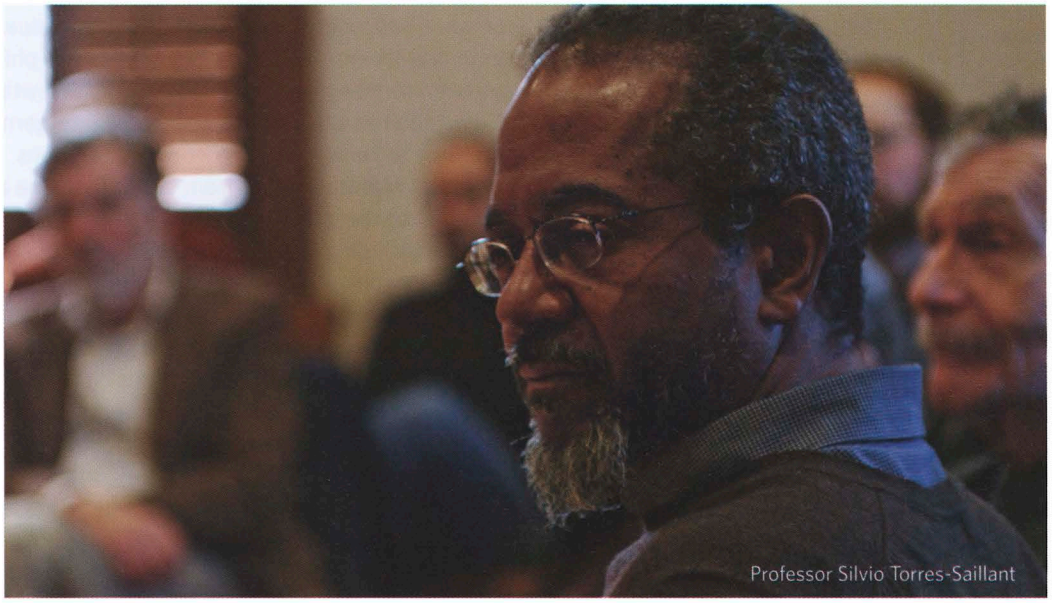
The University energizes the humanities with a dedicated space and new initiatives designed to enhance collaboration and community projects

Valuing the Humanities

By David Marc

Tolley building photos by Susan Kahn

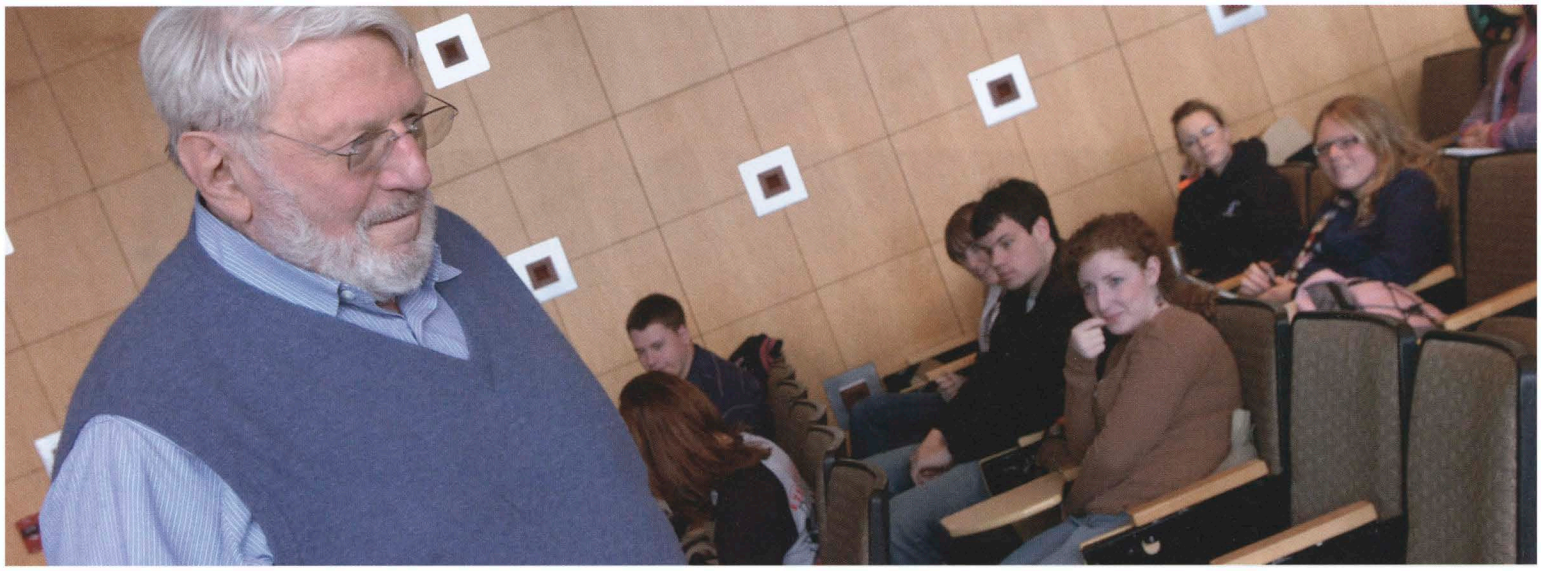
A local African American drum ensemble leads the procession at the dedication ceremony for the Center for the Public and Collaborative Humanities.



Professor Silvio Torres-Saillant

Albert Einstein was an outspoken advocate for an education in which our capacities for understanding the universe and each other are cultivated in equal measures. "A student must learn to understand the motives of human beings—their illusions and their sufferings—to acquire a proper relationship to others and to the community," Einstein told *The New York Times* in 1952. "This is what I have in mind when I recommend the 'humanities.'" Last October, at the dedication of SU's new Center for the Public and Collaborative Humanities, Kathryn Vomero '07, an English and Spanish major in the Renée Crown University Honors Program, reaffirmed Einstein's endorsement of the humanities in a contemporary context. "In a world that places demands on youth to focus on preparing for 'utilitarian' careers, the importance of the humanities is sometimes questioned," said Vomero, who begins doctoral studies in literature at New York University this fall. "Whatever career we may choose, the humanities empower us with empathy, the key to understanding others and our connections to others, which are preconditions for peace and prosperity. To me, those are necessities, not luxuries." »

Procession photo by Steve Sartori; Silvio Torres-Saillant photo by Jainkun Xie



Renowned singer and stage actor Theodore Bikel meets with a religion, literature, and film class this spring. He visited campus with a trio of musicians for a week of inter-ethnic music and conversation.

According to Gerald Greenberg, associate dean of humanities at the College of Arts and Sciences, the new center will serve and enhance what has long been a thriving component of academic and campus life at Syracuse. "There have always been so many interesting activities going on in the humanities at SU that it was often impossible for anyone to know what everyone else was up to," he says. Making a sweeping gesture across the Quad, Greenberg rattles off more than a dozen examples, including the creative writing program's classes for prisoners at the county jail in Jamesville; student interns from women's studies who work with battered women at Vera House on the East Side; the scores of volunteer tutors who have helped make Syracuse a national leader in adult literacy programs; and the African American studies department, whose faculty and students have built and sustained such local institutions as the Community Folk Art Center and the Paul Robeson Performing Arts Company for more than 30 years. "In the past, we lacked a nucleus, a hub, and a facilitator for existing programs, and we needed an incubator for new ideas," Greenberg says.

No longer. Last fall, the University reached a milestone in its historical commitment to humanities education and research with the rededication of the Tolley building as home to the Center for the Public and Collaborative Humanities (CPCH). Tolley, an 1889 campus landmark, was built as a special collections library, and became the University's central administration building in 1907. In 2004, Chancellor Nancy Cantor made a gift of it to the College of Arts and Sciences to create a high-profile focal point for the humanities on campus, a place where values-oriented interdisciplinary learning and creative public engagement can flourish for the benefit of all. After an $8 million renovation led by Dean Cathryn Newton, Tolley reopened in January, prepared to put humanities scholarship into action. "We created the center as a point of interface for scholar-practitioners who are pursuing humane values through their studies of language, literature, philosophy, the fine arts, religion, and history," Newton says. "This is a place for them to enter into germinating dialogues and productive collaborations with colleagues and ideas from every discipline and culture."

Synergy and Outreach

Sharing the red-brick Romanesque gem with the CPCH are offices of five existing programs that emphasize the core academic concerns described by Newton: Judaic studies; Latino-Latin American studies; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender studies; Native American studies; and religion and society. "Each of these interdisciplinary programs has an element of public engagement in its history," Newton says. "Ideas, like people, are bumping into each other in the hallways at Tolley. As a result, public engagement projects are bound to grow in number, sophistication, and impact at the humanities center."

Linda Martín Alcoff, a philosophy professor and chair of the women's studies program, worked with Newton and Greenberg as a principal faculty voice in shaping the center. "The purpose of this place is to invigorate the level of discussion and debate, both within the humanities and across all disciplines," she says. "It will develop its own stand-alone projects, such as bringing guest speakers or faculty fellows-in-residence to Syracuse, but I see it primarily as a valuable partner to existing and new programs, with the energy and savvy to aid their development."

Among the programs CPCH is fostering is the Central New York Humanities Corridor, a partnership of three of the region's premier research universities: SU, Cornell University, and the University of Rochester. Supported by a $1 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon

Photos by Susan Kahn

African American studies professors Kishi Animashaun Ducre (left) and Linda Carty

GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:
The Humanities at Work on Syracuse's South Side

WHEN THE SUBJECT TURNS TO ENVIronmental issues, most people have visions of smog, toxic sludge, and polluted water. But what about these environmental threats to health: a crack house that litters the block with broken glass; a small grocery—the only one in walking distance—that sells nothing but junk food at inflated prices; or a sewage treatment plant that cleans everybody's water, but emits noxious fumes into its neighborhood?

African American studies professors Linda Carty and Kishi Animashaun Ducre are exploring these and related questions as principal investigators of Gender and Environmental Justice, a project they are conducting on Syracuse's South Side with funding from a Ford Foundation grant to the Center for the Public and Collaborative Humanities. The study's goals are to learn how African American mothers and other women in caretaker roles define the term "environment," and to document through photography the visions these women have for environmental improvement. "The project is open-ended," says Ducre, who joined the Syracuse faculty in 2005 after earning a Ph.D. degree in environmental justice at the University of Michigan. "We don't know how they conceptualize their environment. They may focus on the mainstream issues of the discourse, or they may have other issues—problems that policymakers don't usually conceptualize as 'environmental.'"

Threats to health in some neighborhoods might include anything from broken street lamps that foster robbery and rape to a gentrification trend that may force lifelong residents out of affordable housing. "Issues of toxicity have always been associated with communities of color," says Carty, a former African American studies department chair and the author of *And Still We Rise*, a definitive text on Canadian feminism.

The project includes a speakers series that began in April with campus visits by Nellie Hester Bailey, head of the Harlem Tenants Council, and Professor Patricia McFadden of Spelman College. A research symposium on health and environmental justice is set for next spring. At the heart of the study's activity is the Syracuse Community Mapping and Photo Voice Project. "Residents will be asked to take pictures of their environment, including what they see as its positive and negative aspects," Ducre says. "We will put together an exhibition of their work, which will be available to those involved in the revitalization of Syracuse." According to Carty, the research project should yield benefits to both the University and the community. "By bringing together gender studies and environmental studies, we are expanding our curricular horizon," she says. "As we do this, we are giving voices to residents—voices not often heard—concerning the future of their city."

Foundation, the research trio, all members of the Association of American Universities, is pooling access to scholarly resources, opening courses to each other's graduate students, and collaborating on new learning opportunities, including much needed—and hard to find—instruction in such languages as Bengali, Polish, Tamil, and Turkish.

By creating a whole greater than the sum of its parts, the corridor will enhance the work of more than 600 humanities scholars who are members of consortium faculties, as well as thousands of students from around the world who come to Central New York to study with them each year. A cross-institutional committee has articulated six thematic clusters of interest for the corridor's inaugural agenda in 2007-08: cultures and religions (see related story, page 16), the interface between the humanities and science/technology, linguistics, music history/musicology, philosophy, and visual arts and cultures. Greenberg is particularly enthusiastic about the science/technology interface cluster as a means of demonstrating the relevance of the humanities to contemporary concerns. "Two areas we will explore are the ethical aspects of the relationship between global warming and human health, and issues related to sustainable technologies," he says.

Another Tolley tenant, new to campus, is

Spirit of the Place

THE CENTER FOR THE PUBLIC AND Collaborative Humanities provides Syracuse humanities scholars with an intellectual home away from their offices—a place where they can meet, share their passions for ideas and art, and establish through practice a prevailing zeitgeist.

On a steel gray February afternoon, more than a score of critics, historians, linguists, and philosophers make their way past lounges and offices. They stomp slush from their boots and unwrap their greatcoats under the high ceiling of a room whose claims to civilization begin with fine woodwork and walls full of books. "Welcome to the Tuesday Humanities Coffee Hour," says Professor Silvio Torres-Saillant, a founder of the informal group and director of the Latino-Latin American studies program. "This afternoon, Patricia Roylance of the English department will speak on the use of socialist rhetoric in pro-slavery literature of the antebellum South."

Roylance, a new faculty member who completed doctoral work at Stanford in 2005, passes around handouts containing political cartoons and excerpts of period literature. She astounds, confounds, and otherwise makes impact on the group by presenting and giving context to examples of pro-slavery prose and poetry whose writers claim common cause with labor reformers by characterizing them as fellow opponents of industrial capitalism. As intended, the presentation quickly develops into a spirited discussion touching on a freewheeling series of subjects that includes debate on the meaning of "socialism," implications for the rise of German fascism, and critiques of Roylance's premises. Some two hours later, with no obvious note taken of a lake effect event that has been building force outside the north-facing picture window, Torres-Saillant rises to end the session. "These kinds of discussions among scholars of differing backgrounds and interests are as much a part of our research in the humanities as anything that can be accomplished alone at the library," he says. "It is in building communities of knowledge that we may hope to help bring about social transformation."

Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life (IA). A consortium of 80 institutions, IA will make Syracuse its home for at least five years. Its primary mission is to extend the reach of artists and humanities scholars into everyday life through advocacy and support of community partnership projects. Chancellor Cantor was among the founders of Imagining America, which was launched at the University of Michigan in 1999. She remains an active participant, chairing an IA effort to gain due credit and recognition in the academic promotion process for humanities faculty members who put their expertise to work in beneficial community projects. When the opportunity arose to bring an organization to Syracuse whose aims so fully complement and augment the University's Scholarship in Action initiatives, Cantor did not hesitate to pursue this advantage. "I'm honored that Syracuse has been selected as the new home for IA," she says. "As scholars and artists create new ways of making their work vital to the communities we live in, IA provides help in maximizing the impact of their efforts at creative public scholarship, and ensuring that such work is properly valued in higher education."

The CPCH is designed to attract outside funding to Syracuse for humanities projects, and the Ford Foundation was among the first to respond. Two Ford-funded postdoctoral positions in 2007-08 will create opportunities for visiting fellows to study appropriate community engagement projects and to explore possibilities for innovation. "This will help to cultivate a new generation of humanities scholars, at Syracuse and across the country, who regard community projects as no less integral to their professional work than publishing and teaching," Greenberg says. Ford is also supporting a research project conducted by professors Linda Carty and Kishi Animashaun Ducre (see story, page 33).

Photos by Susan Kahn

Dympna Callaghan (right), Dean's Professor in the Humanities and a member of the English department faculty, visits with students outside the humanities center.

Alumni are expressing deeply held views on the importance of the humanities in their educations by contributing to the work of the new center. Len Elman '52 and Elise Barnett Elman '52 made a gift providing $16,000 annually for CPCH activities. "Our lives have been immeasurably enriched by the humanities courses we took at Syracuse more than 50 years ago, particularly the courses in history, English, and philosophy," says Len Elman, who attended Harvard Law School after earning a B.A. degree from the College of Arts and Sciences. "We consider ourselves fortunate and proud to be able to plan support for the broader mission envisioned for the humanities at the new center, a mission that includes publicly engaged scholarship and interaction among scholars, students, community-based organizations, nonprofits, and schools."

The Humanities: What Are They?

If put on the spot to define "the humanities," many people might answer with the old one-liner, "I know 'em when I see 'em." Often confused with its phonetic cousin, *humanism* (a philosophy), sometimes misused as a synonym for the arts, or even innocently mistaken as a plural form for *humanity,* "the humanities" refer to a body of knowledge gained from the human capacity to interpret the experiences and aspirations of others and relate them to oneself. Although perspectives differ, most scholars agree that the aim of humanities study is to develop the capacity to make informed judgments about what beliefs are worth holding and what values are worth adopting. "The humanities develop and examine interpretation of human experience and thought," Dean Newton says. "Intellectually pluralistic, diverse in subject matter and methods, they are our approach to the great questions that make life worth living—the questions concerning values and beliefs."

A geologist by profession, Newton rejects the notion that the humanities and the sciences are somehow oppositional forms of learning, an oversimplification promoted by mass media stereotypes. "I don't think portraying the humanities as 'secondary' or 'inferior' to the sciences is in any way helpful to understanding either," she says. Amos Kiewe, a communication and rhetorical studies professor at the College of Visual and Performing Arts, agrees. "Though often positioned against the scientific paradigm, the humanities, with their emphases on critical, interpretive, and descriptive methods of research, offer qualitative perspectives and contexts that are essential for understanding and valuing scientific research," says Kiewe, who specializes in the analysis of speeches by American presidents. "The humanities offer a window into the world, with all its riches of text, context, words, images, and symbols."

Newton believes the Center for the Public and Collaborative Humanities has arrived at a moment ripe for a reaffirmation of qualitative thinking through public engagement. "Never has there been a point in human history when so many of the great and pressing questions are about values and beliefs, or when knowledge of languages and cultures is so crucial," she says. "Our system of common law is based on interpretation of texts. Free enterprise relies on systems of personal and shared ethics. Representative democracy depends on collaborations of opposing political philosophies. The humanities are about what we think, what we speak, how we see the world, how we define art—subjects of immense scope—and the students know it. The humanities are hot."