There’s more good news inside!

- Bragging Rights ...................................... p. 2
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Students from UH-Downtown are working alongside researchers at Baylor College of Medicine’s Human Genome Sequencing Center (HGSC) to analyze the genetic make-up of pathogens that can – and do – kill humans. For UH-Downtown Scholars Academy students, it is an opportunity to participate in some of the most cutting-edge research done anywhere in the world.

“It’s very exciting,” says UH-Downtown Associate Professor of Biology and Biochemistry Akif Uzman. “This is the kind of work that can open up a career and make these students sought after. Also, the students literally take what they’ve learned in their textbooks and lectures on cell biology, biochemistry, immunology, and microbiology into a unique research setting.”

A genome is the entire DNA of an organism, including the genes that carry the information crucial to making proteins necessary for that organism. It is the proteins that determine how an organism looks and functions.

Analysis of a genome requires sequencing and annotating the DNA, followed by analysis of the biochemical pathways revealed by the annotation.

Uncovering Deadly Secrets

Associate Professor Uzman and Genome Project

Akif Uzman, associate professor of Biology and Biochemistry, is closely associated with the Baylor College of Medicine’s Human Genome Sequencing Center project. When an annotation project comes up, Uzman puts out flyers through the UH-Downtown Scholars Academy to recruit UHD students. Then he trains recruits to do the annotation work and meets regularly with them so that everyone can go over each other’s work. The results delineate how genes are organized in the genome. Initially, Uzman welcomed these duties both to help UHD students and as a means of training himself on certain areas that applied to his own research into how genes are regulated in development. Now he has become one of Baylor’s senior annotators. “The work,” he declares, “has taken on a life of its own!”

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And the money is coming not only from a UH-Downtown salary. Mayer was recently named one of 14 international recipients of the 2007 Jane N. Ryland Fellowship Program by EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit association for higher education information technology professionals seeking to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology. Since 1998, Ryland Fellowships have been awarded annually to recognize contributions and enhance professional development opportunities for people in information resources leadership roles in higher education. These competitively-based awards recognize a combination of past achievement, commitment to higher education and information technology, potential benefit to the individual and the institution, and financial need. The fellowship award will allow Mayer to participate in the 2007 EDUCAUSE Institute Leadership Program in Boulder, Colorado this summer. Mayer is the second Texas recipient of the Ryland Fellowship.

“I’m very excited and honored to have been selected as a Ryland Fellow and look forward to exploring new ideas with colleagues at the EDUCAUSE Institute Leadership Program,” Mayer says.

Hossein Shahraki, associate vice president of Information Technology and UHD primary representative to EDUCAUSE, applauds the award.

“I am pleased to see that EDUCAUSE, the premier education technology group in the nation, has recognized the valuable contributions Erin has made to this university and the IT profession by awarding her the prestigious Ryland Fellowship, through which she will take part in an advanced technology leadership program,” says Shahraki.

Mayer has made valuable contributions, indeed, and continues to do so. She has been indispensable in UH-Downtown’s migration from WebCT to WebCT Vista Course Management System, which is a major upgrade in functionality as well as in technical infrastructure and application environment. She has also worked closely with the group making the banner upgrade from Version 6 to Version 7. She spearheaded the implementation of Apressions, a new voice mail system that is integrated with our current Exchange email system, and she is working with a broad range of managers to implement a UH-Downtown website redesign. Then there is the selective data backup service for desktop/laptop computers, the business continuity plan, online registration, and the laptop checkout pilot program. These are but a few of the contributions that she has made to many of the information technology systems that impact employees, students, vendors, and information technology, potential benefit to the individual and the institution, and financial need. (continued)

Janice Nath Assumes Chair of the Consortium of State Organizations for Texas Teacher Education

Associate Professor Janice Nath was elected Chair of the Consortium of State Organizations for Texas Teacher Education (CSTOE). Her tenure as the Executive Board will help to promote quality programs in teacher education. One of her roles with CSTOE is to bring the various teacher organizations together or the CSTOE annual conference. She co-chairs the consortium from her work with member organization Texas Credentials for Teacher Certification Testing (TCCT), where she has served in many capacities including President, Past President, and (presently) Treasurer. Her broad experiences will benefit CSTOE as it works toward its goals.

Richard Sebastiani Develops Model Sports League

Richard Sebastiani, director of sports and fitness at the UHD Student Life Center, solved a problem so well that others are using his model. After trying without success to find a league for the women’s volleyball team that was not cost and time prohibitive, he created the Houston Area Collegiate Volleyball League (HACL). Along with UHDwomen, the charter members are Rice University, North Texas College, and the University of Houston. The success of the HACL has spawned the creation of club leagues in a variety of sports. Sebastiani later launched the Houston Area Collegiate Soccer League in 2004. That fall, the UHDwomen’s Women’s Volleyball Team took home the HACLX trophy.
The O’Kane Gallery hosted the important exhibition, *Pride of the Southside* in Retrospect, January 17 through March 2, with over 20 works featured. UHD received a $5,900 Houston Arts Alliance grant for the show. Buller’s paintings are described as “clean and opulent, with a terrible power.”

A collaboration of San Antonio artists Vincent Valdez and Alex Rubio, *Pride of the Southside*, offers a new series of works depicting locations, memories and markings of San Antonio’s SouthSide community. The exhibition opens March 15 and runs through April 25. Valdez describes the work as images “reflecting the collision of the modern world with the old [SouthSide area] high school.” Some variant of the show will move to San Antonio’s Museo Alameda-Smithsonian following the O’Kane exhibition.

High Art, a celebration of art produced by Houston area high school students, returns to the O’Kane Gallery at the request of local schools. It will run from May 3 to May 10.

Continuing the highly successful Annual Women in Jazz series, UHD-Downtown Civic Jazz Orchestra Program Director Robert Wilson is developing the 10th event in the series for spring 2007. The concerts feature noted female jazz players from the Houston area and beyond.

Last year’s concert played to a sizable and enthusiastic crowd at Scott Gertner’s Sky Bar. The play opens on March 31. Pogue earlier directed A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Macbeth for the UHD-Downtown theater department.

### UHD Internship Program Provides Rewarding Work Experiences

When Chris Bell gave a strong performance during the Texas gubernatorial debate, Anisa Adams beamed with pride. An intern for Bell’s campaign, she had helped him prepare for the event.

Dr. David Branham knows the power of these internship programs. He co-chairs UH-Downtown’s Social Sciences internship initiative with Dr. Susan Henney. Before they started the program, UH-Downtown social sciences students interested in internships had to find their own positions. Now, a variety of experiences are available to students.

Branham spent five years in a post-doctoral program directing the University of Houston Center for Public Policy (CPP). When setting up the UH-Downtown program, he realized that assignments and scheduling could become a nightmare with two major programs operating, so he chose to unite the UH-Downtown internship initiative with the CPP.

“CPP Associate Director Renee Cross has helped us tremendously in developing our program,” he says. “Training with her has given us more credibility. She knows almost every legislator in the area.”

Not every intern is assigned to a legislative office; some work with public action committees. Although much of their work is administrative, Branham tries “to get students involved in more meaningful activities.”

Some interns, for example, attended City Council meetings with Councilman Adrian Garcia; Shirley Saulsberg, a Veteran’s Affairs intern, visited homeless vets. Internships can lead to bigger opportunities. After working for Mayor Bill White, Adrianna Rodriguez landed a job with Congresswoman Shelly Sekula-Gilbs.

“Anisa got an outstanding review from the Bell campaign,” Branham says. “If he had won, she would have had her pick of jobs in Austin.”
he saw his mother struggle 16 hours a day as his family attempted to survive in post-war Vietnam. Chau Hoang, the student representative at UH-Downtown’s Fall 2006 Commencement, shared his story with nearly 1,000 candidates and their families at Minute Maid Park in December.

Motivated by his mother’s determination, Hoang earned his first degree from UH-Downtown in computer science and returned to follow his dream of becoming a doctor. His second degree in biology gained his acceptance into UTMB, the UT School of Medicine in Galveston.

It was a different but equally difficult struggle for 31-year-old Benny Palomo who suffered severe brain trauma and bodily injury after a devastating motorcycle accident in 2000. Benny awoke from a month-long coma only minutes after his paternal grandfather peacefully passed away from cancer in the same hospital. Still facing an uphill battle, he and his family felt blessed, nonetheless.

Palomo had to relearn the most basic tasks, like walking and talking. Five years later he re-enrolled at UH-Downtown. This fall he graduated with a BBA in International Business. His mother says, “I’m very proud that he hung in there and didn’t give up.”

It was more of a fairy tale for UH-Downtown’s oldest graduate this term, A. Diane Smith and her daughter Roxxane Merricks, who also graduated with a BS in Sociology. At 62 years of age, Diane now must choose between retirement from a successful real estate career or pursuit of a master’s degree in psychology. The “youngest” daughter of octogenarians Lloyd and Virginia Smith, Diane is the last of their children to graduate from college. The Smiths traveled from Luling, Texas to celebrate by watching their daughter and granddaughter receive their degrees.

For information on Alumni Giving please call: 713-221-8045 or email: alumni@dt.uh.edu.

Passion for Education Celebrated at the Red Rose Ball

Mayor Bill and Andrea White have a passionate history of support for education and belief in Houston and its people. They will be honored this year at the 26th Annual Red Rose Ball.

Andrea White serves on the board of Houston A+ Challenge, a public school reform program working with secondary schools in Harris County. She and Mayor White also created Expectation Graduation, a mentoring and re-enrollment program designed to boost local graduation rates.

“It would be wonderful if we could provide access to a higher education to all kids who are qualified without regard to their ability to pay,” Andrea White said in support of scholarships for UH-Downtown students.

Mayor Bill and Andrea White will be honored at the 2007 Red Rose Ball.

The Whites and the Jileses will join UH-Downtown President Max Castillo and Dr. Rosario Martínez-Castillo as they recognize 25 outstanding UH-Downtown students for their academic performance, leadership skills and commitment to service both at the university and in the community. Scholars receive $3,000 for the 2007-08 academic year, essentially covering tuition for two semesters.

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Folks behind the scenes at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo (HLSR) know Kyle Pentecost’s work and recognize his contributions to the annual event. Yep, in his spare time, Pentecost is a dedicated Life Member of the HLSR. He serves on two committees: the Junior Swine Auction Committee and the Gatekeepers Committee.

Furthermore, he serves as manager of product sponsorship of the HLSR’s Cut Above Cooking Team at the World Championship BBQ Cook Off. Yum!

What’s New? Send a Note!

Update your former UHD classmates on your life by submitting an item for the “Alumni Notes” in New Horizons. We’ll also post your item in the alumni section of UHD’s website. You can e-mail directly from the website or send a note to alum@uhd.edu. We’ll also post your item to Alumni Relations at UHD, One Main Street, Suite 990-S, Houston, Texas 77002.

Alumni Notes

Colin Fletcher

Colin Fletcher (’05, Management), who landed his fulltime job with BMC Software in late 2005, moved up the corporate ladder last spring when he was promoted to Solutions Marketing Manager. “It’s a big leap in responsibility and opportunity,” he said. Fletcher helps create the messaging, advertising materials and website content for identity management solutions. While keeping all these balls in the air, Fletcher is also finishing up his MBA at Rice. He will be traveling on an educational trip to China this coming January, where he plans to meet up with a fellow UH-Downtown alum, Tyan Cao (’05, Finance). Both were BMC Software interns during their student days at UH-Downtown and have stayed in touch.

Mary Anne Fogarty

Mary Anne Fogarty (’06, English), teaches 9th grade English at Langham Creek High School in the Cy-Fair ISD. This is the school from which her grown son graduated and the one where her daughter will be a senior this year. She is also continuing her classes toward an M.Ed. in the evening and should graduate in May 2006. While still at UH-Downtown, Fogarty did freelance writing and published in New Horizons. “I enjoyed writing for New Horizons,” she says. “Who knew?” Some day I may be teaching a high school journalism class and the New Horizons publication would be one of the examples that we could study.”

Steve Tucker

Steve Tucker (’99, Computer Science) currently works for Continental Airlines. He also started a software development company, SharkByte, which creates software solutions for business and pleasure. Gamers will be interested in the work of this company. SharkByte is focused presently on a game engine, TiburonGX, and a game, M.O.S., geared toward massive multiplayer roles. To support gaming, SharkByte started the first Houston IGDA (International Game Developer Association) chapter. This special interest group serves by providing a forum for game developers/artists/enthusiasts to interact and share ideas.

Gwen Vastine

Gwen Vastine (’00, Applied Mathematical) graduated from UH-Downtown at the tender age of 46. She presently teaches algebra, geometry, and precalculus to grades 7 through 12 at Humble Christian School. “I am the math department,” she says, “and I follow my kids year after year, so they can never tell me last year’s teacher didn’t teach us that. If they don’t like math, I tell them not to worry because I promise to love math enough for both of us.”

Vastine can handle a small private school’s poor pay because she graduated from UH-Downtown with no debt. “I’m in love with what I do, and I am so grateful to UH-Downtown for helping me with scholarships and job opportunities on campus that allowed me to pay my own way.”

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When South Texas Junior College (STJC) was launching its real estate program in 1974, Kyle Pentecost had just started school there. Today, STJC, acquired by the UH System so many years ago, is now the University of Houston-Downtown. Pentecost is a successful real estate broker but also a telecommunications consultant. Reflecting on his educational experience, he says, “UHD brought me in people from the business world to teach courses. They know what they’re talking about, so, when you graduate, you know what you’re doing.”

Pentecost graduated cum laude in 1978 – the first UH-Downtown student to receive a bachelor’s degree in business. He continued his relationships with UH-Downtown for several years, teaching real estate courses at night.

Now, Pentecost is not only a real estate broker but also a telecommunications consultant. Reflecting on his educational experience, he says, “UHD brought me in people from the business world to teach courses. They know what they’re talking about, so, when you graduate, you know what you’re doing.”

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“South Texas Junior College was a two-year school. I would have had to transfer to complete my education,” he recalls, “but there weren’t any other real estate programs in Texas back then.”

Some courses in UH-Downtown’s fledgling program were so new, though, that instead of attending class, Pentecost was assigned to write “mini-theses.” He would meet frequently with a proctor to discuss his progress.

Those studies gave Pentecost a “good business background and well-rounded knowledge of real estate terms, law and finance,” he remembers. They also helped prepare him to earn his real estate broker’s license.

Calendar of Events

Women’s Month
March 2006

Science and Engineering
Fair of Houston
March 22-24

Destination UHD
Campus Open House
March 24

O’Kane Theatre
Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare
March 30 – April 7

One Main Event
March 31

O’Kane Gallery
Pride of the SouthSide: Vincent Valdez and Alex Rubio
March 22 – April 26

Faculty Awards
Program
April 3

Ed’s Bayou Cleanup
Ponding – should have next week

Red Rose Ball
April 13

Culture on the Bayou
April 20

Student Research Conference
April 21

International Business Association
Banquet
April 21

Graduate Project
Exhibition - Urban Education/College of Public Service
May 1

Academic Awards
May 2

O’Kane Gallery
UHD Student Exhibition
May 3 – May 12

O’Kane Theatre
Drama Trip to Greece
May 12-22

Spring Commencement
May 13

Summer in England and Scotland Study Abroad Program
May 14 – 23

Alum Attended Both South Texas Junior College and UH-Downtown

Kyle Pentecost (BBA ’78) makes time during his busy day to sit on an several Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo committees.
New Horizons presents a series of articles focused upon technology in the workplace, beginning with thoughts about Dr. David Weinberger’s recent comments at UH-Downtown concerning Net neutrality:

Outside the Net
By Gall Kellersberger

We are at a crossroads,” warns Dr. David Weinberger, Fellow at Harvard’s prestigious Berkman Center, as the UH-Downtown audience in the Willeminah Culbertson auditorium sits mesmerized. Weinberger spoke last October through the auspices of University College and the UHD Culture Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, about the tool we all hold in our hands— the Internet.

His conclusion is that Net neutrality is in danger of being compromised. Companies like AT&T, Verizon, and Time Warner that provide Internet services are lobbying for the ability to limit their offerings. Thus, a customer of Verizon, for example, might not be able to access a search engine like Ask.com that Verizon chose to make unavailable. Or, as happened last April, Time Warner AOL users were blocked from accessing any emails that mentioned the word “AOL.”

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AT&T customer might be blocked to limit the Internet sites provided to their customers. Had it passed, AT&T to honor the principle that Net neutrality and does not succumb to commercial interests.

“I’m not opposed to business,” she says, “but I think the Net is like a commons—in this case, the public information commons. That should be a public space, not just an exclusively commercial space.”

Many people (and certainly most librarians) agree, but Robert Jarrett, associate dean of Humanities and Social Sciences and associate professor of professional writing and technical communications at UH-Downtown, has been following this debate with interest and sees rough times ahead.

One of the problems worrying him is that the rollout of high-speed services to United States citizens has lagged significantly in comparison to the rollout across the Internet as a whole. Vint Cerf (Google), who codereveloped the Internet’s backbone protocols, along with Dave Farber (Carnegie Mellon), considered the grandfather of the Internet, both agree that Net neutrality in essence will make it very difficult to roll out improved Internet services in the U.S.

Most Internet users are not going to be happy sticking for the next ten years with the Internet we presently have because it cannot possibly keep up with the demands that will be placed upon it. It will slow us down, impede business, and, yes, impede education.

On the other hand, no one wants to take a research topic to the W. I. Dykes Library only to discover that large portions of the subject cannot be researched because, although the latest data is available, the university cannot afford the large fees required to access that privileged, high-speed content. It would not be much different from going to the library today and paying a hefty fee for each article or book accessed.

Networking researchers say it is not realistic to expect providers to handle massive amounts of data for free.

Presently, the Internet, like libraries, is accessible and free. If corporations take control, the entire dynamic of what the Internet means, in particular to academic institutions, will likely change. If corporations do not take control, some other solution to high-speed broadband rollout must be found. Otherwise many of us will find ourselves outside the Net.

To learn more about the issue, visit www.cnet.com, www.saveane.net and www.technologyreview.com/infoarch/18083

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We are at a crossroads,” warns Dr. David Weinberger, Fellow at Harvard’s prestigious Berkman Center, as the UH-Downtown audience in the Willeminah Culbertson auditorium sits mesmerized. Weinberger spoke last October through the auspices of University College and the UHD Culture Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, about the tool we all hold in our hands— the Internet.

His conclusion is that Net neutrality is in danger of being compromised. Companies like AT&T, Verizon, and Time Warner that provide Internet services are lobbying for the ability to limit their offerings. Thus, a customer of Verizon, for example, might not be able to access a search engine like Ask.com that Verizon chose to make unavailable. Or, as happened last April, Time Warner AOL users were blocked from accessing any emails that mentioned the word “AOL.”

AT&T customer might be blocked to limit the Internet sites provided to their customers. Had it passed, AT&T to honor the principle that Net neutrality and does not succumb to commercial interests.

“I’m not opposed to business,” she says, “but I think the Net is like a commons—in this case, the public information commons. That should be a public space, not just an exclusively commercial space.”

Many people (and certainly most librarians) agree, but Robert Jarrett, associate dean of Humanities and Social Sciences and associate professor of professional writing and technical communications at UH-Downtown, has been following this debate with interest and sees rough times ahead.

One of the problems worrying him is that the rollout of high-speed services to United States citizens has lagged significantly in comparison to the rollout across the Internet as a whole. Vint Cerf (Google), who codereveloped the Internet’s backbone protocols, along with Dave Farber (Carnegie Mellon), considered the grandfather of the Internet, both agree that Net neutrality in essence will make it very difficult to roll out improved Internet services in the U.S.

Most Internet users are not going to be happy sticking for the next ten years with the Internet we presently have because it cannot possibly keep up with the demands that will be placed upon it. It will slow us down, impede business, and, yes, impede education.

On the other hand, no one wants to take a research topic to the W. I. Dykes Library only to discover that large portions of the subject cannot be researched because, although the latest data is available, the university cannot afford the large fees required to access that privileged, high-speed content. It would not be much different from going to the library today and paying a hefty fee for each article or book accessed.

Networking researchers say it is not realistic to expect providers to handle massive amounts of data for free.

Presently, the Internet, like libraries, is accessible and free. If corporations take control, the entire dynamic of what the Internet means, in particular to academic institutions, will likely change. If corporations do not take control, some other solution to high-speed broadband rollout must be found. Otherwise many of us will find ourselves outside the Net.

To learn more about the issue, visit www.cnet.com, www.saveane.net and www.technologyreview.com/infoarch/18083

Outs..
Uncovering Deadly Secrets

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This collaboration began about three years ago when the late Dr. Joan Abramowitz worked with Dr. Highlander to arrange for UH-Downtown Scholars Academy students to annotate microbial genomes. Professor Uzman was also asked to participate and became their faculty advisor.

For student Arely Gonzalez, a recent UH-Downtown graduate, the opportunity to work at the HGSC was a critical first step toward finding a school in which to pursue her Ph.D. in microbiology.

“We analyzed Francisella tularensis OSU18, a pathogen found in rabbits, muskrats and some other animals, which is quite virulent when contracted by the handlers of these animals,” says Arely. “Two people work on a section of the genome, so that they can compare their analyses for consistency as the entire team works to cover the whole genome.”

Teamwork, according to Arely, is a crucial element to the success of the project. Fourteen people worked with Arely and Dr. Highlander and Uzman for more than two semesters. Arely’s work earned her co-authorship of an important article that appeared in the October 2006 Journal of Bacteriology. Co-authorship of scientific articles as an undergraduate is just not done very often.

“This work is an excellent opportunity for students,” says Dr. Highlander. “And it is good for the HGSC because some grants call for an educational outreach component in the grant.” Dr. Highlander is currently writing a grant proposal that is hoped to bring a half million dollars worth of equipment to the HGSC.

Another Scholars Academy student, Okezie Igboeli, is participating in the analysis of a microbial genome, a deadly strain of Staphylococcus aureus that is a cause of highly virulent community-born staph infections.

“It has a high fatality rate,” says Okezie, who has just returned to his work at the HGSC from a stint as a reserve officer in the U.S. Army. “There are genetic clusters that are not what we typically find in that strain, so it’s interesting.”

He recently presented a poster on his work at the HGSC at a microbiology meeting. He has just returned to his work at the HGSC from a stint as a reserve officer in the U.S. Army. “This work is an excellent opportunity for students,” says Dr. Highlander. “And it is good for the HGSC because some grants call for an educational outreach component in the grant.” Dr. Highlander is currently writing a grant proposal that is hoped to bring a half million dollars worth of equipment to the HGSC.

Currently, there are three other UH-Downtown students – Hiba Zwiya, Avani Verma and Prince Bozombo – who are working at the HGSC on the complex microbial genome of Bacillus pumilus that is unrelated to sterilization techniques used on the space shuttle.

Professor Uzman is understandably pleased with the collaboration.

“It’s an opportunity for UH-Downtown and the Scholars Academy to be visible in the scientific community, and the chance for our students to actively participate in the life of a top-notch research institution and be at the cutting edge of modern biology.”

UH-Downtown, Unexpected Sports Powerhouse

When people think of UH-Downtown, they think of educational opportunities, proximity to downtown and cultural diversity. They do not associate the university with sports teams. Yet UH-Downtown has produced champions in several sports – club sports that is. Despite the fact that UH-Downtown has a small gymnasium and no outdoor facilities, UH-Downtown fields a variety of very competitive club teams and has won several league titles. Without a doubt, the most successful of these teams has been the women’s volleyball team.

The Gators swept past Tomball College three games to none in the rifle volleyball match, capturing the NH-WCCD Sports Conference championship on November 12, 2006. The women’s volleyball team has now garnered three league titles in the last three semesters and has reached the championship match in its league five consecutive times. The Gators are definitely a force to be reckoned with.

The men’s club basketball team was started in the fall of 2005 and won its league championship while going undefeated that same semester. The team lost the championship game to North Harris College.

“I am more proud of this second place win than I can express. The players played liked champions to the bitter end,” says a proud Richard Sebastiani, director of Sports & Fitness.

With other club sports teams also representing the university, like the men’s and women’s soccer teams and the women’s basketball team, a new sports team has recently joined the ranks – the first ever UH-Downtown baseball team will proudly take the field this spring.

Another Scholars Academy student, Okezie Igboeli, is analyzing the genome of the deadly Staphylococcus aureus which is a cause of highly virulent community-born staph infections.

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Professor Helps Prisoners Make a Fresh Start

Sitting in the middle of a tightly packed group of 65 burly, tattooed, male prisoners for a celebration photo was not something Jean DeWitt, associate professor in Arts & Humanities (Communications) at UH-Downtown, had ever dreamed of doing. But there she was, posing for photos, shaking hands with the prisoners whose business plans she had personally critiqued, and loving every minute of it!

It all started when DeWitt read an article in the New York Times in July about the Prisoner Entrepreneurship Program (PEP) run by Catherine Rohr based out of Houston. Fascinated by the description of this program which takes a highly selective group of prisoners at Hamilton Unit in Bryan and provides them with many hours of coursework in entrepreneurial skills, DeWitt volunteered to edit and critique, over a five-month period, their assignment—a business plan for the project which they will put into operation when they are released from prison.

“Catherine Rohr is amazing,” DeWitt says. “The prisoners admire this energetic young woman who has given them hope and self-esteem. She’s loved by them all.”

Rohr had a high-paying career as a private equity investor before moving to Houston with her husband and starting the PEP program.

PEP not only trains prisoners but finds mentors and develops funds to get them started. There are all sorts of mechanisms in place to help the participants once they are back in society and working to set up businesses.

“If I could count the ten most important days of my life, one of them would be the day I spent at Hamilton Unit,” DeWitt says.

One Saturday in November, she went to Hamilton Unit in Bryan, Texas, surrendered to a variety of security processes, and then stayed from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m., listening to and critiquing over 40 business presentations.

Several of the prisoners mentioned that, usually, inmates are divided by race, but in PEP there is an extraordinary bond among brothers. “They were very supportive of each other and listened intently to the advice from the people who came to critique their plans,” DeWitt says.

She felt the prisoners were awed that people had volunteered to work with them on their dream ventures and invested additional time by coming to the prison to meet and hear the presentations. After the event, they all sent follow-up letters to thank her. She was incredibly moved by their sincerity and appreciation.

Does the program work? Does it ever! 93% of the participants now released are employed. PEP has maintained a recidivism rate of only 5%, incredible really when you compare it to the 60 – 70% national average. Over 150 top-level business executives have worked for the program, as well as judges and others in the legal profession, including law and MBA students from nearby universities.

The program is so successful that it is now expanding into California. “It’s a marvelous, innovative program,” DeWitt says, “and one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I am continuing to work with them, absolutely!”

For more information, visit www.prisonentrepreneurship.org