Crossing Borders

BY ELEANOR CLIFT

Doris Meissner '63, MA'69 was in her kitchen stuffing a turkey on Thanksgiving Day when she heard news reports of a young boy who had been rescued by fishermen off the coast of Miami. "I thought, 'Oh, my gosh. This is sad,' " she recalled in an interview. "But I didn't believe that it was going to become such a phenomenon, such an incredible issue."

MIAMI HERALD/PEDRO PORTAL

The Elián González saga has been the most high-profile controversy of Doris Meissner's tenure as commissioner of the INS. But Meissner, who was in Madison in May to accept a Distinguished Alumni Award from the Wisconsin Alumni Association, has received praise for her handling of the crisis. In a *USA Today* column, Walter Shapiro hailed her as an "unsung hero" for her diligent work behind the scenes, saying that her "quiet, unflappable competence" has served our nation well.

The battle over Elián González would test all of Meissner's administrative, diplomatic, and people skills. As head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), she made the first decision about the boy's fate when she ruled in January that his father, a thirty-one-year-old hotel worker in Cuba, had the right to speak on his son's behalf.

She did not foresee when her agency approved the temporary placement of Elián with his Miami relatives that carrying out the law and reuniting him with his father would prove so difficult. If there had been no family members, Elián would have been placed in a shelter to await his return to Cuba, instead of becoming the center of a Cold War-style custody dispute.

"We were allowed to decide this on the merits…the issue of whether or not this child belonged with his father, and who was going to speak for the child, and how the future of this child was going to be decided."

She had done her homework. Before siding with the boy's father, Meissner researched Cuban law to confirm that Juan Miguel González had custody after the mother's death, since the parents were divorced before Elián was born. She dispatched an INS official in Havana to interview him to determine whether he was a fit parent.

When she wasn't fully satisfied with his answers, Meissner had the official contact González for a second interview. The level of detail that he supplied about his relationship with his son, including the activities they shared, and how he taught Elián to swim, convinced her that he was a caring father. On whether he was speaking freely, since Cuba is, in Meissner's words, "a coercive society," she concluded that González was expressing his true wishes in wanting his son returned to his care.

"It all connects," she says. "This was a child who…knew his father's phone number, and his father's name and address, and who basically lived during the week with his father and the extended family, and went to school in the district that his father lives in, not in the district where his mother lived."

The Miami branch of the family, having fled Fidel Castro's Cuba, waged a legal and emotional battle to keep Elián. The boy had been found floating alone in an inner tube after his mother had drowned along with her boyfriend and eight others, all Cuban nationals seeking asylum in the U.S.

The relatives argued that the mother's sacrifice should not go unrewarded, and Elián's story took on mystical qualities with the belief that dolphins had guided him to safety. The house where he was staying in the Little Havana section of Miami became the focus of round-the-clock protests and media coverage.

With the INS apparently unable to enforce its ruling, Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle (South Dakota) invited Meissner to brief Democratic members about the administration's position, and how it would be implemented. Reporters who were staked outside the meeting room — perhaps hoping to entice Meissner to take their questions — commented on how good she looked in a taupe silk suit, offset with a funky necklace made of stone beads. Her press secretary conveyed the compliment.

Meissner was amused. "Growing up, your parents tell you it's your character that's important," she remarked with a wry smile. "When you come to Washington, you learn it's how your hair looks and what you're wearing that counts." She didn't fall for the flattery, and left the Capitol without holding a press conference.

KATHERINE LAMBERT

Meissner's recognition of the father's parental rights was supported by Attorney General Janet Reno, and upheld in federal court. Behind the scenes, Meissner served as Reno's confidante, and took an active role in the delicate negotiations between Washington and Cuba, and with the González family members.

Patty First '82, a deputy associate attorney general, said that conference calls among the various players sometimes dragged on for six or seven hours. It would have been easy for Meissner to leave the nitty-gritty to aides, but she stuck with it. Her calm but insistent manner proved to be a valuable resource.

"Everyone was so tired that people's tempers started to flare," says First. "She would get us to focus on the issue at hand — that this is a six-year-old kid whose father says he wants to be reunited with him."

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE INS

Border issues continue to dominate the focus of the INS — and the media. Since Meissner (shown above, third from right) became commissioner in 1993, the INS work force has nearly doubled — from 18,000 to 32,000 — making it the largest law enforcement agency in the U.S.

With the Miami relatives unwilling to turn over the boy, Janet Reno inched closer to the decision she dreaded: ordering government agents to remove him by force. With Meissner at her side, Reno flew to Miami in mid-April to meet with Lazaro González, the great uncle in whose home Elián was staying.

The meeting ended in a stalemate, and soon after, the Miami relatives released a video of Elián jabbing his finger at the camera and telling Papá he did not want to go to Cuba. A child psychologist retained by the INS went on television to say that Elián, who appeared coached, was suffering from a form of child abuse. The boy was no longer attending school, and had become a trophy for the anti-Castro exile community.

Reno and Meissner engaged in one last marathon negotiation by phone from Washington with the Miami relatives, while an INS SWAT team positioned itself for a surprise raid to retrieve Elián.

Not by nature a public person, Meissner stood next to Reno in a press conference immediately following the pre-dawn raid to demonstrate her unflagging conviction that what they had done was right. Pale and drawn from lack of sleep, Meissner defended the actions of the INS agents, who whisked Elián to the airport to fly to Washington, where his father waited.

Making a rare appearance on a Sunday talk show, Meissner said, "An enforcement action like this is a frightening event — and what we did has to take place very quickly, and the agents have to be in charge." Critics deplored the show of force, but the American public largely backed Reno's right to retrieve the boy, and by a wide margin rejected the prospect of congressional hearings on the matter. Images of a smiling Elián with his father, stepmother, and baby brother eased concern about the boy's well-being.

"The bottom line is success," says Meissner, who was there as Juan Miguel walked to the plane at Andrews Air Force Base to greet his son. "We created the reunification."

Doris Meissner with her son, Andrew, left; her late husband, Charles Meissner; and her daughter, Christine. She lost Chuck, who was assistant secretary at the Department of Commerce, in the same plane crash that killed Commerce Secretary Ron Brown while on a trade mission to Croatia in 1996.

Sitting in the Hot Seat

Meissner has managed the INS for almost the entire term of the Clinton administration. She was confirmed by a unanimous vote in the Senate on October 18, 1993, and has presided during a time of enormous growth. More than ten million people have immigrated to the United States since 1990, the most in any decade in U.S. history. The INS work force has nearly doubled, from eighteen thousand to thirty-two thousand, making it the largest law enforcement agency in the country.

Meissner is regarded as a fair-minded administrator who does her best in one of the most contentious jobs in Washington. She receives criticism from Republicans, who think she's too lax on enforcement, and from Democrats, who don't think she has sufficiently kept her promise to restore the *S* in INS, making it a more service-oriented, immigrant-friendly agency.

These are legitimate policy differences, but even Meissner's harshest critics separate her personality from her role as commissioner. "They go out of their way to say how much they like her — sometimes just before they bash her," says First.

Meissner's serious, almost scholarly approach to immigration issues shields her from the raw partisanship that has characterized much of the Clinton administration's dealings with Congress. The INS has deep bureaucratic roots, and immigration issues don't fall neatly along party lines. With Hispanics the fastest-growing voter bloc in the country, politicians are changing their tune about immigration, and the anti-immigrant sentiments of past elections appear to have faded.

"We're in a different era," says Meissner. "Immigrants are contributing, and they are speaking for themselves." Still, the INS is a hot seat, as the Elián González case demonstrates. "I don't know how she's stayed this long," says First. "It's a testament to her character. There are times when I thought if I were Doris, I'd want to quit."

One of those times was during the administration's "Citizenship USA" program, which Republicans charge was a transparent effort to hastily naturalize immigrants so that they would vote for Clinton in the 1996 presidential election. Meissner says that the accelerated procedures were put in place to accommodate caseloads that had quadrupled in just two years, in part because of the anti-immigrant debate generated under Governor Pete Wilson in California.

The result was that some three hundred people with criminal backgrounds were naturalized (out of a total of 1.3 million processed) when FBI fingerprint reports couldn't be made available in time. In light of the snafu, Republicans called for Meissner's resignation. As this major embarrassment for the INS unfolded, Meissner testified before Congress that her agency had made errors, although she insisted that they were not politically motivated.

Her brother-in-law, Dave Meissner '60 of Milwaukee, says that the criticism from members of Congress — often related to her implementation of laws they pass — wears her down, although she never shows it. "She keeps a stiff upper lip. She understands it isn't personal. But constantly going out and defending the department takes its toll on her," he says.

The citizenship controversy came at an especially trying time for Meissner, who had just lost her husband of thirty-three years. Charles (Chuck) Meissner '64, MS'67, PhD'69 was a senior official at the Commerce Department, and died in the same plane crash that took the life of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown on April 3, 1996. Doris Meissner was in Los Angeles preparing to go on a radio talk show when the plane was reported missing.

"I immediately flew back across the country, fully believing that this was just a quirk of some form or another," she says. The next morning, Janet Reno was in her living room to offer solace along with Donna Shalala, secretary of Health and Human Services and a former UW-Madison chancellor, and several other high-ranking women in the administration. "Out of terrible things, you learn some of the good things," says Meissner, recalling the many acts of friendship that were extended to her.

At a memorial service for Secretary Brown, Meissner was seated next to Pamela Harriman, who was then the ambassador to England. They had never met, and Meissner never would have imagined she had anything in common with this *grande dame*. "That was a very glittery service, with lots of people walking around looking at each other and wanting to be seen by each other, very frankly," Meissner remembers. "And there I was with Pamela Harriman, who never looked around at anybody else."

Harriman told her that Chuck

Meissner had been in her embassy in London the night before the ill-fated flight, and that he and the others had such high hopes for the work they were doing to spur economic investment in Croatia.

She told Meissner that she was married to a man, the late New York Governor Averell Harriman, who grew very, very old. "It is not the worst thing to die for your country," she said. "Growing old, watching everybody around you die, having people forget who you are, there's nothing nice about that."

Those words comforted Meissner, and helped to put her husband's death into perspective. "It's so true," she says, reflecting on the conversation. "Chuck was at the top of his game. He loved what he was doing, and you can't quarrel with that. None of us get to pick our luck."

Only weeks after her husband's death, Meissner was back at her desk. Her job, says her brother-in-law, "gave her something else to think about other than what happened to her." Meissner agrees. "As hard as it was, this job has sustained me," she says. "You have to function. There is just no choice. And it's much better to have a purpose, to have something to do and to just keep pushing away, which is what I've done."

Last summer, Meissner and her two grown children — Christine, a teacher, and Andrew, who works with an Internet company — flew to Dubrovnik at the invitation of the Croatian government to celebrate the signing of a deal Chuck had negotiated that means millions of dollars in energy capacity for the region.

Continued on page 56

Doris and Chuck met during their freshman year; they were both ILS majors. She lived on the fourth floor of Cole Hall, while he was on the fourth floor of Sullivan, with a window directly opposite hers. In 1968, Doris returned to graduate school while Chuck served his ROTC duty in Vietnam.

Continued from page 23

A Sturdy Hand

Meissner's story, she says, "is really a story of two." She met Chuck when they were both freshmen enrolled in the Integrated Liberal Studies program at the University of Wisconsin. They married two days before graduation in 1963. Chuck went on to graduate school, and Doris supported the family while he earned his doctorate.

A member of the ROTC, Chuck left for Vietnam in 1969 and didn't return until 1971. Doris and their two children stayed in Madison, which was embroiled in anti-war protests. It was a hard time for Meissner, who was apart from her husband and worried about him, and raising their two children alone.

Doris has made regular visits back to campus over the years, returning here to show her children the view from Liz Waters. Known as Doris Borst during her student days, she was the president of her sorority, Alpha Chi Omega, and active in the Wisconsin Student Association and several honor societies.

As an undergraduate, she majored in history with a minor in French, and returned to graduate school to major in political science and education policy. Her undergrad days had been placid, but now, all around her, students were protesting. At one point, when she was a teaching assistant, her classes were canceled for several weeks because student unrest had forced the university to close down.

Perhaps because she had sole responsibility for her children, Meissner concluded that protesting wasn't for her, and that change should come about peacefully through democratic decision-making. She decided to get involved in politics, and coordinated the campaign for Midge Miller, who was running for the state legislature. "I probably wouldn't have won if it hadn't been for her," says Miller, whose 1970 election made her one of the first women members of the Wisconsin legislature.

The following year, when Chuck returned from Vietnam, he had two job offers: one in Washington and one in San Francisco. He let Doris choose the city. She loved San Francisco and the rich cultural life it offered, but she picked Washington. She had discovered politics, and thought, "What better place to have a front-row seat than in the nation's capital?"

Meissner fully expected to be a traditional wife who stayed home and dabbled in politics on the side. Even though she had risen to become the assistant director of student financial aid at Wisconsin, she didn't think of herself as a career person, and had never set professional goals. In fact, she was busy putting up curtains and making a home for her family when Midge Miller arrived in Washington as one of the founding members of the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC).

She recruited Meissner to become the organization's first executive director. In Washington less than a month, Meissner at first begged off. But then, faced with pleas from such feminist luminaries as Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, and Betty Friedan, she relented and took the job.

"Those first years were so tumultuous," Miller recalls. "We were a bunch of prima donnas. We couldn't even have a chair for more than three months so somebody could get ahead of somebody on the totem pole. The sturdiest hand in the whole thing was Doris Meissner."

Meissner led the lobbying efforts for the NWPC at both the Democratic and Republican national conventions in 1972, and based on those experiences, applied for the White House Fellows Program. Traditionally, only one token woman had been selected for the program's class of eighteen. But that year, she was one of four women to make the cut — a groundbreaking moment.

Still, Meissner was not eager to be placed in the White House. Not a fan of President Nixon, she chose the Justice Department instead, which was then headed by Attorney General Elliott Richardson, a man of sterling reputation. Within weeks, the so-called Saturday Night Massacre occurred, Richardson was fired, and Meissner was on her way to a career she had never envisioned. When her fellowship concluded the following fall, Richardson's successor, Attorney General Edward Levy, asked her to stay. She speaks highly of Levy's efforts to restore credibility to the Justice Department.

During this period, Chuck Meissner was a staff aide on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and had traveled regularly to Vietnam. When the city of Saigon fell, signaling the end of the war, Chuck urged Doris to join him in sponsoring a refugee family. "I was not into this at all," she says. "It was not an issue that I had paid very much attention to, except vicariously through his work, and I could see all of this responsibility becoming ours." But Chuck was committed — and Doris relented.

When it became known that the Meissners had a refugee family living in their basement, it was Doris's colleagues who assumed that she was just as dedicated as her husband. That impression deepened when the couple held a huge shower and asked people to bring household goods for the family. A few months later, the attorney general asked her to chair an interagency task force on illegal immigration, and before long she had taken on the aura of an expert. "It was a total accident of time and place and circumstance, in the way that so many things in life are," she says.

In 1986, Meissner left the federal government to join the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, with no intention of returning to public service. "I didn't even necessarily consider myself either a Republican or a Democrat," she recalls. "I had worked on these issues in a very bipartisan way, and I think of immigration as quite a bipartisan issue. It doesn't cut along predictable lines at all."

So Meissner was quite surprised when she was summoned first to the White House for an interview, and then to meet with Attorney General Janet Reno. The Clinton administration had set aside certain senior appointments as positions that required technical expertise, and Meissner's name showed up on everybody's short list.

For years, the immigration agency was a backwater. Most of the commissioners were political appointees who came in with little or no substantive experience. Reno convinced Meissner that, as attorney general, she would take immigration issues seriously. After all, Reno had seen firsthand how immigration had changed Miami, the community in which she grew up. "Now that was very unusual," notes Meissner, who by then had worked for seven or eight attorneys general. "Attorneys general just never paid attention to immigration."

Little did Meissner know that one November day, a young boy would arrive on Miami's shore, and a fight over his permanent home would begin. Little did she know that, in time, the entire world would be paying attention to immigration.

Newsweek contributor Eleanor Clift, of Washington, D.C., has profiled three UW women for *On Wisconsin*: TV journalist Rita Braver '70, U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshevsky '72, and Doris Meissner '63, MA'69. "Getting to know them up close and personal," Clift writes, "I can share Wisconsin's pride in their achievements. Doris Meissner and I discovered a particular bond in that we are both daughters of German immigrants, and grew up in ethnic communities."

INDEX STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY

INTO THE WILD?

People travel to national parks to get away from it all. But can a park ever really be a wilderness? Some researchers say no, and that we've gone too far in ignoring an important part of the park experience: our own history.

By Michael Penn MA'97

HOLLY SMITH-MIDDLETON

The popularity of cruises has put places like Sitka, Alaska, on the map. Passenger ships now call at Sitka on almost every day during summer, unloading thousands of tourists who want a taste of the Alaskan wilderness. But is wilderness what they find? In Sitka National Historical Park, totem poles, such as the one pictured at left, tell a different story.

On just about any of the endless days of Alaskan summer, a visitor to Sitka National Historical Park can peer out from the rain forest toward the sea and catch a vista of a massive ocean liner parked just off shore. The sight may seem incongruous — a luxurious megaship dwarfing the harbor of a tiny fishing village. But its presence on the waterfront actually tells much about why Sitka developed in the way that it has.

For more than five thousand years, travelers have arrived at Sitka by boat. The village exists on the ledge of life, clinging to the shore of an island in Alaska's Inner Passage and hemmed in on three sides by forbidding mountains. Nine thousand people live among its attractive tangle of streets, but if any of them were to walk an hour in any direction, they would find themselves amid utter wilderness, land so fierce and untamed that the great naturalist John Muir described it as God's laboratory. There are no bridges to Sitka, and barely any roads beyond town. Water is Sitka's superhighway.

The boats that come to Sitka these days bring tourists, nearly three hundred thousand of them arriving each year, making the town one of the most popular travel destinations in the nation's largest state. But if those travelers come expecting wilderness, they will be disappointed. Although it is unquestionably remote, and one can see in any direction the vast, formidable outback Alaska is famous for, Sitka is civilization to its core.

It was in Sitka, for instance, that Russian fur hunters established the world's most powerful trading company, and it was there that the United States established the territorial government of Alaska after buying the land from Russia in 1867. Long before that, some millennia ago, clans of the Tlingit tribe (pronounced Klin-git) settled in Sitka, and they have stayed there ever since. Sitka's national park, part of the eighty million American acres protected and managed by the National Park Service, covers only fifty-six acres, barely the picnic grounds at more-sprawling cousins in the park system. But its land, surrounding the banks of the Indian River, has been some of the most valued territory in the state — land so precious to Russian and Tlingit cultures that bloody battles resulted over its control.

Yet for a place of such human vitality, Sitka's park is a strangely quiet place. It is a historical park, yes, but only in a whispered, ghostly sense. Visitors come here to amble peacefully in a gorgeous and inspiring forest. It is as if the banks of the Indian River, which bustled with human activity for thousands of years, have been frozen in perpetuity, as if put behind glass.

This may seem like the desired result when you set aside a parcel of land to be preserved. As in national parks across the country, much effort goes into making sure that nothing changes at Sitka. It's part of an active management philosophy to ensure that the unspoiled beauty of such places remains unspoiled.

A laudable goal, no doubt, but at what cost? More people, including a growing community of experts at universities such as Wisconsin, are beginning to question the long-accepted axiom that national parks should be sheltered tracts of wilderness never touched by human hands.

ARNOLD ALANEN

Sitka may seem like a tiny village, an insignificant blip of land stuck in the seascape. But no place may be more central to telling the Alaskan tale than Sitka. That's what drew Arnold Alanen here: a chance to turn a beautiful place into something more.

Arnold Alanen, a UW-Madison professor of landscape architecture who has spent the last five years studying Sitka, is one of them. He doesn't understand why we consider park lands only as wildernesses, given that almost none of them are.

"Just about the whole earth now is a cultural landscape," says Alanen. "There have been interactions with humans everywhere, even on Mount Everest."

In Sitka, a long history of human interaction explains why the Indian River and the surrounding rain forest hold high spiritual value for the Tlingit, who survived on the area's natural resources for five thousand years. Living in small camps along the river's banks, the tribe fished the waters, hunted sea otter and deer, and carved paths through the forest for plant gathering. When Russian traders set up a colony on the island in 1799, the Tlingit fiercely defended their stake, nearly wiping out the Russian village in 1802. Two years later, Russians retaliated, ransacking the Tlingit fort that stood near the shore and devastating the Kiksadi clan who lived there. The battle forced the Tlingit to retreat to the other side of the island, although by the 1830s, many had returned to establish new camps near the river.

It seemed nothing would prevent the Tlingit, deeply committed to preserving the lifeways of their ancestors, from continuing to subsist in harmony with the land. Nothing, that is, until the federal government arrived. Once the National Park Service moved in to preserve the lands they so loved, the Tlingit began to feel like interlopers on their own land. Discouraged by the new forces controlling the lands, they eventually stopped fishing the river and holding ceremonies.

The only sounds heard on the banks of the Indian River were the whir and click of tourists' cameras. In an attempt to preserve Tlingit culture and heritage for future generations, the National Park Service did what the Russians, the colonists, and the bitter Alaskan night were not able to do: it drove the Tlingit from the banks of the Indian River.

In 1863, a young Scottish immigrant left the University of Wisconsin to sample the splendor of the American frontier. The son of a brutal and demanding father, John Muir believed that nature had a healing, spiritually lifting power, and he vowed to spend the rest of his days wandering the wild lands in blissful solitude.

For the next forty years, Muir traveled to remote and beautiful parts of the West. His writings offered urban Americans a window to a country they had never seen, and his influence helped bring about the national park system, the world's first network of preserved places. Today, the park system is the crown jewel of American environmentalism, including nearly four hundred individual sites and some of our most cherished landscapes: the awe of the Grand Canyon, the wonder of Yellowstone's steam-spouting geysers, the ancient blue hilltops of the Great Smoky Mountains. Overdeveloped or not, the United States has the best, most well-rounded park system on the planet.

And we take advantage of it. It is estimated that in the year 2000, more than 290 million visits will be made to park grounds, the equivalent of more than one visit each year for every man, woman, and child in the country. The parks are our collective back yards — our playgrounds, schoolyards, sources of inspiration, and laboratories for exploring the natural world.

Those many roles represent a monumental management challenge: how do we ensure that parks endure as symbols for generations to come? And what should they symbolize?

That debate has been quietly percolating in places such as Sitka, which may be the perfect example of a park pulled in opposite directions. It's an unquestionably beautiful place, with a dense swath

ARNOLD ALANEN

JULIE GOODMAN

Nature and culture at odds: Trees in Sitka have grown so tall that they now almost completely obscure views of the totem poles placed in Sitka's park nearly a century ago. As illustrated above right, UW researchers have suggested thinning the spruce trees and undergrowth to help visitors appreciate the grand, looming poles as they were intended to be seen.

of old-growth rain forest and breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains and sea. But the park also contains many artifacts of human culture, such as the site of the Tlingit fort and a collection of totem poles carved by Tlingit and other tribal artisans. We're meant to feel the gravity of human history — but not so much that it makes us feel as if we've come all the way to Alaska without deserting civilization.

In parks such as Sitka, human history often gets treated this way. Too much of it is believed to be distracting to the spiritual and natural wonder of a setting. Is it possible for a place to be both natural and manmade at the same time?

That question intrigued Arnold Alanen while visiting his daughter in Alaska in 1994. When he casually asked at the regional office of the National Park Service what park managers were doing to help promote cultural preservation in Sitka, he ended up signing on for a multiyear research project.

Along with Holly Smith-Middleton, then a student in the UW's doctoral program, Alanen explored every inch of the Sitka landscape, sometimes spending months at a time there. The result is five hundred pages of evaluation and recommendations, which outline how Sitka can enhance the cultural experience of visitors while retaining its rugged nature. If it is accepted by park managers and embraced by visitors, it may represent a change in the way that people experience nature in national parks.

Underlying the Sitka report is a concept in environmental study known as the cultural landscape. It's basically a way of acknowledging that there is more to nature than nature — that most landscapes have been shaped to some extent by human activity. You might think of a land's cultural fingerprint as being like the effects of a volcano. Lava streams and ash give us visible clues as to how a volcano's eruptions have changed the landscape. People like Alanen and Smith-Middleton, sometimes referred to as landscape historians, look for manmade formations such as foot trails, camps, and old structures that show how humans have affected the land, and how they have been affected by it.

Alanen, one of the pioneers of the field, has worked in places from Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore to aboriginal lands in the Australian outback, detailing their cultural characteristics. In Sitka, he says managers were doing a fair job of communicating culture. Signs and markers are located throughout the park, spelling out the specifics of the Tlingit battle and the meanings of the totem poles. Displays in the visitors center add more information about how Tlingit settlers lived, as well as providing a home for Indian woodworkers and jewelers.

But those features don't get at the deeper appreciation that Alanen wants people to derive from their interactions with nature. More than exhibits of the past, he wants national parks to become living museums, where culture is not merely explained, but preserved, protected, and practiced.

When Smith-Middleton began to interview Sitka residents, one of the park's shortcomings as a cultural experience became apparent. She found that many had no direct experience with the park lands. Only elderly residents could recall ceremonial events held prior to World War II. Since then, Tlingit culture in the park has become largely allegory — a tale told for the entertainment of others, rather than preservation among the Tlingit themselves.

"Many of the Tlingit — especially the most recent generation — don't know the traditional uses of this land," says Smith-Middleton. "They need to be the ones who are telling the story to the public. It's their story." Thus, a major theme in the researchers' final report became the reintegration of Tlingit participation in the park.

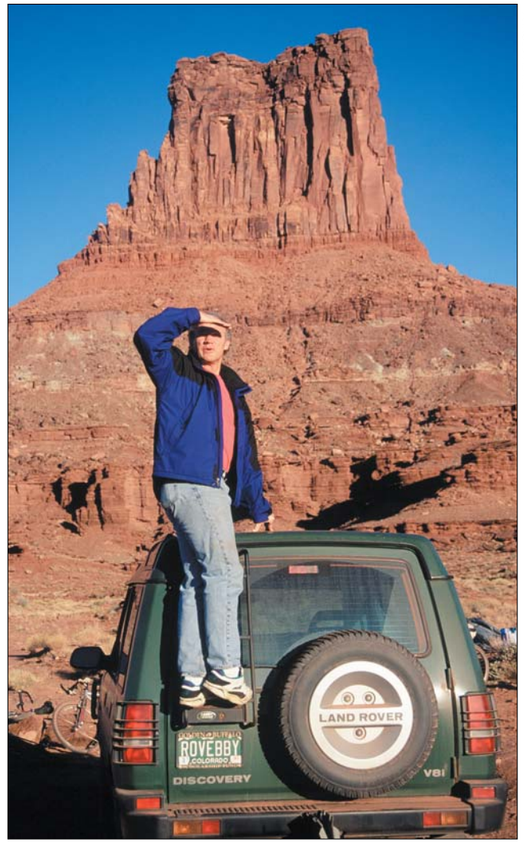
Some of the suggested policies may seem unparklike on the surface. The researchers have recommended, for instance, that Tlingit elders be allowed to close the park for private ceremonies and that subsistence fishing be permitted within park borders. Other proposals would heighten visitors' awareness of the environment as the Tlingit and Russian explorers experienced it, such as cutting down trees that have encroached on the fort site. As it is now, those trees shut off views of the water and prevent people from understanding why the fort made sense as a strategic site.

The recommendations are based on managing Sitka not as a natural place, or as a cultural place, but as an inexorable combination. Alanen says the plan will help visitors to "go beyond the trails and see that the vegetation, the stream, the birds, and the animals are part of the entire environment the Tlingit have so respected."

The researchers' plan may seem like common sense, but the idea of interpreting a landscape's culture has been slow to achieve formal recognition in our nation's parks. Although cultural landscapes have been discussed in environmental texts since the 1920s, the National Park Service did not begin to formally study the cultural aspects of its lands until 1979.

Parks have had a Hydra-headed mission from the start, though. In the 1916 act that formed the NPS, Congress directed the organization to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same." So why has it taken so long for the park service to see both nature and culture as management priorities?

The answer may have something to do with management biases formed long ago. "Cultural resources in national parks have had sort of a speckled history," says Donald Field '63, MS'65, a professor of forest ecology who worked as the NPS's senior scientist during the seventies and eighties. In many parks, especially those perceived as "beautiful places," artifacts of human construction were for decades methodically erased from the landscape. Old frontier lodges were torn down. Farm buildings were bulldozed. Open pastures, maintained by generations of humans pruning and burning the landscape, were allowed to grow thick with wild growth.



ARNOLD ALANEN

Outdoor recreation can take many forms, from boating near the Grand Canyon, right, to cruising the rocky terrain of Utah's Canyonlands National Park in a Land Rover, above. Managing the parks to keep all of those users happy isn't easy. Ensuring access and facilitating some recreational uses may compromise other values, such as wilderness and historical reflection. That's the challenge facing professors in the environmental sciences who are trying to help the park system find the right balance.

"People have the ideal notion that these are hallowed grounds not influenced by the polity of the day," Field says. "When you put a manager in a park, [he or she] has a great deal of influence. They can sway the emphasis of the park." For example, regulations now call for the preservation of historic structures in parks, a recent victory that points to the growing momentum for culture-based management practices. It's now much more difficult for parks to destroy structures fifty years or older. But, Field adds, that hasn't stopped park managers from trying.

Each fall, Field shares the benefits of his years inside the NPS with a handful of ecology students, leading a seminar on the management of national parks. Some of his students will go on to become managers or scientists workingin public lands; others are just interested in the beloved role that parks have assumed in the national psyche. As one student remarked in a recent class session, the national park system is a cultural icon unto itself.

Like Alanen's work, the course represents a shift away from the purely scientific evaluation of national parks. For decades, parks were full of researchers who mainly did things such as count spores and catalog lichens. Now, the questions are more humanistic. Field asks his students to consider the forces that move national parks. What do people want to get out of a national park visit? Those expectations, he argues, play a big role in how parks are managed.

People usually have well-formed notions about how a park should look and feel. Environmental historians will tell you, however, that such expectations are influenced not only by direct experience with nature, but by things written or said about nature — anything from Robert Frost to *The Blair Witch Project*.

Yi-Fu Tuan, an emeritus professor of geography, often would begin his seminars by asking students to write a short narrative about a place that held great significance to them. Invariably, he found, they wrote about nature, despite the fact that most of them had spent nearly all of their lives in cities. "I knew from talking to them that they enjoyed living in these cities," says Tuan. "But somehow those experiences were repressed in them."

Instead, students allowed romanticized imagery to substitute for their own experience. They loved nature, says Tuan, as though they were born to respond that way, recalling pretty lines written by long-dead New Englanders, but forgetting that those images are actually artifacts of culture, not nature.

And of gauzy, idealistic portrayals of nature, there is no shortage. Writers wax philosophic. Photographers capture feasts of light and beauty. A human construction such as a city, by comparison, wallows in the bad press of reality. It's a case of the grass being greener — quite literally.

As a result, nature tends to get separated and specially marked off, practically making these areas cathedrals. Ironically, notes Tuan, "the very setting up of a boundary converts a wilderness into a legally defined, and therefore humanized, place." But not many people seem bothered by the distinction. As William Cronon '76, UW-Madison's noted environmental historian, puts it, "We want to designate well-defined, bounded sections as the places where we are representing some human artifact. You go across that boundary, and you're back in nature."

A professor with appointments in three academic departments, Cronon has emerged as a vocal leader in the environmental movement by slaying such sacred cows. A member of the board of governors of the Wilderness Society, he had the temerity in 1995 to challenge some of his closest allies by writing an essay for the *New York Times* that questioned the very reality of wilderness. He argued that the notion of a pristine wilderness untouched by human hands was an environmentalist's fantasy, representing "the false hope of an escape from responsibility," that we can somehow ignore all that has happened to the land since humans began to inhabit it. After he published his argument, one environmental journal devoted an entire issue to bashing him.

Some suggest that Cronon and others are pushing an ancient belief system with a ton of historical inertia. Nancy Langston, a forest ecology professor who has studied human interactions with nature through time, notes that humans

"We want to designate well-defined, bounded sections as the places where we are representing some human artifact. You go across that boundary, and you're back in nature."

have drawn distinct divisions between themselves and the natural world for thousands of years, dating to the very roots of Western thought. Greek scholars, she notes, looked at the world as a series of dualisms: good pitted against evil, the divine versus the mortal. Possibly because of that influence, she says, "we define ourselves as human by not being of nature, and we define nature as those things that are not human. It's hard for us to overcome that."

Thoreau and Emerson placed nature in a spiritual context. So did John Muir, who had great scientific curiosity and a rational mind. "None of Nature's landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild," he wrote, while dismissing most human activity as destructive and annoying. Agriculture, in particular, drew his ire. He often referred to cows as "hoofed locusts."

Muir wasn't totally disapproving of man's influence. In Alaska, he welcomed miners and gold-seekers, and even reasoned that their roads would make it possible for travelers to explore new corners

It's not hard to understand why many people don't want any sign of human existence in natural areas. Humans haven't always been the best guests. A few of the things people do in and around national parks so damage their physical environment that some environmental activists warn that the parks may not survive our use of them. The National Parks Conservation Association, a private watchdog group, cites ten parks that it considers the most endangered, listed here with the activities that threaten them:

- **Petrified Forest National Park** (Arizona): Thievery and vandalism results in the park losing twelve tons of fossilized wood each year.
- **Yellowstone (Wyoming):** During winter, as many as one thousand snowmobilers each day descend on the park (despite laws against riding in the park), creating noise and air pollution.
- **Denali (Alaska):** Snowmobilers, plus plans for new roads and a resort within park grounds.
- **Great Smoky Mountains** (Tennessee/North Carolina): Air pollution from vehicles and nearby power plants.
- **Joshua Tree** (California): Proposed landfill near park borders.
- **Stones River National Battlefield** (Tennessee): A planned highway would cut through the park.
- **Ozarks Scenic Riverways** (Missouri): May allow miners to explore the park's watershed for lead.
- **National Underground Railroad Network** (various states): Not enough money available to restore crumbling buildings.
- **Everglades and Big Cypress** (Florida): Off-road vehicle use and new development near park grounds.
- **Haleakala** (Hawaii): Possible airport expansion and creeping non-native plant invasions.

of the planet. But the predominant picture of Muir is of a solitary wanderer on a lonely sojourn to heal himself through peace and respite. The ruthless punishments doled out by his father gave Muir his first lesson in the imperfection of man, and the subtle charm of the Wisconsin countryside seemed divine by comparison.

Muir began pushing for a network of government-protected preserves, calling them "health and pleasure grounds," which he believed could tangibly lengthen and improve the life of the visitor. He wrote of "jumping from rock to rock, feeling the life of them," and "getting in touch with the nerves of Mother Earth," and "washing off sins and cobweb cares of the devil's spinning." Parks for Muir were positively baptismal.

Fantasy or not, Muir's legacy is clear. Legions of modern-day Muirs have headed into the sanctity of national park grounds not to learn about humans; they've gone to escape them.

"I think the basic reason that we want to go to parks is to forget that we are social beings," says Tuan. "We see nature as a place that is beyond the social reality that we are normally submerged in." The effect many derive from nature, he says, is similar to what they might seek from a narcotic drug, except that nature, along with being cheap and legal, actually heightens their senses rather than deadening them. So, in a certain sense, building up notions of human culture in our natural places may be the intellectual equivalent of a buzz kill. "It's a difficult issue," Tuan says. "Especially in America, there is hardly any place that has no human imprint. But on the other hand, from a therapeutic view, it may be best not to be reminded of that."

During the middle part of the twentieth century, the National Park Service went to great lengths to support that escapism. In 1962, for example, the NPS adopted a policy that "biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary, recreated, as nearly as possible to the direction that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man." Parks across the country responded by spending huge sums of money to recreate a picture of their pre-colonial selves — although even then they were still deeply affected by humans before whites ever showed up.

Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore contains a good example of how strange the fetish with wilderness can be. The lands, stretching for thirty-five miles along Lake Michigan west of Traverse City, have a long history of habitation, including many historic farmsteads. The park service preserved the buildings, which Alanen helped to classify and describe.

But the NPS also preserved a "wilderness area" in Sleeping Bear, a section of wild growth that had actually been a hunting ground created by wealthy sportsmen. It's a completely fabricated landscape, full of exotic plant species and animals that you wouldn't find anywhere else in northern Michigan, all shipped in by the hunters for their amusement. But, because it looks natural, it now has the full protection and preservation efforts of the federal government.

Environmentalists such as Cronon argue that these sorts of willing delusions may end up causing more harm than good. If we become accustomed to ignoring the human presence in natural areas, they believe we will end up ignoring the natural influences on human life. We will fail to think about the oil that heats our homes and fuels our automobiles as products of the natural world, and we'll deplete our natural resources even as we think that we are protecting them. As Cronon notes, it isn't oil companies that are clamoring to drill in the Alaskan wilderness: it's us.

Heavy thoughts, granted. But Cronon argues that being aware of how a landscape has changed through history — and how history has been changed by a landscape — makes exploring nature more fun and memorable. "Historic monuments have a lot of nature in them, and natural monuments have history in them," he says. "You'll understand them both better if you can see those two things simultaneously."

How does he know? Because as a fifth-grader, he had one of the formative experiences of his life: a family trip to see the great national parks of the American West.

THANKS TO CRUISE SHIPS, many more people are experiencing one of America's last frontiers: Alaska. But time is not among the many luxuries afforded to cruise passengers. Places like Sitka are now most often seen in a few hours, taken in on a whirlwind tour that often winds up with a midnight chocolate buffet. Does cultural tourism stand a chance here?

Alanen and Smith-Middleton say the work they have done in Sitka is partly about enhancing the experience of the tourist. But they also recognize that national parks are fundamentally about protecting something worth seeing.

In the years since they began their Sitka project, the researchers have been encouraged by positive sights in Sitka. Tlingit dancers have returned to the fort site, where they are again holding ceremonies to honor their fallen ancestors.

"Especially in America, there is hardly any place that has no human imprint. But on the other hand, from a therapeutic view, it may be best not to be reminded of that."

Last fall, tribal elders erected a totem pole at the site to memorialize the Kiksadi hero of the 1804 battle with the Russians. Such a renewed embrace of the park by the Tlingit is "the most important thing that could come out of our work," says Smith-Middleton.

But what will future generations of park visitors know about the Tlingit? Even the tribe members themselves have become more concerned about how others will interpret their culture and history.

In 1996, the main clans of the tribe that still live around Sitka — families that have long histories of internal tensions and squabbles — jointly sponsored the first traditional totem pole to be raised in Sitka National Historical Park in more than one hundred years. Nearly forty feet tall, the red cedar pole is festooned with painstakingly carved and colored figures, all the way up to the sharp-beaked figure of the raven, which to many Pacific tribes represents both the creator of the world and a cunning trickster. The pole is the first in Tlingit history to feature symbols of both the raven and eagle clans of the tribe, symbolic of the new energy for communicating and preserving its history.

More than seven hundred people showed up in a rain storm to see the new pole erected near the park's cultural center. The ceremony was led by tribal elders, elaborately costumed and wearing the traditional wooden hats of their clans. It took nearly an hour to pull the totem into its place overlooking the waterfront.

But the new pole also illustrates just how tricky culture can be to translate for people who aren't part of it. Totem poles are notoriously hard for non-natives to interpret properly, and many of their meanings are cloaked in closely guarded traditions and folk tales. Even their names can be oblique. Officially, the new pole is called the "Indian River Tlingit History Pole." But the nuance and texture of its Tlingit name, which roughly translates to "our grandparents who were the very first people here to use the Indian River and the other people who were here, too," simply can't be translated.

Only those who speak Tlingit get the full picture, and there aren't many of them left. Once as large as forty thousand, the number of natives living in Alaska is dwindling. Even with the efforts to enliven Tlingit culture through the park, there is a real sense that soon there won't be any of the Tlingit left. Only the jet-black eyes of a raven will attest to their history — a solemn, silent monument staring out to sea, a reminder to the cruise ships that they aren't the first to discover the glory of Sitka.

Michael Penn MA'97, an associate editor of *On Wisconsin,* found common ground with many of this story's sources. He, too, fondly recalls visiting the nation's great parks as a child.

DREAMS *Undeferred*

WISCONSIN CENTER FOR FILM AND THEATER RESEARCH

Although she'd been unhappy as an undergraduate, an experience at the UW would make an enormous impact on Lorraine Hansberry's life: a play at the Wisconsin Union Theater. "I remember rather clearly that my coming had been an accident," she wrote. "Also that I sat in the orchestra close to the stage: the orchestra of the great modern building which is the main theater plant of the University of Wisconsin." In the play she saw, Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, she was touched by "the woman's voice, the howl, the shriek of misery fitted to a wail of poetry that consumed all my senses and all my awareness of human pain, endurance and the futility of it."

Overcoming sometimes daunting odds, these alumni found their true calling at UW-Madison — even if they didn't know it at the time.

By Susan Pigorsch '80

"She had begun her college career awkwardly and it stayed that way," writes Lorraine Hansberry x'52 of her Madison experience in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*.

"The point of things eluded her — things like classes and note-taking and lecture and lab. She found most of them unspeakably dull and irrelevant to virtually anything she had ever had on her mind or ever expected to." On top of it, she was one of only a few African-American students on campus at the time, an urban out-of-stater, and a woman at that. *"All that she imagined college to be had yet to materialize,"* Hansberry continues. *"The only thing which had not disappointed was — the snow. What, what was it about the snow?"*

At that moment, the first black playwright to win the Best Play of the Year Award from the New York Drama Critics had not a clue as to what would be her calling. Vikings and Scandinavian lore captivated her, yet she was beginning to become one with the "sound of the mighty Congo drum." To give her soul some respite — perhaps to rest her eyes from the lake's flat white — Hansberry wandered into the modernist curves of the Wisconsin Union Theater, which was opening the student production of *Juno and the Paycock*, by Sean O'Casey.

"An incredible thing happened to her here," recounts theater manager Michael Goldberg '64. "But first remember that she came from Chicago, and that she wrote that she wasn't necessarily a happy camper in Madison. It was a time when she was considered not an African-American, but a Negro." Coming in from the cold that day in the late forties, she collapsed into the theater's earth-colored upholstery, and soaked up O'Casey's Irish dialect. She came out in a daze. "It's very clear in her book that this was her apotheosis," Goldberg continues. "It was a life-transforming experience." Hansberry had been enraptured by O'Casey's honest ode to the human condition — its Irish drunkards, Irish braggart, and Irish liar — who thereby set the stage for genuine heroes.

"[O'Casey's] melody was one that I had known for a very long while," Hansberry writes. *"I was seventeen, and I did not think then of writing the melody as I knew it — in a different key; but I believe it entered my consciousness and stayed there."* In 1959, at age twenty-nine, the artist's epiphany inspired her opus, *A Raisin in the Sun*. The youngest winner of New York's Best Drama Award, and the fifth woman to earn the honor, immediately changed the way the African-American experience would be depicted on stage — and eventually embraced in an even more significant way — at UW-Madison. But that part of the story would take two more generations to develop.

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The University of Wisconsin has long been the place where students — both the ambitious and the ambivalent — have found opportunities and intellectual insights that would have otherwise eluded them. By its very creation, this land grant institution was designed to educate individuals with promise — regardless of pedigree. The children of immigrants needed blue blood to break the ice around the Ivy League. But the people of Wisconsin voted to build bridges to their university of higher learning, and invited the world to come to Madison to take part in an unprecedented approach to higher education.

John Muir, the son of Scottish immigrants, came from nearby Portage. Upon having his epiphany over the similarities between the pod of a pea and that of a locust tree, he went on to become the visionary founder of our national park system (see story, page 26).

JOE PASKUS

Joann Jones, head of the Ho-Chunk Nation from 1991–'95, received three degrees from the UW — after raising four children. She was chosen as the outstanding alumnus of the year in 2000 by the Indian law student association.

Carlton Highsmith '73, a North Carolina native, was denied access to his own state university. Improbably, he says, "this great university, UW-Madison ... reached out to a poor, non-resident, African-American student and admitted him because they felt he had promise." He's now the CEO of one of the top minority-owned businesses in the nation, Specialized Packaging Group.

Joan Lappin '64, a financial investor in New York City, was turned away by Northwestern, she says, because of the "Jewish quota." But UW-Madison welcomed her, three hours to the north and west, and then from Langdon Street to the ag campus.

As part of the university's sesquicentennial celebration, we asked alumni to send in stories about UW grads who also found their true calling at the UW, whether they knew it at the time or not. Via letter, e-mail, and a special Web site, dozens of amazing stories flooded in about individuals whose unique university experience helped them to go on to make a real difference in the world.

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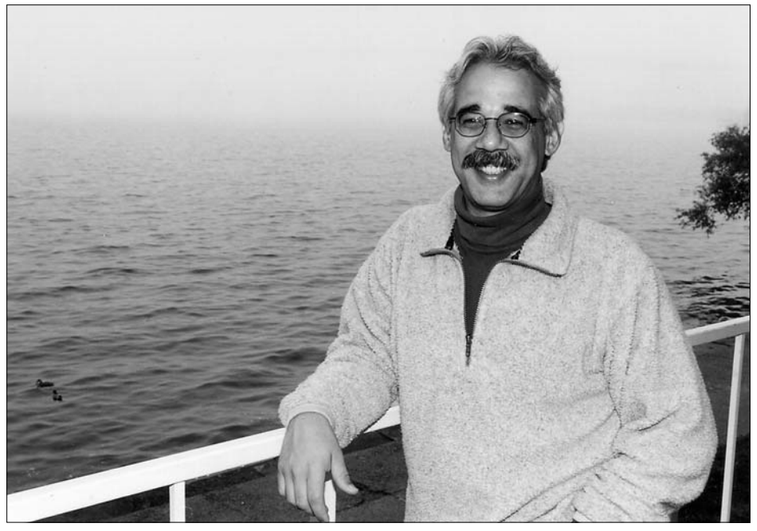
We heard from Eduardo Santana '79, MS'85, PhD'00, a Cuban who grew up in Puerto Rico, and gained his desire to learn about the natural world while tromping through the woods with his father, a contractor who built roads and bridges. With luck, he enrolled at Madison at age seventeen. But like Lorraine Hansberry, he had trouble finding his footing. Coming from a high school of only 350 students, he viewed the University of Wisconsin as being like a huge monster. He'd had a bad experience as well, "with a professor who, when I



GLENN TRUDEL

In May, Cuban-born Eduardo Santana became the first student of Hispanic origin to receive a professional degree in wildlife ecology. He had a rocky start at Madison back in the mid-seventies, but went on to pursue his passion: the conservation of North American birds.

asked him a question after class, told me that I did not belong in college," he writes. Fortunately, his adviser, a medical student, suggested that he should talk with Professor Joe Hickey, a wildlife ecologist, whose course he'd enjoyed as an elective. "My adviser was black," Santana continues, "so at least I figured Hickey wasn't racist — an important consideration in as much as I had had some ugly experiences in Madison."

The two got along right away, and Santana officially became an undergraduate in the Department of Wildlife Ecology, even though he'd never heard of Aldo Leopold and couldn't identify a common thistle. Professor Hickey was ever-encouraging, Santana says, and he earned steady As — that is, until age nineteen.

"All of a sudden, studying wildlife did not seem to be all that relevant," he writes. "There were too many problems to solve in the world and not enough time. I couldn't process everything." He would have flunked out, had his pragmatic professor not suggested that he drop out instead, and got him a job with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

It was exactly the right remedy for Santana, who lacked real-life experience. He returned to UW-Madison to earn three degrees, and as of May, he became the first student of Hispanic origin to receive a professional degree in wildlife ecology. As a professor at Mexico's University of Guadalajara, he has already received international awards and recognition for his work in the Sierra de Manantlan Biosphere Reserve, where he focuses on the conservation of birds in North America.

"Joe Hickey would be pleased," Santana says. "I finally have my 'union card,' which, in this business, is my PhD."

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KELLY COTTER '98 NOT ONLY FOUND HER FUTURE AT UW–MADISON — it saved her life. This native of the city was diagnosed with leukemia in 1988. Under the care of the UW Comprehensive Cancer Center, she received a bone marrow transplant from her then-eight-year-old brother, Adam. The procedure was a success, and Kelly went on to explore all that UW-Madison could offer to an undergraduate.

Cancer survivor Kelly Cotter, shown at graduation with her brother, Adam, has embraced Madison's commitment to public service. She's led "Kids with Courage" reunions for other UW patients treated for childhood cancer, and she's in law school now to study patient advocacy.

She was elected to the 1995 Homecoming Court, and spent a semester abroad in Florence, Italy. "It was one of the most memorable experiences of my life," writes Cotter. "Most importantly, the people I have met throughout my experience at the university have helped me to realize how to reach my future goals," and she hasn't wasted any time.

Cotter led several "Kids with Courage" reunions for UW patients who have been treated for childhood cancer. With her mother, Maury Cotter, director of UW-Madison's Office of Quality Improvement, she developed a book about kids with cancer, and then an online resource for childhood cancer survivors (www.outlook-life.org).

Currently, Cotter is enrolled as a law student at UW-Madison. "I am interested in being able to help make a difference," she says, "by being involved with patient advocacy, medical ethics, and health policy." In short, she's committed to extending the meaning of public service by giving hope to others.

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FINDING ONE'S TRUE CALLING DOESN'T ALWAYS HAPPEN WHEN YOU'RE AN undergrad, of course. It can take much more time — and seasoning — as it did for Joann Jones '82, MS'83, JD'87 of Wisconsin Dells. The former president of the Ho-Chunk Nation originally had no desire to attend college. Raising four children wherever her spouse's career with Kodak took them was demanding enough. Yet she found time to teach Indian culture in the schools of North Carolina, Texas, and Florida. And through her work, she discovered that state and local government aid programs to the tribes weren't succeeding because there weren't enough American Indians with degrees to run them.

"I wanted to get a political science degree so I would know the political systems Indian people had to deal with," Jones told *On Wisconsin* Magazine. Starting at age thirty-six, she began her undergraduate degree — and daily commute to Madison. But as soon as she had earned her bachelor's, she realized that she needed more. "I wanted to learn about the human services departments, because large numbers of our people are served by these agencies," she recalls. So she went on to earn a master's in sociology. Then she realized that most Indian issues end up in the courts, so she went back to school yet again — this time, to earn her third UW degree, in law.

Jones was elected tribal president shortly thereafter, when a schism split her nation over casino and gaming issues, and what should be done with the millions of dollars in profits.

"I foresee all those who want to further their education doing so," Jones says of the casino income, echoing the sentiments of the Wisconsin Alumni Association's American Indian Alumni Council, which has raised more than $100,000 to help Indian students attend UW-Madison. "I see UW graduates returning home with their skills to build our communities into viable places to live." Jones says it doesn't matter if students are seventeen, or forty-seven-year-old returning adults. What matters is taking advantage of one's educational opportunities.

ALAN DECKER

"As is true with all young people," says André De Shields, "it takes time ... and it takes hindsight to appreciate those life lessons that you take for granted." After three decades away, the actor has reconnected with the UW to promote a professorship honoring Lorraine Hansberry.

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YOU WOULDN'T EXPECT ANDRÉ DE SHIELDS '70 TO EVER COME BACK to the UW. After all, this Emmy winner and Tony Award nominee was only here for eighteen months in the late sixties. As a transfer student, his tumultuous tenure spanned protests against the Vietnam War, the black student strike, and the Mifflin Street riots. As an African-American actor, he says he was denied a leading role in any campus production, as these roles were thought to be written exclusively for white males. And even the alternative student acting troupe he helped to launch — "Screw Theater, with all puns intended" — was closed down after just two Union Play Circle performances. They were controversial enough, in fact, to make their way into Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show" monologues.

"It's no secret. For thirty years, there was no love lost between me and the university," says De Shields, who lives in New York City between roles staged from Paris and London to San Diego. "I had to defer my dream of being an actor on campus because there was no sense of inclusion, ethnic diversity, or nontraditional casting. It was a heartbreaking experience."

Yet like Lorraine Hansberry, De Shields had no idea that Madison would also offer the transformative experience of his life. He followed the vanguard who demonstrated for the creation of an African-American Studies department — the first in the Big Ten, and perhaps the first in the nation outside of those in traditionally black institutions.

"The idea of upholding America as a melting pot wasn't just black students agitating for representation," De Shields says. "All of us were losing out on a valuable education because a demographic of the population was being marginalized." Amidst this milieu, he was nonetheless determined to make his mark in the theater, even if he had to head off campus. He joined the iconoclastic Broom Street Theater under the direction of Stuart Gordon '69 (also an Emmy winner, whose screenplay became the basis for *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*). Then he was asked to take a leading role in the Madison Community Theater, now known as the Madison Rep.

"It was a precedent-setting experience," De Shields recalls. "I was twenty-one when I was cast as El Gallo in their debut production of the *Fantasticks*. It's a role that is ordinarily the sole domain of white actors, and it was a first in nontraditional casting." It was 1968, and De Shields had met with success, yet he brooded for nearly three decades because he'd only acted *off* campus, at *alternative* venues.

"At a time when the fortresses of exclusivity were being challenged and dissolved around this country, the university still institutionalized — I won't say racism — but racial elitism," De Shields notes. "It wasn't until 1998 that I could do what I had always dreamed of doing here: to act while being embraced by the resources of my chosen profes-

Continued on page 51

Dreams Undeferred

Continued from page 41

sion." In celebration of the Madison Rep's thirtieth anniversary, he accepted the role of Sheridan Whiteside in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*.

A few months earlier, De Shields had stepped onto the Union Theater stage for the very first time — on a tour with jazz musician Wynton Marsalis.

"Those values and those relationships that have become the foundation of my adult life, and that will carry me through for the rest of my life, were established in part during the eighteen months I spent as a student at the University of Wisconsin."

He'd unexpectedly reconnected with old friends, beginning with the Union's Michael Goldberg, and something began to change.

"Although I could not have known it then, my lifelong friendships were established at Madison, and that's what's important to me," De Shields says. "Those values and those relationships that have become the foundation of my adult life, and that will carry me through for the rest of my life, were established in part during the eighteen months I spent as a student at the University of Wisconsin."

So it was easy to accept the Madison Rep's invitation to come back to Madison, and to continue to reconnect with friends such as Zorba Paster '69 and Ben Sidran '67. "Then Sandy Adell from African Studies and Sally Banes from the Department of Theater and Drama asked me if I could please come and speak to their students," De Shields remembers. "I was happy to comply, but dismayed that the African-American students were still so few in number, and were still lodging the same concerns that I had thirty years before — that there was very little opportunity for artistic self-expression, and that there seemed to be hardly any commitment to multiculturalism, blind casting, and inclusion." Together, students, faculty, and the seasoned alumnus brainstormed: What could they do to make a difference?

"That's when the whole idea of the Lorraine Hansberry Visiting Professorship got started," De Shields continues. Every semester, an individual with both scholarly insights and firsthand knowledge of underrepresented ethnic minorities in the dramatic arts will come to campus to assist with student productions and the university's cultural community. "The hope of the idea is that there will be permanent evidence attesting to the university's commitment to diversity," De Shields explains.

"We must realize how everyone's higher learning experience is diminished because of the ill-conceived approach of homogeneous education," he concludes. "We must, we absolutely must, reflect in our approach to education the diverse society that has always prevailed in America."

As a young person, De Shields believed revolution must "happen now, or it won't happen ever," he says. "My realization as an adult is that revolution is a constant thing, a continuum. The change has to happen from one generation to the next, and each successive generation is informed by the former generation. So what we are achieving now is the seed of change that was not planted first in the sixties, but back in the fifties" — when playwright Lorraine Hansberry was young, gifted, and black on campus, and *A Raisin in the Sun* still clung to the vine.

"It took two full generations of students passing through the university to finally say, 'Enough is enough,' " De Shields adds. "We must now do something concrete and lasting so that the mission of the school rings true to a higher and equal education for all who pursue those goals."

Many thanks to interns Kira Winter '99 and Jill Cornell '99 for coordinating the "Alumni Who Made a Difference" project. If you know of someone who found a starting point at UW-Madison after facing obstacles to education elsewhere, please write to us at "Alumni Who Made a Difference," 650 N. Lake Street, Madison, WI 53706, or e-mail WAA@uwalumni.com.