyes.

Gibbs would go on to win the National Magazine Award for TIME’s special issue on September 11, 2001, and was the lead TIME writer on the last five presidential campaigns. After the 2008 election, Politico.com described her as “the poet laureate of presidents.” Gibbs will be featured along with her colleague Michael Duffy during Week Nine of the 2012 season on the topic of “The Presidents Club.”

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“My husband and I started thinking some years back that Chautauqua was the original Internet,” Gibbs said during her interview. “At a time when the country was not connected by an interstate highway system, nor by technology or television or broadband, it was connected by Chautauqua. It was connected by what grew into this remarkable traveling college campus that would pull into your town and expose people for the first time to an opera, a concert, a lecture, the great books, and start a conversation that went on long after the chautauqua left town. And now Chautauqua Institution has come full circle, connecting people through the year in a virtual way with the actual community that comes together to connect in the summer on the shores of Chautauqua Lake.”

The next morning, the film crew stepped off an elevator and into the headquarters of the National Football League where they walked past the trademark fedora of Dallas Cowboy Coach Tom Landry, set behind glass. Their interview subject, National Football League Commissioner Roger Goodell, was in the middle of the work stoppage and labor dispute between NFL players and team owners that would last from March until late July. As is his custom, Goodell had come into the city that morning at 6:15 to work out at a nearby gym and was at his desk by 8:00. “A normal day,” he says, and then smiles, “but there is no normal day in this job.”

Despite his relentless schedule, the soft-spoken, genteel Goodell has made time to sit in the NFL press room with a single TV light overhead and talk about a place very close to his heart—Chautauqua. Like Nancy Gibbs, Goodell also grew up spending his summers on the grounds as the middle child among five brothers. His father, Charles E. Goodell, was a Jamestown native who served in Congress for nearly five terms before being appointed to fill the Senate seat left vacant by the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968. Coming home to western New
“Chautauqua is such an oasis, a place that allows you to focus on body, mind and spirit.” Klein goes on. “And there are so many opportunities for relaxation and finding spiritual wellness. My parents absolutely loved visiting with me there.”

A few weeks later the video crew rolls into Shlington, a suburb of Washington, DC, and approaches a bunker-like building that houses the studios for “PBS News Hour” and “Washington Week in Review” on the first floor and the offices of journalists Ray Suarez, Judy Woodruff, Gwen Ifill, Jeffrey Brown, Margaret Warner, and Jim Lehrer. The very next day, Lehrer would be retiring after 52 years as a journalist, 36 of which have been spent anchoring “News Hour” as it evolved at Washington station WETA into a national broadcast with more than a million regular viewers. Lehrer arrives for his interview in full makeup and is ready to go, talking passionately about the critical need for civility in American discourse and the special role of Chautauqua in modeling dialogue at its best.

A Kansas native, Lehrer began his journalism career at The Dallas Morning News where he covered the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He later moved into broadcast journalism, eventually launching “The McNeil/Lehrer Report” with co-anchor Robert McNeill in 1973. To date, Lehrer has moderated 11 presidential debates, including the last between John McCain and Barack Obama. He has also published twenty novels, two volumes of memoir, and written four plays. His last appearance at Chautauqua came in 2010 during a week devoted to the topic of liberty. In 2012, he will “anchor” Week Two, July 1-7 at Chautauqua in 2012, with a theme entitled, “The Lehrer Report: What Informed Voters Need to Know.”

When asked about the importance of Chautauqua in American life, Lehrer answers: “I believe one of the things we’ve lost in this country is civil discourse, and Chautauqua is a reminder of what it could be like and what it should be like among Americans who care about things and disagree about things…. If we do not find ways to sustain institutions like Chautauqua, we’re going to lose a very important ingredient, I think, that makes a democratic society work.”

The participation of seasoned observers such as Jim Lehrer and young talents such as Jessica Klein are, of course, important ingredients in the future of Chautauqua as we head deeper into the 21st century. To learn more about what all of these prominent Chautauquans had to say—including Roger Goodell, Nancy Gibbs, and other notable friends of the Institution—please contact Linda Steckley (lsteckley@ciweb.org) to view the video produced by the Foundation. In the next issue of Pillars, the conversations continue as the film crew visits Colonial Williamsburg, Winter Park, Florida, and Atlanta, Georgia.

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—Jim Lehrer
Two years ago, Kimberly Myers’s husband Bob surprised his wife with the gift of a week at Chautauqua as her Christmas present. It had been eight years since Kimberly had been on the grounds of the place that she fell in love with as a thirteen-year-old dance student in the 1970s. She studied ballet for four summers at Chautauqua and went on to begin a major in dance at Butler University. “As it turned out, I was a better actress than dancer,” says Kimberly, “so I switched my major to drama, but I will never forget those wonderful years. Coming from Youngstown, Ohio, I had never known any place like Chautauqua.”

After her college years, Myers married Bob, moved to Florida, and began raising a family. Once, when the children were young, the Myerses visited Chautauqua so that the family could experience what their mother still talked about wistfully. And Kimberly kept a foot in the dance world as one of the founders of the Florida West Ballet while also working in community theater.

On her 40th birthday, Myers treated herself to a week at Chautauqua and was more impressed than ever with the Dance Program. “It had come so far so fast under the leadership of Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux and Patti McBride. With what Chautauqua has to offer those dance students,” she says, “how wonderful those parents must feel about sending their children here. It’s remarkable what Jean-Pierre and Patti have done with such devotion and passion.”

For the next ten years Myers came to Chautauqua, selecting weeks in which dance was featured, and she also began sitting in on classes and rehearsals, “seeing it in the making,” as she puts it. “You have to understand—as a young person, I would go to New York City to see Patricia McBride when she was dancing for the New York City Ballet. She is still like a movie star to me, and Jean-Pierre could be anywhere but he has stayed at Chautauqua. We are so fortunate to have them.”

As Bob Myers moved toward retirement, the couple began looking for a second home, and while Chautauqua was in the running, they ultimately settled in Harbor Springs, Michigan, and for eight years after that, Kimberly didn’t make it back to her beloved Chautauqua.

So it was the Christmas present from Bob that brought her back, and she hasn’t missed a season since, coming for a week to immerse herself in the Dance Program as an avid supporter and audience member. Says Myers: “We want the facilities of the Chautauqua Dance Program to match the excellence of its leadership, so Bob and I decided we wanted to make a gift.” The Myerses have recently created an endowment fund that will help to maintain the Dance facilities. “Of course, scholarships for the dancers are always needed, and lots of people find that an appealing way to support the program, but we want our gift to go towards improving and maintaining the facilities that would benefit the dancers specifically, such as the floors and studios,” Kimberly explains.

Maintaining a Dance Connection: 
K I M B E R L Y  A N D  B O B  M Y E R S

“How wonderful those parents must feel about sending their children here. It’s remarkable what Jean-Pierre and Patti have done with such devotion and passion.”
——Kimberly Myers
Practicing Tikkun Olam: Blossom Leibowitz

Growing up in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, Blossom Leibowitz wasn’t aware of Chautauqua Institution as a child, though as an adult she says she “kept hearing about the place over and over. It sounded great, but I could never quite figure out how to get here. You know, it seems pretty complicated if you’ve never been,” she says, now sitting in a contemporary house full of natural light that she’s rented for the 2011 season on Stoessel Avenue.

It wasn’t until National Geographic offered an expedition to the grounds for a week in 2009 that Leibowitz finally jumped at the chance to visit the Institution. “Susan Norton, who led our trip, At the last minute, Leibowitz with Geographic. (See Partners story, page 4.)

“At the last minute,” Leibowitz continues, “my daughter Susie also decided to come with me. It was incredible. We had a marvelous time, and now I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be for the summer.”

Leibowitz, a resident of Tampa, Florida, came back for the 2010 season and hosted 20 guests over the course of the summer—people, including her extended family, who had never been to Chautauqua. This season was much the same. Leibowitz’s daughter Susie and her two sons, Justin and Jackson, spent five weeks on the grounds along with more than a dozen other friends and family members that Leibowitz invited.

Chautauqua has already taken root in the family in a profound way. Grandson Justin—a sixth grader and aspiring actor, also from Tampa—was featured in the final issue of the National Geographic Museum in Washington and a key player in Chautauqua’s ongoing partnership with Geographic. (See Partners story, page 4.)

“Forty percent of college students have said they would stay in the area if they could find work,” says Leibowitz, who believes that the conditions faced by the unemployed today are much worse than when she was helping Russian immigrants find work in the 1970s. Job Links is therefore building its capacity to help in as many ways as possible, including finding transportation to get people to available jobs, encouraging entrepreneurship among those who want to start a business, and identifying high level mentors for job candidates.

Like so many other leaders who come to Chautauqua for respite and renewal, Leibowitz also managed to keep a hand in this work back home even in the midst of attending the morning lectures, the CTC productions, and hosting her weekly guests. Already this summer Tampa Bay Job Links was expanding from one to four employees and establishing satellite offices around the region. To bolster her own skills on behalf of the organization, Leibowitz took a Special Studies class on “Being a AAA Board Member,” taught by fundraising consultant, Abbe von Schlegell. The next step in her Chautauqua experience, she says, will likely involve finding a permanent home here. “I want to give the gift of this place to my children and grandchildren.”

Blossom Leibowitz

Such headlong immersion in community is apparently a family trait. For her part, Grandma Blossom has a remarkable track record as a forty-year community activist. She began her career of service in Pennsylvania through Head Start and then was tapped for the state’s Panel of American Women—a select group of female leaders from different ethnic and religious backgrounds who traveled the state using a Chautauqua-like format of presentation and discussion to increase awareness of prejudice, discrimination, and racism.

After moving to Florida, Leibowitz took on a range of leadership roles in the Tampa Jewish Federation and was one of the founding trustees of the T.O.P. (Tampa, Orlando and Pinellas) Jewish Foundation. As a long-time board member of Tampa Jewish Family Services, she was active in the region’s Russian resettlement program during the 1970s. Among her many awards for community service, Leibowitz most recently received the Tampa Jewish Federation’s Tikkun Olam Award given annually to a person who embodies the meaning of Tikkun Olam, literally “repairing the world.”

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“I have strong faith that even in challenging times such as this, that when community comes together we can make a difference for individuals, for organizations, agencies, communities, states and countries and the world,” she told the audience that night, and it is precisely this sentiment that has led Leibowitz to her latest venture, which she is much more comfortable talking about than her own achievements.

“Tampa Bay Job Links is a brand new nonprofit created to bring new community together to find jobs for the unemployed and for college students just graduating. We were so motivated because the Tampa, St. Pete, Clearwater region has the highest unemployment in the State of Florida,” she explains. Preparing candidates to apply for jobs, “empowering them to perform at the highest level,” as Leibowitz puts it, is the work of the organization, which is also tapping the other side of the jobs equation—mobilizing business leaders and partnering organizations to identify training, support, and employment opportunities.

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—Blossom Leibowitz
Keeping the Pillars Strong:  
GARY AND WILLOW BROST

Gary and Willow Brost are quiet activists with strong beliefs and a broad engagement in education and the arts across the Buffalo/Niagara region. Gary is a member of the Chautauqua Foundation Board, a sustaining director of the Buffalo Renaissance Foundation, vice chair of the board for Gateway Longview (a child and family services organization in Buffalo) and trustee and past chair of the Burchfield Penney Art Center. He is also chairman and CEO of Strategic Investments & Holdings, Inc. in Buffalo. Willow Brost is a trustee of Buffalo’s Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site, board chair of Buffalo Prep (a rigorous academic and scholarship program for economically disadvantaged minority students), and is a member of The Michigan Street African American Heritage Commission in Buffalo.

“We are involved in organizations that we feel passionate about,” says Gary, “and Chautauqua is very high on our list. We want to make sure it stays here for a long time.”

“The notion of the four pillars is central,” Willow says. “To me they are a good model for the life well lived. Of course, none of the four pillars can stand for very long without the others.” Both of the Brosts are graduates of Allegheny College where they met, and where Willow also serves on the board of trustees. It was there that they first developed a passion for the liberal arts. “Chautauqua president Dan Bratton was also a graduate of Allegheny,” Willow notes proudly. “We share Chautauqua’s values of lifelong learning and respect for diverse opinions.” Willow, whose family goes back seven generations in Chautauqua County, has known Chautauqua all her life, though her experiences on the grounds as a child were limited. Her grandmother was a waitress at the Athenaeum and once served Thomas Edison there.

“My parents did not have a lot of disposable income,” she explains, “so our summer vacation when I was six was a Monday night performance of La Bohème in Norton Hall. My parents recognized the unique asset in their own backyard. Chautauqua provided opportunities for exposure to intellectual and cultural experiences even on a limited budget.”

Gary, who first came to Chautauqua in 1973, and Willow have gradually been able to participate more extensively in the varied programs Chautauqua offers. “Early in our marriage we’d come down from Buffalo for a day. Then we stayed for a week, then two weeks and eventually for the season. Thirty-seven Miller is now the official gathering place for four generations of our family.”

“Chautauqua is a lived community,” says Gary, “and I believe we all have a responsibility to invest in that community. We have been very fortunate in life to be in a position to help organizations philanthropically. It is not about having our names splashed all over, but putting our resources where our hearts are. When a capital campaign comes along, I say, just get it done. I’d rather be a leader than a follower.”

“Chautauqua is a framework and venue to share these endeavors with a wide audience. What a treasure!” Willow agrees: “People will always reflect and enhance humanity through artistic expression, scientific innovation and the exchange of ideas. Chautauqua provides the framework and venue to share these endeavors with a wide audience. What a treasure!”

“Philanthropy as a proportion of the Institution’s total revenue needs to increase,” Gary adds. “Who better to contribute than those who participate in what Chautauqua has to offer?”

“Rather than our dictating to the Institution what they must do with these funds, we want the staff to prioritize the needs.”

—Gary Brost