A Tale of Two Facilities

Our tale begins on a balmy afternoon during the 2007 season. Jean Pierre Bonnefoux, Artistic Director of Chautauqua Dance, is sitting in a wicker chair on the porch outside his tiny office in the Carnahan-Jackson Studios. As he talks, a class of young dancers in the studio just down the way is working with Daniel Ulbricht, a principal dancer in the New York City Ballet. The music is energetic, and every time the class leaps in unison, the doors to the studio swing outward a few inches. The glass in the windows seems to wobble. Even the screen door to Bonnefoux’s office periodically wobbles open. He shrugs.

These are the conditions under which Chautauqua’s remarkable dance faculty, staff, and students have long labored. Providing housing for summer faculty and staff has been equally challenging. But help is finally on the way, thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Carol Hirsh and her mother’s family, the Gartner Nobels, who made a $500,000 gift in honor of Carol’s brother Sandy and her husband Mike. The Hirsh funds will provide extraordinary housing for dance faculty and students and additional workspace for the program. But at this point in the 2007 season, as far as Bonnefoux knows, more funds are still needed to outfit the new building as planned and to make the much-needed renovations to Carnahan-Jackson.

Bonnefoux’s passion to provide the best for his students and faculty is palpable, but it appears that more patience will be required as he ticks off a list of other programs around the country with “wonderful studios” — programs with which Chautauqua must compete for students. “For the very best 12- to 17-year-olds in dance, one of the five years of their training should be at Chautauqua!” Bonnefoux says emphatically. “The quality of the faculty we have assembled over the years is solid.” But the floors of Carnahan-Jackson are not, and at this moment in July, several dance staff members are crowded into a single office, while the costume personnel are still dyeing fabrics in the Carnahan-Jackson kitchen.

Remarkably, it would only be a few days later that Ed Anderson and his wife Joan Parsons issued a $150,000 challenge to be matched by six gifts of $25,000 each. Earlier in the season, a generous gift from Stewart and Donna Kohl [profiled elsewhere in this issue of Pillars] had provided the resources to complete and name the costume shop. These gifts in combination would allow the completion of what is now to be called the Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux-Patricia McBride Hall. The first floor of Bonnefoux-McBride Hall will feature two one-bedroom apartments and one two-bedroom apartment for faculty, along with a series of air-conditioned dorm rooms for staff, thanks to the Andersons and their matching donors. The second floor will triple the space available to the program’s costume shop, thanks to the Kohls’ gift.

In turn, these enhancements have made it more feasible for Chautauqua to address deferred maintenance needs in Carnahan-Jackson. The Institution is now investing another $100,000 to shore up the sagging floors and more.

The new building is up, and construction crews have undertaken simultaneous, critical upgrades to Carnahan-Jackson. Renovated administrative offices for staff, a faculty lounge, and a proper office for Bonnefoux are all part of the work that’s underway. In addition, new dressing rooms will finally accommodate the privacy needs of both male and female dancers of all ages who are rehearsing and teaching at any given time in the summer.

“As we got in there we discovered that Carnahan-Jackson, like so many others among the oldest structures at Chautauqua, was built on pillars,” explains the Institution’s Vice President and Director of Programming, Marty Merkley. “Shoring up the foundation, porches, decks, roof, railings, and the addition of new siding for the central studio in the back are essential to improve the structural stability and appearance of Carnahan-Jackson.”

“With the costume shop moved next door in Bonnefoux-McBride Hall, see COVER STORY page 2 — Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux

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www.chautauquafoundation.org
“These are not campers, they are people working 12-hour days, and they have to keep themselves healthy.”

— Jay Lesenger, Artistic/General Director of Chautauqua Opera
Having been through two previous capital campaigns as an active Chautauqua volunteer, I began my third as a member of the Idea Campaign Cabinet. In that capacity and before I took the position of CEO for the Foundation, I told my fellow cabinet members that this campaign would probably be more challenging than the others. This time, I tell them, we’d be asking the community to invest in programs where they might have less of a direct connection. We would be seeking scholarship funds for young people who are not our own, and physical improvements to benefit the faculty and those talented artists who come for a summer to teach and study at Chautauqua and then move on in their careers. By contrast, in the last campaign we had written checks to support the Boys’ and Girls’ Club and to renovate the Bratton Theater. Arguably, those investments provided direct benefit to a majority of Chautauquans — especially those with children and grandchildren and our avid theatergoers. But this time, I said, we might have a more difficult case to make with donors.

Boy, was I wrong.

One after another, families and individuals stood up and said yes to our schools of fine and performing arts. As it turns out, we as a community clearly understand the value we derive by having these incredibly driven and talented young people and their teachers in our midst each season. And now, not only have we begun to upgrade the facilities they use, but we have far exceeded our goal for endowment of student scholarships. The coming transformation is already evident in the announcements of Chautauqua’s invitation to partner with Steinway & Sons for the exclusive use of Steinway pianos by all of our students, faculty, and guest performers. This imprimatur of quality would not have happened without the Idea Campaign, and the net gains are just beginning.

Student scholarships in art, music, and dance will enhance our recruitment capabilities — for both students and faculty — putting Chautauqua in a much more favorable position among other prestigious conservatories and summer festivals. (Our cover story in this issue examines the anticipated impact of improvements in faculty and staff housing for both dance and opera.)

So I find myself wondering now, on this side of the campaign, if we could only go back to 1988 and really remember what the grounds looked like and what we were doing back then at Chautauqua, we would so vividly see how the last three capital campaigns are not separate efforts. The combined philanthropy over these twenty years has made possible such strategic and powerful improvements in the quality of all our facilities and programs. We should all be very proud.

Of course, now and for a time to come, we will take a rest from campaign mode, but the role of philanthropy remains essential, particularly in the area of unrestricted endowment as the Chautauqua Index (below) attests. And through Pillars, we will continue to keep you informed of what it takes to keep Chautauqua going. So far we have been delighted by your response to this publication, and we’d like to hear more from you.

Not long after the first issue of Pillars was mailed to our core group of Chautauqua donors and volunteers, I happened to be in the office one Saturday morning. The phone rang. “Chautauqua Foundation,” I answered, and before I had a chance to give my name, the caller launched into high praise of our inaugural newsletter. “You have captured Chautauqua in a way that we have not been able to do when we talk to our friends who’ve never been here,” he said.

When I was finally able to identify myself and thank him on behalf of the Foundation, he asked if I might get some additional copies of Pillars to share with friends. We were delighted to oblige and were similarly gratified by a smattering of complimentary e-mails in the weeks that followed. In particular several people mentioned how much they appreciated the candid conversation among the Reverends Forbes, Taylor, and Barnes. (In this issue we feature the perspectives on our programs for children and teens from veteran staffers Kit Trapasso and Greg Prechtl.)

Please keep the comments coming. We welcome your suggestions for improvement, what you may be curious about, and your recommendations for stories you’d like us to cover in the future. Please contact me at gfollansbee@ciweb.org. My personal thanks to all of you who, through the Idea Campaign, proved once more just how very much we all value the extraordinary experience we share at Chautauqua.

— Geof Follansbee, CEO, Chautauqua Foundation

The Chautauqua Idea Campaign

$53,053,809 Total dollars raised in the Chautauqua Idea Campaign

$16,752,134 Total dollars to be invested in capital improvements on the grounds made possible by the Idea Campaign

Index

89% Percentage of total campaign dollars raised contributed by Chautauqua property owners

71% Percentage of total campaign dollars represented by the 96 gifts of over $100,000 each

Cover Story cont’d

that is Chautauqua.

Though some people may have questioned the investment required to build more housing on the grounds for performing artists and staff, Lesenger suggests that the connection between artists, staff, and the larger community is critical. “Some years ago we had to put an artist up in an apartment near Lake Erie,” he says. “The next year we were able to put her on the grounds. She told us, ‘I had no idea what was going on here! This is amazing.’”

“If you are staying on the grounds, you never leave your audience,” Lesenger continues. “A performer walking across Bestor Plaza will easily encounter five different audience members who will tell you exactly what they thought of the performance the night before. That’s so unusual in this business for performers to be able to engage with their audience so completely.” And that is what makes Chautauqua like nowhere else for both performers and audience members.

Chautauqua Opera Young Artists in Gaetano Donizetti’s The Elixir of Love, 2007

From the CEO

Geof Follansbee

You stood up and said YES!
McSweeny and Benesch: More Than One

Since the 2007 season ended Ethan McSweeny and Vivienne Benesch have been more than a little busy. When we caught up with them in February, just before Valentine’s Day, the couple who serve as co-artistic directors of Chautauqua Theater Company were sharing two apartments in the Landsburg Building above the Shakespeare Theater Company, not far from the Mall in Washington, D.C. Here McSweeny is directing and Benesch is playing the leading role in “Major Barbara” — considered the most controversial of George Bernard Shaw’s works. Washington is McSweeny’s hometown and the Shakespeare Theater is where the couple first worked together in 1995.

So why are these life and business partners sharing two apartments? “It gives us room to spread out,” says McSweeny. In fact one apartment is the de facto office of the Chautauqua Theater Company in the off season. “It’s a bit like a space station,” McSweeny says, laughing. “This is the pod for working, and the other one is the pod for eating.” In addition to the play that’s taking shape downstairs at the Shakespeare, McSweeny and Benesch are in the thick of selecting the 14 actors who will comprise the company for Chautauqua’s 2008 theater season.

Just the week before, Benesch and McSweeny had flown up to Providence to audition actors from the graduate programs at Brown University and Trinity College. Then they drove down for more auditions at the Yale School of Drama. Last December, Benesch had traveled to the University of California Irvine, the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, the National Theater Conservatory in Denver, and Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh to audition candidates. More auditions in Minnesota are coming up soon, and then four days of some 250 auditions in New York City in March round out the process. By the time they finish, the couple will have considered more than 500 applicants in order to choose the five women and nine men they’ll need for CTC’s 25th season.

McSweeny explains that the ratio of men to women for this year’s company was decided when they selected “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” as the closing production for the season, a show that will feature the entire conservatory group. From there, they worked backwards to determine the personnel needed for the other two main stage productions — “Death of a Salesman” and “Reckless.”

Geoff Follansbee also attended the ceremony.

KAY LOGAN received the Arts Philanthropist of the Year Award from the American String Teachers Association on March 1 in recognition of her deep generosity to numerous organizations in furtherance of arts education.

KAREN ARMSTRONG is one of three winners of the 2008 TED Prize. TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) brings together more than 1,000 leading thinkers annually to share ideas over four days. Past prize winners include Bill Clinton, E.O. Wilson, and Bono. Armstrong will return to Chautauqua during the first week of the 2008 season as a lecturer for the Department of Religion.

JOAN BROWN CAMPBELL, Director of Chautauqua’s Department of Religion, spent ten days in India in early March and chaired the Global Women’s Peace Initiative conference in Jaipur, India.

More than five hundred women and men from around the world gathered to discuss how feminist principles might address global issues of peace and poverty. On February 15, 2008, Morehouse College celebrated the inauguration of ROBERT M. FRANKLIN as its 10th President. Franklin, a 1975 alumnus of Morehouse, served as Chautauqua’s Theologian-in-Residence during the 2006 season and a morning lecturer last summer during the week on Sacred Texts. Joan Brown Campbell represented Chautauqua in the procession of representatives of Colleges, Universities, and Learned Societies. President Tom Becker, his wife Jane, and Chautauqua Foundation CEO Jack Voelker, Director of Chautauqua’s Youth & Recreation program, spoke at the Connecticut State Recreation and Parks Conference at the Mohegan Sun Resort in Uncasville, Conn., on the topic of “children and nature.” Jack’s speech used Chautauqua’s new playground at the Turner Community Center as a primary example of new trends in children’s recreation.

AL DIBBS, long-time Director of the Youth Activities Center, has gone to work for Digitell, the multimedia company that also records Chautauqua’s lectures, and has been traveling the globe representing Digitell at conferences in Bangkok, Tokyo, Bali, Barcelona and other fascinating destinations.
In addition, this year we have easily Amphitheater for the first time in 2003, are based on the experience which Benesch and McSweeny must. As part of the anniversary Chautauqua history. CTC alumni the Musical Director of the CSO, Previn. “It’s one of the exceptional kinds of productions you can do at Chautauqua that would be hard to do anywhere else,” says McSweeny. (The play calls for six actors and a full orchestra.) In addition, this year we have easily gone over the highest number of scripts ever submitted for the new play workshop series,” McSweeny continues. More than 150 scripts are sitting in the apartment in D.C., which Benesch and McSweeny must also somehow find time to read. The plays will address the Week Three lecture theme, “On Writing,” and the Week Six theme, “Healing the Globe.” As if this weren’t enough, the co-artistic directors have also set themselves a special task in the second main stage play of the season. “Reckless” will feature Vivienne Benesch on stage for the first time in a full production since becoming co-artistic director of CTC. She will reprise the role of Rachel — a part she played 20 years ago as a student at Chautauqua. “Now she is unfortunately the right age for the part,” McSweeny says mischievously. “I should be starting to learn my lines right now. It’s a gigantic role.” “Unfortunately she’s a little busy playing the title role in ‘Major Barbara,’” McSweeny adds.

Managing multiple tasks simultaneously seems to be the bread and butter of these two powerhouse careers. Their careers have been and continue to be nothing less than meteoric. Just as the year: “100 Saints You Should Know,” presented at Playwrights Horizons in September, and the world premiere of “1001,” a new play by Jason Grote. In a review of the latter production, The New York Times singled out McSweeny for his “kinetic direction.” He then headed to California to direct another world premiere in “This Corner,” a play about the boxer Joe Louis at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego.

For her part, Vivienne Benesch went straight from Chautauqua in August to Juilliard where she directed a Marsha Norman play called “Getting Out.” She then went into what she calls “full time Chautauqua mode” for planning and auditions. However, as chair of the theater panel for the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts, Benesch also had to squeeze in time to review some 3,000 applications for Presidential Award Scholarships. From this pool, 20 high school students were selected to come to Miami to audition for finalists in the category of theater. “It’s a wonderful way to keep my eyes on the next generation of young actors,” she says. Somehow in this period Benesch also managed to catch a few shows on Broadway featuring Chautauqua’s conservatory alumni, including Brian Smith in “Come Back Little Sheba” alongside S. Epatha Merkerson and Kate MacCluggage, who landed an understudy role this year in Aaron Sorkin’s “The Farmsworth Invention.” “We take great pride in staying in touch with our conservatory alumni and watching them go on to do great things,” Benesch says.

It will be the day after Memorial Day when Benesch and McSweeny finally arrive on the Chautauqua grounds to begin their work on site. “We are generally the first arts organization to land,” McSweeny says. “The administrators in the Colonnade always seem a bit surprised to see us so soon.” He grins. “Within the next week, we’ll open all our props and costume shops, and the week after that we will start rehearsals on our first show.” For Chautauqua theater fans, the 2008 season can’t come soon enough.
A kid, a dog, a bike, and an ice cream cone ...

“The rush, the construction — I always think they’ll never get this place ready in time, yet somehow they always do.”

— Donna Kohl

In their back yard at the corner of Elm and North, within sight of the Packard Manor lawn, Stewart and Donna Kohl have furnished a broad and sunny patio that they enjoy during Chautauqua summers. The proximity of their other home in Cleveland’s Shaker Heights also makes it possible for them to come to the grounds out of season, a time they also treasure.

“It’s a white wonderland in winter when the lake freezes over,” Stewart declares. For her part, Donna is fascinated by the flurry of activity that starts by late spring every year. “The rush, the construction — I always think they’ll never get this place ready in time, yet somehow they always do,” she says, shaking her head.

For these first generation Chautauquans, however, the grounds did not engender love at first sight. The Kohls came to the Institution for the first time 20 years ago with friends who were forty-year veterans of Chautauqua. “We only stayed a few hours,” says Stewart. “It seemed like an interesting community, but it didn’t grab us right away as it does for some people. Maybe we didn’t stay long enough.” He smiles broadly. The Kohls simply filed away their first Chautauqua experience and went back to their busy lives.

When the Kohls’ first grandchild was born nine years ago, however, the equation changed, and they reconsidered Chautauqua. They suddenly recognized that the Institution offered something quite old-fashioned and rare, something they now wanted very much for their family.

“At Chautauqua you have to have a bike,” says Stewart. “A kid, a dog, a bike, and an ice cream cone — that’s Chautauqua. This place harkens back to a day that probably never really existed or a period we wish had existed. That’s the charm, and it seems that the short season helps achieve that. It is always fleeting, ephemeral.”

Chautauqua was a perfect place to bring their grandson, the Kohls realized, and soon they were renting a house on the grounds. For a time they lived at the corner of Miller and South Lake where they could always hear the Bell Tower ring. They enjoyed the view of the lake, but ultimately settled for a neighborhood a bit more removed, in the Chautauqua “suburbs” as Stewart calls it, near Packard Manor.

Today the Kohls have three grandchildren, and the eldest is already out on his bicycle on this very warm, sunny morning in August. Evidence is everywhere that the Kohl household is in perpetual motion: an array of shoes of all sizes is lined up neatly by the back door. Gated areas in the house have been set aside for various dogs that accompany their owners who are frequent guests of the Kohls. Stewart, who manages to come only occasionally for weekends in the summer, has just come in from his own bicycle adventure. He is part of “a serious cohort of cyclists,” as he puts it, who regularly pedal their way around Bemus Point and will often ride as far as Lilydale or Erie on back roads.

In addition to his passion for Chautauqua, Stewart is an enthusiastic graduate and trustee of Oberlin College. The Kohls have been leading supporters of the jazz program in the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Professionally Stewart is Co-CEO of The Riverside Group, a private equity firm that primarily invests in smaller, market-leading companies. The firm has offices in New York, Cleveland, Dallas, San Francisco, Munich, Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw. Before joining Riverside in 1993 he was, for five years, a vice president of Citicorp Venture Capital in Cleveland. Before that, he was COO of the National Cooperative Business Association in Washington, D.C. where he met Donna, who had emigrated to the United States from British Guyana in 1983.

Donna is a serious amateur dancer. She runs the family household, manages a sizeable garden in Shaker Heights, and serves on several nonprofit boards in Ohio. Her latest project, however, is a facelift of the landscape around their Chautauqua home. She says she is constantly inspired by all the gardens on the grounds.

In the long run, both of the Kohls hope to be able to spend the entire nine-week season at Chautauqua, instead of the frequent comings and goings that their present life and Stewart’s business travel require. As philanthropic supporters of Chautauqua, the Kohls say they have been drawn not only to the unregimented life their grandchildren especially enjoy here, but to the fact that lectures and cultural events are not dumbed down. They also appreciate that there are fewer air conditioners, televisions, and telephones in use, proving that life can go on without those appliances. The neighborhood culture of sitting and talking about important issues “is a vision of what America could gravitate toward,” Stewart says. “It is proof that not everyone in America wants to live an exurban life.”

Similarly, Wendy and Ed Cohen have a special appreciation for the life of the mind that’s possible at Chautauqua. “This is not a vacation place for me,” Wendy Cohen says emphatically. “It is where I live in the summer.” A decade ago Wendy, a dedicated potter, and her husband, Ed, came to visit Chautauqua for a week. “And that was it,” Wendy explains. “We stayed in a one bedroom at Arlington. It was a beautiful week, almost surrealistic. It filled a void for me that was missing all those years I lived in Manhattan and later in Fort Lauderdale.” The Cohens soon bought a place and determined that they would be in residence for the last four weeks of...
“I got here and I realized the rental idea was a mistake,” Wendy explains. “I called Ed and told him, ‘I’m not leaving.’” That summer Wendy could not find accommodations when she was forced to leave her condo. She ended up staying in a dorm with young students. “It was not air conditioned, but it was worth it,” she says.

During the 2007 season, Wendy is taking a yoga class, throwing pots in the Lincoln Ceramics Center, and managing her duties as president of the Friends of the Theater. She says a typical day at Chautauqua for her is “when you don’t get to do everything you want to do.”

For Wendy and Ed Cohen, Chautauqua provides what they characterize as a powerful sense of community and “a concentrated dose of recreation.” After years of taking their four daughters to camp in the Carolinas and then setting off for various spots around the world for summer vacations, the Cohens finally settled on Chautauqua as their preferred destination. “I made a decision that community is the most important thing,” says Wendy, who completed her course work for the CLSC Guild of the Seven Seals and currently serves on the Chautauqua Foundation Board. She also helped the Institution develop its partnership with Syracuse University, where she recently completed 16 years as a trustee. Working with Syracuse, Chautauqua has hosted a panel discussion at the Syracuse University President’s office. “But it was Wendy who had the vision for this studio. She was hands on from day one. She asked us tough questions all along the way, but let us run with it. It wouldn’t have happened without her.”

To honor her hands-on engagement in the project, Bernd Gottinger approached Cohen one day in the middle of studio construction and asked her what her favorite color might be. “Purple,” she told him instantly.

“The next thing I knew,” Wendy says, “the studio was painted purple! Someone told me it is a very spiritual color. It is a very relaxing shade.”

Just outside the purple soundproof area, a half-dozen workstations with keyboards attached to desktop computers occupy the room where Chautauqua archivist Alfreda Irwin once clipped newspapers. Chautauqua teenagers have been coming in to learn how to record their own music through a software program called Garage Band. Older Chautauquans have also been finding their way to the studio to record their memoirs and to collect oral histories from their relatives.

All of the equipment here is portable and has been used in Lenna Hall and elsewhere on the grounds. Matt Wilson says he’s recorded everything from Celtic music to grunge rock to jazz, and even a marimba soloist. Later this particular afternoon he will record an accordion player who has scheduled a session. Tomorrow he will create a podcast featuring the week’s platform speaker. Sara Lundine says the next step is to add some video equipment to the studio’s capabilities.

For Wendy Cohen, engaging in the work of the Institution in this way is simply a natural outgrowth of the friendships she has forged here. “We have so many friends at Chautauqua,” she says. “I find that when I go to the corner to get the paper, it takes a half hour!”

Community is the thing, she repeats, and now she and her husband, Ed, have played a key role in helping to record the incredible variety of voices that comprise our community year after year.
Consultants Marvel at Chautauqua’s Transportation Mix

If we managed to create something more like a main street atmosphere outside the gates and convince the state to slow traffic through new signals, it could be quite positive.” — Charlie Heinz

Environmentally conscious communities across the country are racing to explore the latest in fuel-efficient public transit buses with a vigor intensified by the rising price of gas. Planning boards in many cities are mapping out bike lanes to cut down on car usage and pollution in traffic-starved communities, while also promoting new levels of building density, trying to reverse trends of willy-nilly urban sprawl. Saving greenspace has finally become a priority along with concerns about the walkability of urban developments, a condition that is critical to the public’s willingness to use public transportation. Meanwhile, Chautauqua Institution has recently been declared “possibly the most successful mixed pedestrian/motor vehicle environment in the United States.”

These words are part of a transportation review commissioned by the Chautauqua Board of Trustees and presented at its meeting last November. It is now being used by the board as it enters a new strategic planning cycle that began at its February meeting. The report was prepared by Glatting Jackson Kercher Anglin, Inc., a consulting firm with offices in Orlando, West Palm Beach, and Atlanta. Glatting Jackson specializes in a holistic approach to community planning and design that incorporates transportation, parks, landscaping, hospitality design, and wayfinding, a term that refers to “the organized movement of pedestrians and vehicles through a complex environment.” Glatting Jackson is also affiliated with Walkable Communities, Inc., a nonprofit organization founded in Florida that educates communities about the components of healthy street designs and often facilitates public meetings in which community planning and traffic management are the focus.

Their report assesses three aspects of Chautauqua’s transportation system on the grounds — walking and bicycling, the shuttle system, and motor vehicle travel and parking. It also examines off grounds parking, walking routes in the main parking lot, parking shuttle operations, and the situation encountered by visitors arriving on Route 394. By its assessment Glatting Jackson found Chautauqua to be “one of the unique travel environments in the United States. The fortuitous combination of an inherited skeleton of ideally configured streets, gorgeous architecture placed densely along many of these streets, full time staffing dealing with the minutely detailed aspects of travel on a daily basis, and voluntary committees of unusual capabilities have all contributed toward advancing the transportation system to the point where many aspects of it cannot and should not be further improved.”

The firm particularly noted the ability for children to walk and bicycle unsupervised on the entire street system and the accommodation of a large influx of pedestrians at the public assembly venues. The consultants marveled at the way in which Chautauqua drivers have such a heightened sense of observation while maneuvering the grounds and are so thoroughly conditioned to drive slowly. Glatting Jackson was also impressed with what they called “the meticulously detailed address-by-address inspection and enforcement of parking policies” — an aspect of life at Chautauqua that makes the mix of pedestrian, bicycle, and minimal motorized movement possible.

“The study is a nice affirmation,” says Chautauqua’s Vice President of Administrative and Community Services, Charlie Heinz, “but we know that we can always improve the system. There are number of emerging challenges that will be handled incrementally in the years to come.”

For example, Heinz notes that the replacement of Chautauqua’s current shuttles will likely involve the acquisition over time of buses that minimize fumes and noise. In addition, the consulting firm recommended the replacement of the golf cart tram with a larger-capacity tug and trailer-type vehicle. Says Heinz: “We are also thinking about ways to take this initiative beyond just buying the latest environmentally sensitive buses. For example, we’d also like to consider how, in the off season, we might be able to use the buses to improve rural transportation in Chautauqua County.”

The transportation study also suggests that aesthetic improvements should be considered — including new lighting and landscaping along the walking routes from the parking areas outside the gates. “We are trying to put together some figures for the costs, options, and funding possibilities that would improve how we get across Highway 394 to the main gate,” says Heinz.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the study, however, comes at its conclusion. “The aesthetic impact of the grounds should be the peak of a crescendo of small town and rural beauty,” says the report. To this end, the consultants encouraged the Institution to explore ways in which Route 394, “the front door to the grounds,” as they call it, might be enhanced to provide more of a small town feel using curb and gutter, sidewalks, additional streetscaping, and some form of traffic control that would provide more of a small town ambiance instead of the broad highway and rural sprawl currently at Chautauqua’s entrance.

“It’s a breakthrough idea,” says Heinz. “If we managed to create something more like a main street atmosphere outside the gates and convince the state to slow traffic through new signals, it could be quite positive. Of course we are only in the beginning stages of our planning process, but this study provides us with some ideas we’ve never really thought about quite this way.”

To read more about Walkable Communities, see http://www.walkable.org.
We asked Sherra Babcock, named Director of the Department of Education in July 2007, to provide reflections on her first six months at Chautauqua. This is her response:

One of my favorite childhood stories is the legend of the six blind men and the elephant. As these men approach an elephant, each describes it according to the part he touches. The man who touches the tail decides the elephant is like a rope; the one encountering the side declares the elephant to be like a wall. The trunk reminds the blind man of a snake, and the tusk suggests that the elephant is a spear. The one touching the ear says the elephant is like a fan, the elephant’s leg evokes a tree.

Since most people I have met at Chautauqua agree that Chautauqua is indescribable, I can only attempt description in the context of my own experience. Chautauqua is like a liberal arts college, the environment in which I spent eighteen years: a mix of intellectual opportunities in literature, history, science, religion, fine arts. Teaching and learning. The interconnectedness of each experience, each book, each lecture, each conversation, each enlightening each of the others. Even the small-town atmosphere of most liberal arts colleges is reflected in Chautauqua’s lived community, balancing community, hearsay, opinion, reflection. I tell my faculty friends that 37 years later, I’ve found a job in my field of American Studies!

Chautauqua is like the church. As a lifelong United Methodist, active in children’s ministry and adult learning, I continue to pursue an understanding of God’s call. Chautauqua Institution, in its ecumenical and Abrahamic tradition, provides the connection of religion to spirituality, the questions of social justice, and the importance of our relationships to each other. Like the church, Chautauqua’s many programs would not happen without volunteers. Also like the church, we come together for awhile and leave to practice what we have learned.

Chautauqua is like a business. Twenty years in advertising/marketing, reconciling differences between no-nonsense business people and creative communicators, taught me to listen, respect differences, find balance, and encourage collaboration. Like the nine theme weeks I have the privilege of developing each year, I learned to explore and define distinction, to find the “ah-ha!” No day is exactly like another! New theme weeks, like new clients, demand study, reading, linking, thinking. Questioning: “Are we offering balance? Do we have the diverse viewpoints covered?” Measuring results.

Chautauqua is, in the words of an advertising campaign I once developed, “what we wish the world could be.” Porch conversations on dissimilar views. Brilliant colleagues. Renewal and recreation beside a silver-blue lake. Multi-generations gathering on Bestor Plaza. Little girls on pink bicycles. Provocative ideas, books, conversations. Professionals and students becoming.

I’ve heard many people use the label, “My Chautauqua.” Mine, in the Department of Education, is the 10:45 lecture platform, the Chautauqua Literary & Scientific Circle, the Writers’ Center, Special Studies, the Oliver Archives, the Smith Library, and the Cohen Recording Studio. The uniting theme of these facets of Chautauqua: words. Spoken words, read words, written words, words that are preserved, disseminated, recorded, digitized, taught, learned, shared, and discussed. I find great joy in representing Chautauqua in think tank offices, at colleges and universities, museums, roundtables, and in the search for new presentations. My Chautauqua is, personally, the glimmer of the lake as I walk to work. The friendly 150,000 summer and 200 winter residents. Hearing children laugh and teens chatter. Incredibly active summers. Red and gold hikes in the fall, white hikes with snowshoes in the winter. Connections and intersections. Enrichment from great music, dance, art, reading, conversation, persuasion, planning. The summer choir. It is a thrill to serve the Chautauqua Institution; I look forward to seeing you again this summer!
Working with Chautauqua’s Kids: Getting More Than You Give

Kit Trapasso has been working at Chautauqua since the summer of 1977 when he initially came on board as a consultant in child development and behavior management. He was appointed Director of the Children’s School in 1984. In the off season, Kit is the school psychologist at Medina High in Medina, New York.

“My plan was to spend two, three years here and it’s turned into more than 30! I was drawn to Chautauqua because of its unique family place. Being here you can participate in what is happening on the grounds. There are wonderful professionals and young people who were excited to learn and grow in an environment that was unusual. And it is good to have people thank you for what you are doing. As time went on, my job at Chautauqua became the pinnacle — working with young people, developing new programs, interacting with new people in different departments. The key aspect is that Chautauqua offers so much in terms of access for children. We can piggyback all with the arts, music, and other cultural activities that are happening on the grounds.”

—Kit Trapasso

Pillars: What is it that drew you both and has kept you in your positions at Chautauqua for so long?

Kit Trapasso: Chautauqua is such a unique family place. Being here you have offered more than a job. It’s been a place where my family has grown and prospered. I’ve had a chance to work with great people. My wife and I have developed lots of friendships over the years. It’s a nice place to raise a family and to stay for decades. We’ve recently purchased a home here. The other key aspect is that Chautauqua offers so much in terms of access for children. We can piggyback with all the arts, music, and other cultural activities that are happening on the grounds. Our Children’s School programs really flourish because of that.

Greg Prechtl: I felt so fortunate when Dick Redington offered me this job. My plan was to spend two, possibly three years at Chautauqua. My wife and I always had in our heads that we would take the kids to visit Alaska one summer so they could experience what we had loved so much on our seven-week honeymoon there. But after we’d been at Chautauqua for three years and our kids had made friends and started having all the opportunities that Chautauqua provides, that dream of taking them out west or back up to Alaska became secondary. In some jobs, you get more than you give. Chautauqua is that kind of job.

Pillars: Were there other things you had planned to do in your career besides Chautauqua?

Kit Trapasso: I have been a school psychologist, though I thought I was going to move in the direction of special education in my career. But I probably found my role — similar to Greg — right here. I started to work with lots of wonderful professionals and young people who were excited to learn and grow in an environment that was unusual. And it is good to have people thank you for what you are doing. As time went on, my job at Chautauqua became the pinnacle — working with young people, developing new programs, interacting with new people in different departments. It has been a place to try lots of new things. We had great programs when we entered, and I think we have phenomenal programs now.

Greg Prechtl: I worked for ten years prior to coming to Chautauqua as the head counselor of the New York State Summer School of the Arts over here at Fredonia State. And that was pleasant in that we had kids who were gifted in the arts. It was a nice six-week program, but it wasn’t the same as being in a community like Chautauqua where you actually get to live and interact with people on a daily basis that you normally wouldn’t meet. Chautauqua really is a very different, special kind of place. My son traveled to Nepal last summer, and he trekked to the base camp at Mt. Everest. That is something Rob would never have considered doing if he had not been exposed to some of the people and ideas that he got at Chautauqua. My daughter just bought a piece of property here this past summer, and she and her husband are talking about starting construction on a home this spring. Both of my kids’ best friends are people they met and have interacted with here over the years.

Pillars: What’s it like to have this continuum of community — kids coming back year after year?

Greg Prechtl: At Boys’ and Girls’ Club, many, many of the kids I hire have had older brothers and sisters here. Half the kids I hire have had parents or aunts and uncles that have worked as counselors at Boys’ or Girls’ Club.

Pillars: What’s the upside and downside of that?

Greg Prechtl: The upside is that every Chautauqua kid who comes to Club or every child who comes through Club feels that they’re going to be employed at Club. [He laughs] So there’s a sense of entitlement which is good, because they strive to make themselves employable, to do the things they need to do to be employed. These kids are from terrific families that have great values, with parents who have high expectations for them. If the parent worked at Club and had a good experience, they want their children to have that same experience. When their children themes has not been something that we can do. However, when there is a presenter up at the Amphitheater, or if there is a performer on the grounds that we can bring in, we’ll go for it. For example, we’ve taken the older kids up to hear Sandra Day O’Connor. The Olympic figure skater Paul Wylie has come down to talk to our kids. Jackie Robinson’s daughter was lecturing on the grounds last year, and she came down to the Club to speak. We use parts of what Chautauqua has to offer whenever we can.

Kit Trapasso: Don’t you think, too, that whole family entertainment series also came out of seeing how we could connect better with Chautauqua?

Greg Prechtl: Yes, and it really works for our kids at Boys’ and Girls’ Club programs.

Pillars: How many young people are you all working with these days?

Greg Prechtl: Twenty years ago a big week would include 350 children at the Club. This past year we were at 525 kids for five of the nine weeks. When Group One comes up in the afternoon, that’s another 65 or 70 kids, so we’re almost at 600 kids a day plus 90 employees. That means we’ve got nearly 700 young people on our campus for a big part of the summer.

Pillars: What’s the upside and downside of this?

Greg Prechtl: There are times when a theme is not going to be employed at Club. [He laughs] So there’s a sense of entitlement which is good, because they strive to make themselves employable, to do the things they need to do to be employed. These kids are from terrific families that have great values, with parents who have high expectations for them. If the parent worked at Club and had a good experience, they want their children to have that same experience. When their children...
Gregory Prechtl has served as Director of the Chautauqua Boys' and Girls' Club for 21 seasons. During the academic year, Prechtl is Athletic Director at the State University of New York at Fredonia where he has recently overseen the construction of a new soccer field and swimming facility.

come through the Club they make sure they are doing what they ought to do to become potential counselors. They help mentor them as they prepare to make their application. It's fantastic to see these kids grow up, to see these relationships grow, and get to know the families. Serving as their children's employer has been a great thing.

Kit Trapasso: In the Children's School we have a little different experience because some of our families may be coming to Chautauqua for the first time. Or they may be lifelong Chautauquans, but maybe it's the first time they're coming with children, so we really have to be on top of the safety issue, making sure the kids are relaxed and comfortable. Maybe it's the first time some of our kids are coming to an organized, certified program. We have to maintain a positive sense of what we're doing and give people confidence. We tell the parents or grandparents, it's okay, you're safe, go and enjoy your vacation. What has changed for us over the years is that I don't have too many kids coming for nine weeks anymore; it's more like seven days. With the constant rotation of children, having people on our staff who have been with us for many years is very helpful.

Greg Prechtl: I talk about the counselors and how much they mean to my program, but I have to mention the senior staff as well. Jennifer Flannagan and John Chubb have been there 30-plus years. Alan Ruben and my wife have been there 20-plus years. Chuck Bowers has been there 15 years. I've got a club that runs as smoothly as it does because we've got such experienced people who are aware of all the safety issues. We can get 600 kids in and out of the water twice a day because of that experience. Our days could be pretty long, but I've got great people. Chautauqua means as much to them as it means to me.

Pillars: What is the role of philanthropy in what you do?

Kit Trapasso: We had our building re-done over a decade ago, and without philanthropy we would have been in dire straits. To allow us to continue adding new activities, ideas, and new materials, we need generous people who are willing to look at the needs we have now—a new playground, a sidewalk improvement.

Greg Prechtl: I can only echo what Kit says. We similarly had many improvements made to our campus about eight years ago. Without philanthropy we would not be able to hire the staff and offer the programs we have at Chautauqua. In order for people to want their kids to come to a camp, it has to look good as well as offer good programming. Our ability to hire the best and the brightest college-age kids who have a lot of options every summer depends on compensation. Our salaries certainly aren't gaudy, but we have to keep them at a level good enough to entice these great young people to come and be counselors for one more year. I know the basic budget can't cover our maintenance costs, our gas and electric, the annual upgrades that need to be made to our facilities, and cover the cost of salaries for summer staff. I would hope that those families who value our children's programs, whose kids have had good experiences in Chautauqua, would look to the Children's Program as a place to support.

"Twenty years ago a big week would include 350 children at the Club. This past year we were at 525 kids for five of the nine weeks. When Group One comes up in the afternoon, that's another 65 or 70 kids, so we're almost at 600 kids a day plus 90 employees. That means we've got nearly 700 young people on our campus for a big part of the summer."

—Greg Prechtl
On March 14th, longtime Chautauquan Susan McKee heads to southern Sudan to fulfill a vision born at Chautauqua. With the financial sponsorship of a group of Chautauqua women, she will join Project Education Sudan for its Journey of Hope 2008. McKee will spend three weeks traveling from village to village helping to build schools, dig wells, and provide teacher workshops, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for women-run micro businesses involving the grinding of grain. McKee will also personally deliver more than 100 shawls hand-woven by women in 37 states and Canada. The shawls are part of an overarching vision of women serving women that was inspired by messages that McKee heard at Chautauqua several years ago.

Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister and a group of women who live in a Jewish-Muslim community in Israel known as Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salaaom spoke at Chautauqua in July of 2004 about the role of women in the struggle for global peace. Their words lingered with McKee as she prayed for discernment about her own role as a peace activist.

“I was being nudged to create a new organization that would empower women to remember other women in global areas of conflict while simultaneously laying the groundwork for women-run micro businesses involving the grinding of grain. McKee will also personally deliver more than 100 shawls hand-woven by women in 37 states and Canada. The shawls are part of an overarching vision of women serving women that was inspired by messages that McKee heard at Chautauqua several years ago.”

Hal Simmons and Susan McKee

Transforming Interfaith Dialogue into Action

John Cathedral had been working on an interfaith curriculum when 9/11 occurred. “Suddenly the effort moved from educating Christians about Muslims and Jews to creating a real dialogue among all three faith traditions; if Abraham’s heirs are more powerful than bullets, tanks, and bombs. We know we are crafting global Peace, one simple stitch at a time,” McKee explains on the organization’s website. To date the group has created more than 500 shawls that have been shipped to women in Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, and Guatemala as expressions of the common goal of peace. Each shawl intentionally incorporates the number three — either by using a chevron pattern, three colors of yarn or by taking the shape of a triangle — representing the three faith families of Abraham. McKee and her husband, Hal Simmons, have been advocates for the Chautauqua Religion Department’s Abrahamic Initiative from its inception, and the knitting project is not the first extension of the Initiative beyond the gates that this couple has launched.

Simmons and McKee were inspired in 1999 by Ross Mackenzie to carry the Abrahamic effort back home to the Episcopal congregation with whom they worship in Denver. A small group of core supporters at St. John Cathedral had been working on an interfaith curriculum when 9/11 occurred. “Suddenly the effort moved from educating Christians about Muslims and Jews to creating a real dialogue among all three groups,” Hal Simmons explains.

Today, as many as 300 people attend interfaith conversations and lectures sponsored by St. John other every other month. A dinner group that Simmons and McKee began with three Muslim, three Christian and three Jewish couples has now expanded to include 150 Denver residents who gather in small groups to share meals and build intentional relationships across their different faith traditions. “The lectures are more of an intellectual exercise,” says Hal Simmons, “but these dinners have literally transformed lives.” Susan gives an example: out of one dinner group, a local Muslim physician was inspired to launch a Muslim-run food pantry with advice from a Jewish woman who hosted a dinner that he attended.

McKee and Simmons’ daughter, Kate, has also helped to build Denver’s Abrahamic Initiative through an interfaith youth group that meets on Thursday nights at a local coffee house. The teenagers watch movies and follow up with discussions. They also have held longer retreats to build their fellowship. “We thought the kids might want to do a service project together, but they knew better than we did what would work,” says Simmons. A Muslim graduate student from the University of Denver has recently been hired to facilitate the ongoing youth discussions and occasional retreats.

“It’s a great opportunity for the kids to get together and compare notes on how to live in this world with so many tensions and conflicts,” McKee explains. Daughter Kate carried her commitment one step further, working as an intern for Joan Brown Campbell in the Religion Department on the Chautauqua grounds last season.

And now Susan McKee is reaching much farther than she dreamed when the idea of women knitting for peace first struck her at Chautauqua. She is putting her faith to work in one of the most desperate regions on the planet where the conflict has multiple dimensions — Arab versus African, ethnic factions fighting within these two groups, and the horrific abuse of women and children. Because of the recent outbreak of violence in neighboring Kenya, McKee’s Sudan trip was already postponed for three months, but now she is ready to go. “We will be the largest group of women to go into Sudan since the early 1980s,” she says. “It’s an exciting opportunity and not the safest trip to make, I welcome everyone’s prayers. We have so much to do.”