First-year students share their visions for the future

By Natalie A. Valentine
When Stacy Nawoichyk was in third grade a police officer gave her class a presentation on safety, drugs, and other issues. Before his lecture, out of curiosity, he calculated their expected year of college graduation. "He told us we would be the Class of 2000 and I remember thinking that was so cool," says Nawoichyk, a Dean's Scholar in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. "Today, I am inspired that I'll be a part of the first generation to enter the workforce in a new century."

Nawoichyk is among more than 2,500 first-year Syracuse University students who hail from 45 states—plus Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands—and 30 other countries. Susan Donovan, associate dean of admissions, has observed these students firsthand as they focus on the uniqueness of their situation. "Many of them have thought a lot about being the Class of 2000," she says. "They are very excited about it and want to make sure they graduate with their class. Certainly, the University won't place any additional pressures on them to graduate because of the year, but there's a sense they are imposing it on themselves."

Banners reading "Class of 2000" greeted Aubree Murray when she moved into Day Hall at the start of the school year. Unlike Nawoichyk, Murray didn't hear any mention of the Class of 2000 until she attended SU's Summer Start, an orientation program for incoming students. "It seems to be in the back of people's minds because it would inevitably come up in the conversations I had," says Murray, a fashion design major from Wilmington, Delaware. "When I think about it, nothing matches having a degree with 2000 printed on it." Murray—whose father, John Murray, graduated from SU in 1966—and a high-school friend keeps a journal titled The Chronicles of 2000. "Four years is close yet very far and we want to document our college life, which at times can be scary," says Murray. "Who knows—maybe it will be a book in the future."

The dawn of a new millennium yields a high level of unpredictability. These students must map out their futures and ready themselves for changes throughout society. "I believe they must prepare themselves for the certainty of change, which, ironically, is one of the constants," says Donovan. "Being SU students, they will be prepared because they have a substantial liberal arts base and professional skills that will help them in life." As a child growing up in Oceanside, New York, Nawoichyk always thought college would be an important part of her life. Seeking the total experience, she does not plan to spend all her time in a studio. "I definitely want to be an artist, but I don't want to just study art," she says. "I want to take philosophy and other subjects that will make me well-rounded."

They have no choice—versatility will be a key to their survival in the 21st century. They must also stay abreast of the latest technologies. Computer geniuses? That won't be necessary, but computer literacy is a must. Technology—an ever-changing and powerful
force in our culture today—will have an even more forceful presence in the year 2000. “In all of our classes we are being bombarded with e-mail, and professors want to make sure we can get around the web,” says Charlotte Diaz, a student in the School of Social Work. “In my school they are working with all aspects of technology, and other colleges are really trying to keep updated in their particular fields.” According to Raymond von Dran, dean of the School of Information Studies, students should focus on being information literate. “Information will be available by using technology—the Internet, World Wide Web, and databases—but the computer is just the tool,” he says. “These students must go beyond that and understand how to use information as an important resource.”

Diaz, born and raised in Puerto Rico, informs other students through political involvement with SU Students for Life, and plans to return to her Caribbean home and take the government by storm. “I think it’s going to be up to us to change many things because as the years go by, old professionals will leave and we’ll be the new authority in the next millennium,” says Diaz, who envisions herself as the future secretary of Puerto Rico’s social services department.

Fortunately, Diaz hasn’t been overwhelmed by the attack of the computer age because her knowledge is well grounded. For other students, however, the trappings of technology can be intimidating, especially for those who travel from afar to obtain an American education. Three percent of SU’s first-year students are from other countries. Along with learning the language and culture, some face additional challenges of mastering technological advances. For Esra Aygin, a native of Kyrenia in Cyprus, computers are frightening, but it’s a fear she’s willing to overcome. “We don’t have that much technology in Cyprus,” she says. “It will be difficult for me to understand it all, but I will learn.” Cyprus is politically divided between the north and south, with the south being more developed. With only one television station in the north, where she lives, Aygin’s goal is to help bring her country into the 21st century. “I came to Newhouse because it is number one in communications,” says the broadcast journalism major. “With my education, I want to be able to improve the standards within my country.”

Wayne Carter is another broadcast journalism major interested in improving standards. This New Orleans teenager is confident that he, along with his classmates, has the energy to positively transform this society. “The Class of 2000 is a unique group with great personalities, focus, and drive,” he says. “There is no doubt in my mind that we can enter the world and clean up everything that has been messed up.” Carter’s career preparation started well before he was accepted into the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. He worked at the local CBS affiliate’s news-and-talk
television show for teenagers called Our Generation, advancing from reporter to anchor to producer. His talent was so welcome that the station invited him to appear on the morning news program. Bradley or Brokaw need not worry—Carter doesn’t necessarily want their jobs. He’s just interested in opening people’s eyes. “This society on the whole is uninformed and it is my job as a journalist to go into this new era and make people aware,” he says. “I want to come on that TV and help John the auto mechanic comprehend what’s going on in Bosnia; I want Jack the 13-year-old kid to love football and Nintendo, but also to understand issues debated by Congress. I want people to be intelligent and gifted enough to realize what’s going on all over the world.”

Having been raised in Burkina-Faso in West Africa and educated in Geneva, Switzerland, Djeneba Diallo also wants to increase students’ cultural awareness. “I’ve always been in an international school where I would learn about other students’ cultures and, in turn, they would learn about mine,” says Diallo. “As an international student, I have different viewpoints that I want to share,” Diallo, a biology major, is interested in practicing medicine in her country, but before leaving SU wants others to recognize and celebrate cultural differences.

“The community here is so national and at times I feel like an intruder,” she says. “On the one hand, I should take the first step in helping people realize all of this, but on the other hand, who am I to tell them what they should know? They have to want to do this for themselves.”

Again, these students don’t have a choice—they must think globally. The future is tied to multiculturalism as the boundaries of their education expand beyond the classroom. “They have an authentic global laboratory right here on campus,” says Donovan. “They learn from each other because they are all very different. In their differences, they become more sensitive to one another.”

Even as students strive to celebrate diversity, be technologically attuned, and keep up with the Joneses and Jetsons, they do yearn for consistency. Although the next millennium will bring numerous changes, many things will stay the same. Stephen Wendel listened to his high school physics teacher discuss how his generation would be the first to live on the moon. Although intrigued, Wendel aims to stay on Earth and follow in his father’s footsteps, not Neil Armstrong’s. “I just want to land a decent job where I can support a family, have children and a dog, and be as happy with my job as my dad is right now,” says the Mesa, Arizona, native. Wendel, dually enrolled in the School of Management and Newhouse, intends to use marketing and public relations to land work in advertising or television. Either way, carrying on the values he was raised with remains a priority. “I am grateful because there will be a lot more options and possibilities for me,”
he says. "But the year 2000 doesn’t mean that I have to change; unless, of course, it’s for the better."

Another young man planning to follow in his father’s footsteps is Alfredo Valdivia. “My father is a civil engineer and he had a lot of influence on my major at Syracuse,” he says. Originally from Peru, Valdivia has lived in White Plains, New York, for the last three-and-a-half years, and is still adjusting to the states and familiarizing himself with college life. "This is all very different from my country," he says. "People are more relaxed in my country."

Here, time is a problem; there is always the pressure of time.” Outside class, Valdivia splits his time among two professional engineering societies, Army ROTC, and recreational swimming. "College is about education and social life,” he says. "I am discovering how to continue my learning beyond books. I am also understanding how to interact with people in different environments.” Valdivia challenges himself daily by approaching someone who is unlike him—a different race, gender, attitude, or behavior—"someone with a different approach to life,” he says. Claiming that he’ll never stop studying people, Valdivia is open-minded and always expects something new. For the year 2000, his contributions will focus on continuing to build this society, literally. "My dream,” he says, "is to have my own construction company erecting anything: bridges, buildings, and roads."

These students, like their classmates, are excited about college and, more importantly, what their contributions to society will be in the year 2000 and beyond. "In their own way, they represent the richness of the University,” says Donovan. As a future engineer, Valdivia has prepared a road map into the 21st century for himself, his classmates, and everyone. "It was once said that distance equals rate times time. If you think about it, distance is how far you are going to get in your life; rate is the amount of energy you commit to your goals; and time is how much you spend on what you want to accomplish," he says. "If you know how to do it, and you have the desire to do it, then just do it!"