

ENVOY

A PUBLICATION OF THE TOWNSEND HARRIS ALUMNI
ASSOCIATION



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THHS UPDATES

- The THHS Equity and Access Team, in partnership with the THAA, has created a speaker series. Speaker #3 was Ms. Lindsey Duel, Sexuality Educator & LGBTQ Youth Program Director of Generation Q. For the recordings of previous speakers, please check out the Townsend Harris YouTube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw62Z5p1EriTWmK0Fe9qkFA>.
- Ms. Graf secured a grant to install a gender equality mural. We look forward to the mural progressing!
- The THHS Student Union hosted several events to celebrate and honor Black History Month. Some of the virtual events include a Black Health Summit, a panel of Black authors and artists discussing the impact of the diaspora, and many more.
- The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) has named Townsend Harris High School one of the recipients of its 2021 Great Books Giveaway. The library will receive a share of more than \$20,000 worth of books, audiobooks, and other materials donated to YALSA from publishers and producers in 2020.
- Despite being remote, the school has committed to bringing students together by holding numerous virtual social activities; for example, on February 9, the school held a “Virtual Speed Friendshipping Event”.
- In February, the Townsend Harris Ethics Bowl teams competed in the NYC Regional Ethics Bowl and secured a win against 38 teams from 16 high schools in New York and New Jersey. One team will now advance to represent NJ and NY at Nationals. The Ethics Bowl is an academic competition where students discuss real-life issues and analyze ethical dilemmas.

CLASS NOTES

- **Arthur Wouk** (1939) designed missile guidance systems, analog and digital computers. He taught computer science for many years before his retirement in 1989. Now, he says he is “occupied with being very old!”
- **Daniel Lew** (1988) continues his work as the Chief Public Defender in Northeast Minnesota working on justice reform, holistic public defense and reducing mass incarceration.
- **Francesca Momplaisir** (1991) recently published her book, *My Mother’s House*, a thriller about the complex underbelly of the immigrant American dream and the dangerous ripple effect one person’s traumas can have on the lives of others.
- **Jessica Rodriguez** (1991) is Chief Marketing Officer and President of Entertainment of Univision.
- **Bernadette Crespo Stark** (1994) is currently living in Western Massachusetts. She is the mother of two amazing boys and is the Director of the Student Legal Services Office at the University of MA, Amherst.
- **Jason Prasso** (2001) is a physician at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Hospital in West Hollywood.
- **John Santucci** (2007) is a Senior Editorial Producer based in Washington for ABC News working on daily and long term political coverage.
- **Louis Calabro** (2011) is an education and labor attorney in Garden City in Long Island. He reports that he will always cherish his memories of Townsend Harris and still keeps up with a close group of around 20 friends from high school.
- **Rebekah Jones** (2016) on being awarded an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship. The NSFGRFP recognizes and supports outstanding graduate students in NSF-supported STEM disciplines who are pursuing research-based masters and doctoral degrees at accredited US institutions.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: NEIL DRUMMING

Tell me a little about yourself.

I was born and raised in Jamaica, Queens. My parents are from the South, and, I ended up wanting to be a writer most of my life. [There were] a lot of books around that I didn't actually see [my parents] reading, but they were in the house, and so it just kind of got me started. I was a big TV kid...I think maybe a little bit before Townsend Harris, leading up to that point, I watched, like, seven hours of television a day which seems absurd now to think about it...that seems like that would have ruined my life, but I think it was very helpful.

How did you end up at Townsend Harris?

I think my best friend--David Meyer who is, a very smart, well-to-do kid from Hollis Hills--knew about Townsend Harris. His parents were like, you know, "I think David's going to Townsend Harris. I think Neil would really like it there." Like I said, my parents were from South Carolina; my mom didn't even finish high school, and my dad barely finished [so] they didn't know what the educational system was like or how to get ahead. But they listened. My mom listened to whoever, [to] any kind of rumor, or [to] anything she heard about a better school. She would try to find it and get us into it. I think that's how I ended up there.

What is the greatest lesson you learned at THHS??

I was kind of a nerd. I liked science fiction and stories, short stories and stuff like that. The teachers were like, "Do it!" "Oh, you want to draw a comic book for your elective, yeah, okay." "You can take trips to the Cloisters and learn about knights and come back and make a comic book out of it." Everyone was super accepting of all of my interests and nerdiness. They were encouraging. Well, I had one friend actually passed away, who I was in school with, who years later we would always talk about Townsend Harris, and he would say "We were a nerdy school" and "You know, we weren't cool" and I was like,



Neil Drumming
THHS Class of '92

who cares? I liked being able to pursue whatever weird thing I was into being and having teachers that were like, "Sure."

Is there any teacher that greatly influenced you while at THHS? How?

Um, absolutely. I don't know if he's still there but Mr Wagner. He was a science teacher of some kind, maybe bio, and he was so weird. And he just would do funny voices and he would let you go off book, and just talk and listen to everyone's theories and I was wrestling in high school with being a Jehovah's Witness and, had a lot of conflicting ideas about God, like religion versus science and he was very encouraging. [There were] all the writing teachers, Ms Cowen and Ms Michlewitz. And then there was a Latin teacher named Mr Ferguson who was just, like, fun to watch, you know...he would do all kinds of funny voices and, like, make the class laugh because Latin is a pretty boring subject, but he would sort of make it very exciting. Yeah, I think it was all the teachers who seemed to be having a lot of fun with the work they were doing, you know. But Mr. Wagner was the one, for sure, for me. Can I add one more thing? There was a French teacher, [Madame D'Souza]. I'm dying to remember her name, but she was Dutch. That was the thing. She wasn't French, she was Dutch, and she had short hair and glasses. And she was like, I'm going to do a French trip for anyone who wants to go. I took French, and I only took it because I thought it was the smart class, like Spanish would've been so much better. But there was this notion that the smart kids took French. I don't know why we thought that, but I took French and I wanted to go on the French trip because the girl I liked was going...She canceled. Everyone was older than me on the trip and they were trying to sneak into each other's rooms, drink wine and do all this stuff. And all I did was hang out with the French teacher and her son. I have pictures of me and this little boy just hanging out. But [it's a great example of how] everything was wrapped up together. It was like girls and French and being in France and seeing art and drinking a café au lait and eating a croissant for the first time and realizing my dad understood something about why it would be helpful to go.

What do you miss most about THHS?

You know, I wish I could say the education, which was great and I could talk forever about that. But honestly, I feel like Townsend Harris was the first time that I was able to really be social and find people who were like me, you know, who had the same kind of

personality or interests that I had. And so the thing I miss about Townsend Harris is ...so we had the bridge year. The [Parsons Boulevard] building that I went to was like a 20, maybe 15-minute walk [from the Queens College campus], the thing I miss the most is walking with my friends to the building on Queens College. Going to Queen's College classes and in the middle, playing pool with my friends at the Queens College Student Union ...Just feeling, not grown up, but being adult enough and having agency over my life and having friends and knowing I was doing well. It was a crazy time, you know, being a teenager with crazy hormones. I was terrible with girls and stuff like that. But like I felt like in some kind of control, it was nice. I think the thing about Harris was, it was encouraging. The teachers were encouraging. Everybody was like, "You can do it." And I have good friends in my life right now from Harris and I know they feel the same way.

Where has life taken you since you graduated THHS/What are you doing now?

I always wanted to be a writer and THHS really encouraged it, and got me thinking that I could be a writer. For most of my life, I have done that in some variety. I was a magazine journalist; I wrote pop culture stuff like Entertainment Weekly; I wrote about movies and TV. And then I branched out and wrote and directed a film that came out in 2013. Then I went back to writing magazine stuff and writing for websites. Then just by a fluke, I ended up as a producer on a podcast called *This American Life*, my first time doing radio audio. I ended up on probably the most popular podcast in America. I produced there for five years. Producing just means writing stories for the radio...and I did some on-air. I was the first African American to host the show. *This American Life* had a sister company called Serial that made the podcast Serial, the most downloaded podcast of all time. I moved from *This American Life* to Serial because I had done some editing of their shows including a very popular show called *S Town*. When I say editing, we all edit each other's shows, which means we listen and make comments and make notes and help people finish. I became Serial's managing editor. The company is kind of small. There are two founders and then the managing editor is the third person in line. The New York Times bought Serial. So now, technically, I work for Serial and The New York Times, and I am a podcast producer. I make podcasts. I staff them, help write them, and help edit them.

How have you implemented the sentiment of the Ephebic Oath into your life since your time at THHS?

Do better or leave the world better than you found it? I try to be a presence in the world. I'm not like a do-gooder. I'm more like a person that is trying to be interesting and put interesting things in the world and put interesting stories in the world. You could say it's positive to do a radio story about a community that is protesting, like I've done stuff like that. But I'm not altruistic. I have a job. My job is to tell stories. It is my life's work. And if good stories help, if good stories are good for people, then that's the degree to which I help anyone.

What is a recent accomplishment that is meaningful to you?

Well, this is pretty relevant to Townsend Harris and people who would read about Townsend Harris and students and parents. I was the managing editor and an editor at Serial during the release of Nice White Parents, which was the podcast about inequity in high schools in New York City schools. And it is an examination of the power that white parents have in shaping the way schools work. And it was reported by probably one of the top three grades radio producers of all time, Chana Joffe-Walt, who's also a good friend of mine and probably the reason I'm at this job. And it's just like an amazing achievement. It's a really lovely piece of work. I didn't write it. I edited it and made sure that it got done, and I am just really proud to be a part of it, whatever part I am of it.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

I just keep thinking about that building, the new building, as this thing that I like never quite experienced. And then the old building is like this thing that is so small, like every time I'm in Queens, I want to go back and look at it. You know, like high school for everyone is probably the same. Nothing I'm about to say is special, but it was just so many experiences crammed into four years, so many different parts of your life. Like I was fighting with my dad all the time. I was like wrestling with religion all the time. I was trying to understand girls at the same time. I was trying to understand how to write a good story, trying to learn how to type. I was trying to understand Latin, like, you know what I mean? Like, you're doing so many things at once, and I understand why it can be overwhelming. And I mean, Townsend Harris was hard and I worked so hard. It's hard to explain why high school is so important. But, like that was, I remember that

everything important was happening; I felt like everything was important.

How can other alumni and current THHS students connect with you? Do you have a LinkedIn or website you are willing to share?

I'm trying to be more active on LinkedIn so I am reachable on LinkedIn. I am also reachable by email for journalists and writers. So that does not mean everybody, but I want to be available to people as someone who could help. Those are my areas of expertise, and I am willing to give advice. So my email addresses Neil@serialpodcast.org. Please don't abuse it.

THAA SPEAKS: BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Black History Month originates from celebrations as early as 1915, but was officially nationally recognized in the US as of 1970. Since its adoption, February has stood as a celebration of Black Americans, their contributions to American society, and American prosperity that has come from Black struggles. The importance of such a celebration cannot be overstated. Understanding Black history—beyond slavery, racism and injustice—is a vital part of being an informed human being. After all, Black history is not just Black history. Black history is American history. And, although, the majority of Blacks are not immigrants, the Black fight for justice and equality in America has paved the way for other people of color (POC) in the US. Consider the many anti-immigration laws of the 20th century against Asian, Mexican, and Mediterranean groups. Or, the quota system meant to "preserve the idea of American homogeneity" that unfairly prioritized certain European groups; limited Southern and Eastern European and African groups; and fully prohibited Arab and Asian POC from immigrating to the US (The Immigration Act of 1917 or 39 Stat. 874 and The Immigration Act of 1924 or 43 Stat. 153). During this same time frame, Black Americans were fighting a war within their own nation for basic human rights. The Civil Rights movement exposed major injustices and raised questions around the US being considered a white nation. Soon after the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was passed, which removed the quota system, substituting it with immigration law that instead disallowed the

process of distributing visas based on the recipient's race, nationality, or sex (Barber, "How the civil rights movement opened the door to immigrants of color").

Now in 2021, as our country seems to be struggling to escape the grips of white supremacy that has always been at our core, it is more important than ever to celebrate Black history and the interconnectedness of the experiences of POC in the US. The Townsend Harris Alumni Association acknowledges the importance of this month to the US as a whole, but also to our mission and to the diverse Townsend Harris High School community. As an institution that aims to facilitate accessible, equitable education for NYC students—especially Black students and other students of color who have historically been disempowered—we fully dedicate ourselves to doing the work to educate ourselves and our processes to make this association a more informed, equal and dedicated organization.

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THAA SPEAKS: TEEN DATING VIOLENCE MONTH

February marks Teen Dating Violence Month. As an association that aims to fight for and support current and former THHS students of all ages, we understand the importance of spreading awareness about this month. The THAA stands against dating, domestic and sexual assault in all forms. Here are some resources we have shared this month for both current students and alumni who may be experiencing any violence in their relationships.

RESOURCES/HOTLINES FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT

NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT TELEPHONE
HOTLINE: 800.656.4673

[HTTPS://WWW.NCTSN.ORG/RESOURCES/TEEN-SEXUAL-ASSAULT-INFORMATION-TEENS](https://www.nctsn.org/resources/teen-sexual-assault-information-teens)

NEW YORK CITY ALLIANCE AGAINST SEXUAL
ASSAULT: (212) 514-7233

NEW YORK STATE DOMESTIC & SEXUAL
VIOLENCE HOTLINE: 1-800-942-6906

DAY ONE:
[HTTPS://WWW.DAYONENY.ORG/OUR-SERVICES](https://www.dayoneny.org/our-services)

If current THHS students need to report or discuss any instances of sexual harassment or abuse, feel free to reach out to **Mr. McClary, Ms. Graf, Ms. Loew, or Ms. York**. You can also reach out to any member of the staff or faculty. Email members via the THHS website by searching for the staff member in the directory: <https://www.thhs.qc.edu/apps/staff/>

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION UPDATES

- **Do Better Together Committee** - Unfortunately, our open event scheduled for February 17th had to be postponed. We will update you shortly with a new time.
- Working with the THHS PTA, Vincent Yuen (Class of 1989, a former member of the THAA Board of Directors) presented a workshop about interviewing strategies to students and parents in January. Outlining what is needed for a successful college or job interview, this workshop has been a favorite and has been given multiple times over the past few years.
- Michael Byc (Class of 2007, member of the Board of Directors) met with the student club, The Green Team, to discuss the state-of-the-art and happenings in the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation where he works as a Project Management Professional.
- THAA once again received a \$25,000 grant from the Henry Nias Foundation for college scholarships for graduating seniors. The Nias Foundation has been providing grants to Townsend Harris students for over 30 years.



THAA Communications Committee

Jillissa Drayton

Selina Lee

Debra Michlewitz

Craig Slutzkin

Additional Reporting by

Mehrose Ahmad

Yanique Fletcher

Sumaita Hasan

Kea Richardson