

Rachel May |

## SEEDING SOLUTIONS TO ECO-CHALLENGES

IF RACHEL MAY EVER LACKS INSPIRATION to start her workday, she need only turn on the news. With heart-wrenching images from the Gulf Coast oil disaster and renewed questions about energy policy filling the airwaves, May views her work as SU's coordinator for sustainability education as something of a calling. The University created the position last fall as part of an effort to ensure that all students graduate with a knowledge and awareness of climate change and sustainability issues. Such awareness, May believes, is a critical step toward solving the kind of challenges facing a culture that has yet to acknowledge that choices have consequences. "The things we take for granted now are changing life as we know it on Earth," May says. "The Gulf oil spill should lead us to a major rethinking of why we're using oil in the first place. And that's not happening. People have not yet connected their personal behavior to the bigger problems. It's very, very hard to do that. Helping to make students aware of these issues, and interested in being leaders on them, feels incredibly valuable to me."

May began her academic career as a scholar of Slavic languages and literature, earning a bachelor's degree from Princeton University, a master's degree as a Marshall Scholar at Oxford University, and a Ph.D. degree from Stanford University. In 2001, she left a tenured position as professor of Russian at Macalaster College in St. Paul, Minnesota, to join her husband in Syracuse, where he teaches philosophy at Le Moyne College. Soon after, she decided to pursue her "other love"—a lifelong interest in the environment—by enrolling in graduate study at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF). Upon completing a master's degree in environmental communications in 2003, she became director of the Office of the Environment and Society, a position jointly created by SU and ESF to promote collaboration in environmental initiatives.

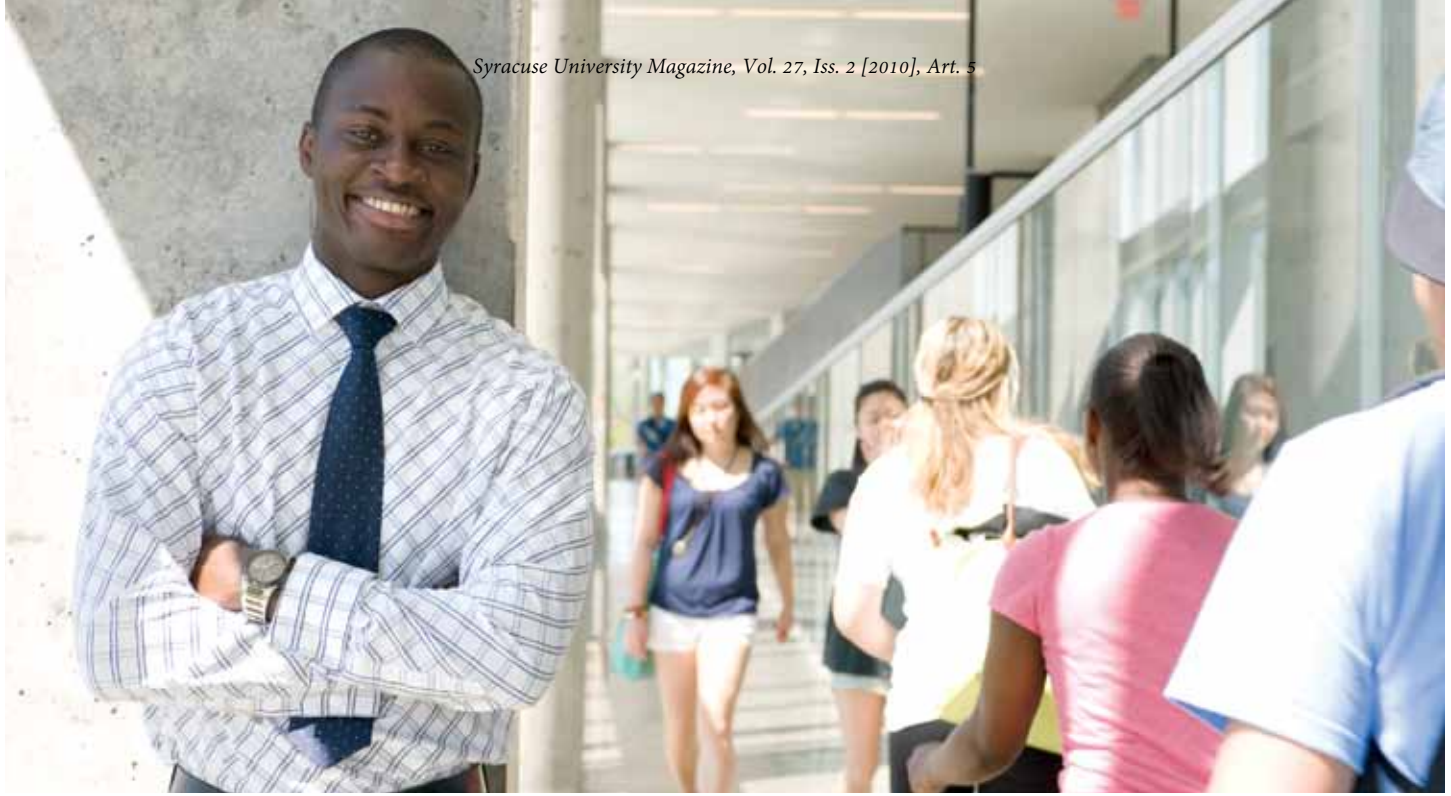
In her new post at SU, May works with faculty across the disciplines to find ways to incorporate sustainability issues into coursework. As part of that effort, the vice chancellor's office last year awarded grants to 12 faculty members for course development and engaging their students in a sustainability-related project for SU Showcase in April. During that event, May also oversaw the installation of a rain garden in the Waverly Avenue campus parking lot



to mark the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. Designed by ESF graduate student Nick Zubin-Stathopoulos and installed by 55 students along with other volunteers, the garden can absorb 2,000 gallons of water, which in heavy downpours will reduce storm water runoff into sewage drains and reduce the likelihood of sewage overflows into local waterways. Just as important, May says, it serves as a crucial reminder of the University's connectedness to those living "downstream" from campus.

Raising awareness of such connections within the larger ecosystem is essential to changing our ways, May says. And while she admits news of deep-water oil spills and climate change trouble her, she believes the same power of imagination that sparked the Industrial Revolution can be harnessed to put the country on a more environmentally responsible course. The next generation—including her 11-year-old daughter—is counting on it. "A lot of these things I do for her," May says. "They are the generation that will see the fruits of what we do, whether good or bad. Keeping our focus on the people to come is really important, and that's what keeps me grounded."

—Carol Boll



## Idriss Njike | REWARDING EXPERIENCES

ERNIE DAVIS HALL RESIDENCE DIRECTOR IDRIS NJIKE G'09 remembers seeing a first-year student crying on the telephone. He invited her into his office and found out she was having trouble making friends and had told her parents she wanted to leave Syracuse. Njike settled her down, asked her about her interests, and encouraged her to join a club, telling her it's a good way to meet like-minded people. "Next time I saw her, she'd been to a club meeting and was a different person," he says. "Get involved. I always say that to students because I've seen that once they are involved in something they enjoy, their college experience changes for the better. They can always find a connection because there are so many ways to get connected."

Njike revels in such moments. A recipient of the 2010 Inspiration Award of the Chancellor's Awards for Public Engagement and Scholarship, he enjoys new experiences and challenges and helping students find their way. That should come as no surprise when you consider Njike's own path. Interested in studying in the United States, he left the booming equatorial city of Douala in his native Cameroon for the frigid climes of the Midwestern town of Marshall, Minnesota, to attend Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU). It was culture shock to say the least, and he still laughs when he remembers his first encounter with hot cheese sauce and how disgusted he was that people drank chocolate milk for lunch—two American gustatory habits that would make French-influenced Cameroonians cringe. At SMSU, Njike earned a bachelor's degree in business management and marketing and worked as a resident advisor and public safety officer. With encouragement from his supervisor, he explored higher education residence programs and landed a position with SU's Office of Residence Life (ORL), where he has worked as an assistant or

head residence director for the past four years. Last year, Njike was appointed to head Ernie Davis Hall during its transition from construction zone to 250-student residence hall. Along with the usual duties of guiding students, settling roommate disputes, and enforcing rules, he monitored the building's ongoing construction and kept hall residents apprised of the progress, including the finishing touches on the gym. "It was definitely a challenge, but I loved every minute of it," he says. "I'll always be grateful for the students and their parents and their understanding. They were amazing." He also studied up on the legendary Ernie Davis '62, the first African American to win the Heisman Trophy, and did his part to ensure students knew Davis's story. "I wanted everyone to know who Ernie Davis was," says Njike, who was thrilled to meet Davis family members at the building's dedication last fall.

He especially enjoyed learning the Orange great was a mathematics major. A numbers man himself, Njike balanced his workload with part-time studies at the Whitman School of Management, earning a master's degree in finance. It's a field that comes naturally to him, he says, recalling how as a youngster he would lend his allowance to friends with interest. He has given financial literacy seminars to ORL colleagues and students, and on an office shelf, next to a wooden map of Africa, sit several piggy banks, which he likes to hand out at seminars as a reminder that saving takes patience. Njike plans to leave Syracuse soon to pursue a finance career; ideally, one day, he would like to combine his finance and higher education backgrounds. For him, it would be a way to continue helping students—sharing the natural gift he has for connecting with them. "I've had the time of my life here," he says. "Higher education is about mentorship, advising students. Having students come up and ask for help with a resume or a cover letter or with their French—that, to me, is the best reward."  
—Jay Cox



To take a video tour of Ernie Davis Hall, go to [sumagazine.syr.edu](https://sumagazine.syr.edu).





Odean Dyer |

## Bridging Communities

ONE OF ODEAN DYER'S LIFE-DEFINING MOMENTS CAME early. "I was about 5 years old when I first saw the Brooklyn Bridge," says Dyer '10, a native of the Bronx. "It was magnificent—so big and able to hold so much weight. I watched all the cars and trucks going over it and I was in awe. How could humans make such a thing? I decided I had to learn how to do this."

By the time he reached high school, Dyer had set a goal for himself of becoming a civil engineer and to study that field at Syracuse University. But his high school guidance counselor told him he wasn't good enough for SU—that he wasn't college mate-

rial. "I took it upon myself to get into SU without his recommendation," he says. "What one person says is not the final word. The person who has the final word is the one who does the work. I wanted to prove to him that he was wrong."

Dyer credits his Jamaican-born parents for his well-developed sense of self. "They have this old-school mentality that no one is going to give it to you," says Dyer, one of four children and the only son. "You have to believe in yourself if you are going to take your future to the highest heights."

He believed so strongly that Syracuse was the place for him that it was the only university he applied to—and when he was accepted to the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science (LCS), he took great satisfaction in showing the acceptance letter to his guidance counselor. On a campus visit, Dyer found that the course of study at LCS wasn't the only thing that appealed to him about SU. He was impressed by the beauty and layout of the University's hilltop site, which added to his enjoyment of college life. "I like how the campus is set up," he says. "You have the Quad in the middle and when you go from class to class, you can see all your friends."

Having a social life—and a social conscience—was as important to Dyer as doing well in the rigorous civil engineering program. In his sophomore year, a brainstorming session he had with Paul Buckley, then-associate director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, led to the establishment of the Multicultural Empowerment Network (M.E.N.). "The goal of M.E.N. is to increase the awareness of multicultural males, to raise our visibility in the community," Dyer says. "We need to be doers, not just talkers, and to become more involved in social issues both on and off campus."

The group has developed a service-focused relationship with the Alliances of Communities Transforming Syracuse, volunteering in soup kitchens, and serving as mentors and tutors for school-children, among other socially oriented activities. For his work with the group and other organizations, Dyer received a 2010 Martin Luther King Jr.

Unsung Hero Award from the University. "When I realized the full magnitude of what the award was, what it meant, I was taken aback," he says. "I was doing things because I believed in them, not thinking I would be getting accolades for it. The award meant a lot to me, but it's not the reason why I got involved. Although now it makes me want to push harder—knowing there are people out there seeing what I do and noticing the good work I'm trying to accomplish. It was really big."

With Commencement behind him, Dyer plans to work for a few years, then earn a master's degree and a Professional Engineering license, with the goal of owning his own company. "Engineering is my passion," he says. "To see my name on a building—or even just to know I was part of the design of a structure—would be the ultimate feeling for me." —Paula Meseroll



## Cliff Davidson | Vision for a Sustainable Future



### THOMAS AND COLLEEN WILMOT CHAIR IN ENGINEERING

**Recipient:** Cliff Davidson, L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science

**Background:** Trustee Thomas C. Wilmot Sr. '70 and his wife, Colleen, endowed the chair with a multimillion-dollar gift to position the selected faculty member at the interface of the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems and the Syracuse Initiative program. The chair will guide students in the development of new technologies that can be licensed or used to spin off technology companies.

CLIFF DAVIDSON IS READY TO IGNITE AN ENGINEERING REVOLUTION. HE WANTS ENGINEERS to help lead the way in creating a sustainable society, one that considers the consequences of technology and development and takes a long-term view of our actions on the natural world. "The idea behind sustainable engineering is to reeducate the world's engineers so they use their science to understand how things have to be redesigned," he says. "Engineers are critically important in any type of sustainable development and have to take a leadership role in telling the politicians and other decision-makers what needs to be done. So we're talking about a big change in the way engineers think and practice."

These beliefs motivated Davidson to accept the Thomas and Colleen Wilmot Chair in Engineering at the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science and an appointment in the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems (SyracuseCoE) in 2009. For the previous 32 years, he was on the faculty of the departments of civil and environmental engineering and engineering and public policy at Carnegie-Mellon University, his undergraduate alma mater in Pittsburgh. Davidson, an award-winning teacher and air-quality researcher who holds a Ph.D. degree in environmental engineering science from the California Institute of Technology, has spent most of his career focused on aerosol physics, earning an international reputation for his studies of atmospheric particles. More than a decade ago, however, his research interests shifted toward sustainable development. He recognized the need to further the cause and developed a course on the environmental effects of engineering decisions. "I found it harder to focus only on work with aerosol particles under a microscope when I saw what was going on in the real world," he says. "That was a real driving force."

For Davidson, the endowed chair provides the perfect opportunity to act on his beliefs. It connects him with the SyracuseCoE and, in particular, its involvement in the sustainable development of the city's Near Westside. "The Near Westside presents tremendous opportunities you might not get in other areas for decades," he says. "Since it's targeted for development in a number of ways, I think it's an open door for introducing the whole concept of sustainable neighborhoods with sustainable buildings and energy. It could move us closer to solving problems that plague cities all across the country."

Davidson is in the sustainability arena for the long haul. And that should come as no surprise. After all, he is a marathon runner, and he and his wife, Megan, share a passion for the wilderness. They hike, camp, and consider themselves "winter enthusiasts." This respect for the environment and a belief that engineers can help shape a sustainable future drive Davidson to share his knowledge with students and alert them to their role in preserving the planet. "We have to teach our engineering students about the link between engineering design and its impact on the natural world," he says. "We have to emphasize the long-term, global picture and get our students to think holistically." —Jay Cox





## Aviva Abramovsky | Risky Business

THESE ARE EXCITING TIMES IN THE FIELD OF INSURANCE law, according to Professor Aviva Abramovsky of the College of Law. Perhaps a bit too exciting. As chair of the Insurance Law Section of the American Association of Law Schools (AALS), Abramovsky occupies a leadership position in an area of legal scholarship that has been thrust into the media spotlight by such ongoing news stories as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the debate over health care legislation, automobile safety recalls, the Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster, and regulation of the financial industry. "The field of insurance law is much broader in scope than most people recognize," Abramovsky says. "It covers all the familiar types of personal insurance, but in a larger sense it's the study of the ways in which contracts can shift risk from one party to another."

Abramovsky, who led a session on the AIG financial debacle at the 2010 AALS convention, is not surprised to find insurance so much on the public mind these days. "The principal product sold by the insurance industry is peace of mind through risk reduction," she says. "Yet we're experiencing a period of fundamental change in the very industry that is supposed to offer us stability." With the passage of a Congressional health care bill, she points out, we have federal regulation of insurance, a power previously reserved to the states. At the same time, we are seeing a blurring of lines between private insurance and public forms of insurance, such as Social Security and Medicare, leading many to worry that the insurance companies they depend on

are becoming more like a public utility or an agent of the government. "The result of all this is tremendous anxiety, and anxiety about insurance creates anxiety throughout the entire financial and commercial structure," she says.

A member of the law faculty since 2004, Abramovsky offers courses on commercial transactions and professional responsibility as well as insurance law. No stranger to Central New York, she did her undergraduate work at Cornell, majoring in industrial labor relations. After completing law school at the University of Pennsylvania, she spent three years in private practice with Anderson, Kill & Olick P.C. in New York City and a year teaching at Florida State University in Tallahassee. For the past three years, Abramovsky has served as co-director of SU's Law in London summer program, an educational experience whose virtues she doesn't mind touting. "During its 30-year history, the London program has established relationships with barristers, solicitors, and other legal professionals who provide internships that allow our students to work with the top legal minds in the U.K.," she says. Of all her activities at SU, Abramovsky places highest personal value on her participation on the College of Law committees chosen by the American Bar Association to evaluate Supreme Court nominees Samuel Alito and Sonia Sotomayor. "The opportunity to serve in that capacity has been the greatest honor in my life," she says. "The Syracuse law faculty is doing many incredibly meaningful things. It's such a pleasure to teach here."

—David Marc

## Yingyi Wu | Celebrating Chinese Culture

YINGYI WU '11 REALIZES THE IMPORTANT REACH OF the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) at Syracuse University. As CSSA president for the past two years, Wu did all she could to ensure new students from China are prepared for life in Syracuse and have opportunities to come together to celebrate and share their culture. Through the CSSA, she's met with Syracuse-bound students and their families in Shanghai and offered advice on everything from appropriate winter wear to necessary cooking utensils. She takes pride in the CSSA's extensive Internet forum and listserv network, which help students connect with one another. She also remembers the challenge of coordinating the group's 2007 Mid-Autumn Festival, a traditional Chinese harvest celebration also known as the Moon Festival. "I didn't know a lot of the people at that time and it was the first big event I ever organized," says Wu, the youngest elected president in CSSA history. "I called a lot of people myself, and one week I used up 1,500 minutes on my cell phone."

Since then, Wu has smoothed out many a detail, gathering and organizing information, building the association's network of volunteers, and helping shape CSSA's role in assisting Chinese students. The group—which serves upwards of 1,000 Chinese students, including ones at SUNY ESF and Upstate Medical University—reaches out to incoming students and their families through a series of informational meetings in Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, and provides a newcomers' handbook with basic information about SU and the Central New York area. Last year, the group welcomed nearly 400 new students, arranging airport pickups and temporary housing and hosting a picnic at Jamesville Beach Park. Through its network, students connect for a variety of services and activities, including ride sharing, shopping excursions, and trips to other cities. "Our volunteers are very important," Wu says. "If we didn't have volunteers, we wouldn't be able to provide these services."

Wu's leadership abilities have blossomed through her CSSA work and should serve her well as she pursues a career in the business world. An accounting major with a

finance minor at the Whitman School of Management, she credits her mother for encouraging her to study abroad. Wu grew up in Suzhou, a city in the eastern province of Jiangsu renowned for its classical gardens. A competitive distance runner and basketball player in high school, Wu first visited the United States as an exchange student in 2001 and has traveled to such places as Disneyland and Las Vegas. Amid



her studies, which include plans for graduate school and earning a certified public accountant license, she still likes to run in her free time. "I always run at Onondaga Lake Park," she says. "I love that place."

It's a good tip for joggers—one Wu would gladly share with newcomers. As the organization grows, it continues to develop new offerings. Working with CSSA, SU Library established a dedicated space for Chinese language books and magazines. Group members interact with the local Chinese community, including such organizations as the Central New York Chinese School, sharing invitations to events. For Wu, it's important for the CSSA to host such gatherings as the Moon Festival and the Spring Festival, which marks the start of the Chinese New Year, because she knows what they mean to Chinese students thousands of miles from home and family. "This kind of event makes them feel close together," Wu says. "As I told them, although we don't have our families with us, we have our friends, classmates, and roommates, and together we can celebrate this festival so we don't feel lonely and stay at home." —Jay Cox