

Young Explorers

By Alvin Powell

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN BOHN / INTRODUCTION BY LAURA FERGUSON

TWENTY FIVE YEARS AGO, ROBYN GITTLEMAN applied for a job as academic coordinator for the Experimental College. One of her first responsibilities was a new venture intended to improve the faculty advising system for freshmen. In what was aptly called Explorations, teams of juniors or seniors would design and lead a freshman seminar. At the same time, the seminar's academic advisor would mentor the upperclassmen and serve as an advisor for the freshmen. It was a win-win situation for both seniors and new students.

Gittleman, who'd earned her master's in education at Tufts in 1969, recalls thinking that the part-time job was a good match. Her three children were in grade school, and her husband, Sol, now senior vice president and provost, was a tenured professor of German. "My background was in alternative education and this was a great opportunity to get home when the kids came home and still have a really interesting job," says Gittleman. "The moment I heard about it I knew it was perfect."

Explorations quickly appealed to undergraduates as well. By its second year, the initial offering of 7 seminars had more than doubled to 18. Within a few more years it was offering a wide range of timely seminars with titles such as *Utopia*, *On Male and Female Liberation*, *The Perversion of the American Dream*, and *The Energy Crisis*.

Today, as director of the Experimental College, Gittleman looks back on that auspicious beginning from a unique vantage point. Her corner office in Miner Hall is crowded with files on hundreds of Explorations graduates, many of whom have gone on to success in areas close to their Explorations subjects. "I come into contact with some of the best students in the university," she says, with obvious pleasure.

As for the program's success, that may have a lot to do with its base in the pioneering Experimental College, founded in 1964 to introduce less traditional courses into the curriculum, taught by faculty, students and visiting experts.

Just why the Experimental College flourished in the relatively calm years of the mid-1960s, and at Tufts, is hard to say. "I don't know," admits Gittleman. "And why here? In 1964 women could not drink Coke in the dorm rooms because it was bad for your teeth! I think Nils Wessel recognized that the University needed a place to try new ideas and the faculty agreed by voting in the Experimental College."

By the early 1970s, while other college and university campuses were erupting in student unrest, the Experimental College gave students a ready outlet for their intellectual quests. "Our students already had a great deal of power," says Gittleman. "We had students teaching and giving credit when other schools were struggling to find their own answers."

Explorations has built on that track record. Students with an adventurous streak, a passion for ideas and learning, and a capacity for hard work seized the chance to teach. The small seminars, suggests Gittleman, provided a safe yet challenging testing ground for their ideas, convictions and communication skills.

"The students who take Explorations as freshmen very often want to teach as seniors," says Gittleman. "They see the role modeling of the upper-level students and say, 'When we're juniors and seniors let's do Explorations together.' Sometimes they choose the same subject and sometimes a subject they've subsequently become passionate about."

Last fall, 19 teams of co-teachers were chosen. Standout applications reflect commitment combined with practical skills—organizing material, assigning homework, and work-



IN EXPLORATIONS SEMINARS, SENIORS VENTURE INTO TERRITORIES BOTH FAMILIAR AND FULL OF DISCOVERY

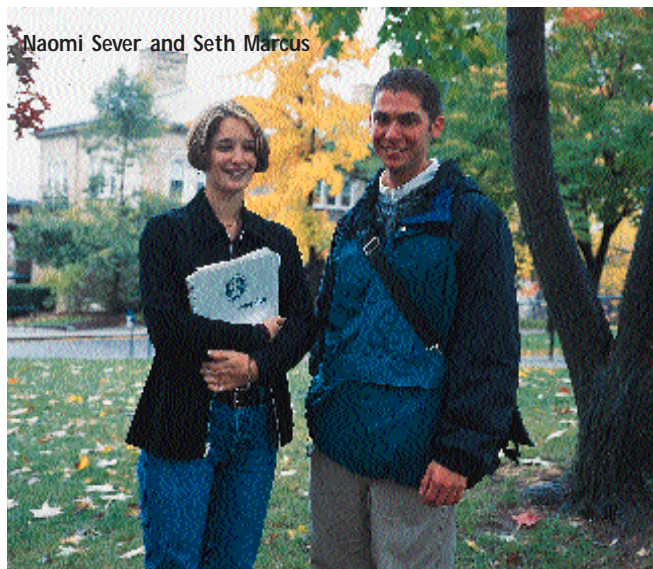
ing well with people. “Teaching is very time consuming. Candidates for Explorations can’t be taking an extra-heavy course load and think they can just wing it,” says Gittleman. “It’s also very difficult to teach. So many times I hear students say, ‘Boy, I really appreciate my teachers after this!’ ”

Over the years, Gittleman has seen two themes emerge in student proposals. Some entering students choose an Explorations seminar like bioethics because it’s their academic or preprofessional interest. Others really want to learn about themselves—every year brings courses on gender roles and psychology, topics that reflect an ongoing fascination with self-inquiry.

Regardless of the topic, Gittleman has seen Explorations influence and shape student experiences. “Teaching requires students to bring all their powers to a focal point,” she says. “This really is leadership training. They test themselves when they assume a position of responsibility. We tell them the most important thing to remember is that they are role models, and they are. I see students who are earnest, conscientious, well organized and articulate.”

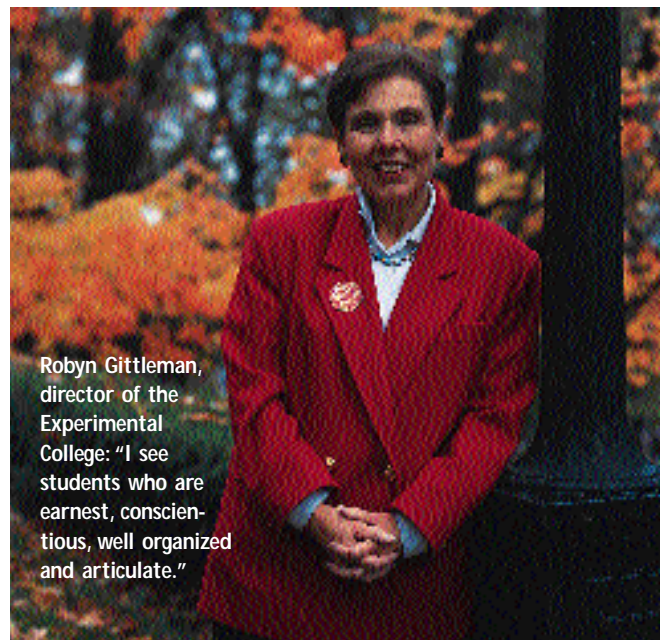
Many who have passed through the Explorations portals eventually go into teaching. Others head for jobs and graduate school. Graduates like Neal Shapiro, A80, now executive producer for *Dateline NBC*, for instance, was editor of *The Observer*, and taught an Explorations class on journalism. “It was the first project that was all about organizing something over a long period of time, figuring out your resources, how you were going to use them over time,” recalls Shapiro. “But also, most supremely, it was about keeping people interested all the way. And that’s a lot of what I do now: be sure you tell stories in a way that keeps people interested as long as possible.”

Freshmen continue to benefit as well. More than 200 sign up for the seminars each fall, and student-teachers use the seminars to distribute not only course syllabi but basic information about life at Tufts. The supportive environment of the small seminar, Gittleman stresses, encourages a dialogue that would probably not happen in a large lecture. “We build about 20 minutes into each seminar to talk about nonacademic issues new students may be confronting for the first time, and we tell them that if they need



Naomi Sever and Seth Marcus

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Robyn Gittleman, director of the Experimental College: “I see students who are earnest, conscientious, well organized and articulate.”

an hour for discussing something like preregistration, that’s OK. It can be tough to understand how the college works all on your own. Explorations gives them solid footing and, we hope, a chance to connect with Tufts on a personal level.”

Debating Bioethics

Students walk into the Bioethics seminar taught by Naomi Sever and Seth Marcus believing they have the answers to tough issues like abortion and euthanasia. When they leave, they’re sometimes not so sure.

“That’s frustrating for them, but it’s most important that we help them begin to really explore these issues,” says Marcus.

That scrutiny is at the heart of the approach the two premed majors bring to this examination of controversial social issues—euthanasia, abortion, genetic screening, alternative medicines like marijuana, human experimentation and reproductive technologies, among others. Part of their teaching process, they say, is to pick apart arguments on both sides to get students to understand opposing positions.

“A lot of times, we have to argue a side of an issue we don’t agree with just to air that side,” Sever says.

Sever and Marcus have been hooked on bioethics since their own experience in a similar Explorations class, which opened their minds to issues being hotly debated outside the university’s walls. While they both pursued science majors they didn’t forget social concerns, signing on for various public service activities.

Marcus took charge of the Leonard Carmichael Society’s hunger project, led a twice-a-week project at a Somerville homeless shelter, served low-income people diagnosed with AIDS, volunteered in the Massachusetts General Hospital’s Emergency Room, and headed up one of Tufts’ biggest philanthropic events, Greek Jam, a lip-synch contest that raised \$5,000 for the American Cancer Society. He also organized the Faculty Wait on You Dinner and Auction, which raised more than \$2,500 for the Somerville Homeless Coalition.

Sever, a biology major pursuing a minor in women’s studies,

has counseled women about abortion at a family-planning clinic in Jamaica Plain, volunteered for Tufts' annual Kids Day and built housing for migrant farm workers on a Leonard Carmichael Society Volunteer Vacation. She is also combining her interests in medicine and women's issues in a thesis on women surgeons, exploring the difficulties still faced by women seeking to enter a male-dominated field.

Sever and Marcus have drawn on the faculty support of biology professor David Cochrane, and agree that the Experimental College experience has put polishing touches on their college education and helped prepare them for medical careers. "We have had to learn to listen," says Marcus. "That's by far the most important part of teaching and of medicine."

The Flip Side of Disney

Ever since they were freshmen watching videos such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*, Tal Rabinowitz and Ashley Rothbard have wanted to teach a class on Disney's animated classics. "We knew it would work because we would make it work," says Rothbard. "We each had different perspectives: to me it was more like watching a fairy tale and Tal—she saw more things— she would say *Beauty and the Beast* is a 'solid illustration of the empowered woman.' It was clear that our views would complement each other."

Three years later the two best friends joined forces to present their fall Explorations seminar, *The Flip Side of Disney: Beyond Euphoria*. While committed to having fun, they are no slouches on assignments. They critiqued ten films in all, and in some classes students role played, improvising, for instance, a post-modern Cinderella. "We wanted to show how time changes our thinking in different ways," says Rabinowitz. "We also assigned different types of reading each week, some not directly Disney-related, such as articles on LSD [*Alice in Wonderland*] homelessness [*Lady and the Tramp*], and the historical story of Pocahontas. Students also wrote a ten-page paper and were required to lead one class meeting. "Ultimately," says Rothbard, "we wanted to pinpoint all the details that get overlooked in the movie theaters. We wanted students to be open-minded about Disney, to be able to see below the surface. Working with faculty art history professor Eric Rosenberg was a great experience, too. He was a big help."

The Explorations seminar is yet another outlet for a shared love for learning. Rabinowitz, an international relations major from Bergen County, New Jersey, studied in Madrid last year, worked one summer in Parliament in London, interned at the United Nations of Greater Boston and sings with the Jackson Jills. Rothbard, a child study major who also hails from Bergen County, has studied in Australia and at the Tufts European Center in Talloires, volunteered at Tufts Day Care Center, and written a column for the *Tufts Daily*.

Being Explorations teachers ranks among their most satisfying Tufts pursuits. They share one typical evaluation: "Our leaders were a great team . . . they were always together in their thinking and complemented each other, which made the class run very smoothly."

"That is very rewarding," Rothbard says. "It makes us feel that we learned from them and they learned from us in the way we wanted to teach."



Ashley Rothbard and Tal Rabinowitz

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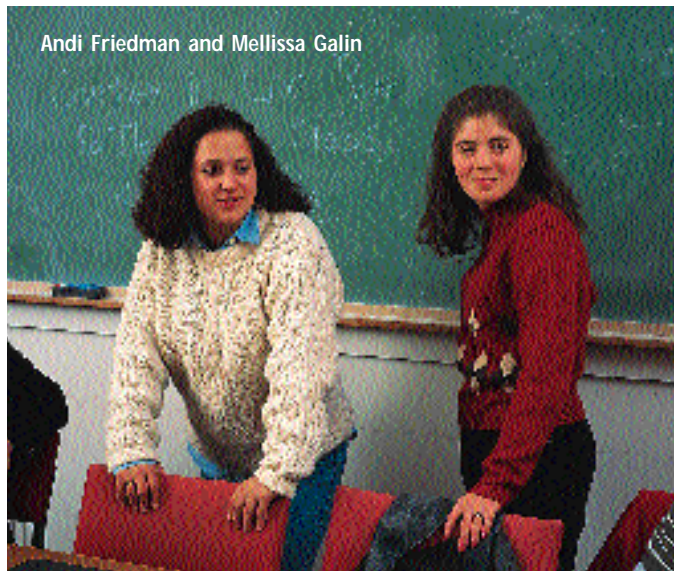
Books of Their Youth

Bridge to Terabithia, a book about best friends who create a magical kingdom, sparked a love of reading in 15-year-old Andi Friedman. Melissa Galin cannot remember not reading before falling asleep. "I have always enjoyed reading books," she says.

This past fall the two seniors shared their love of literature in *Adolescent Fiction*, a seminar with a reading list of classics such as J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* and S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and less well-known works such as *Life-Size* by Jenefer Shute about a girl recovering from anorexia.

"There is something appealing about reflecting on our junior high years," says Friedman. "Everyone has their experiences, these identity crises, and to revisit them from the perspective of someone older puts them into a broader context. When you're 15 you are caught up with the characters; at 18 and 19 you get a better sense of the big picture and of a book's broader applications. I think the books also have relevance to what students might be feeling as freshmen: how do you fit in, where do you belong, how do you adjust?"

Freshmen adjusting to their new environment are in good hands. Friedman, a political science major from Wilmette, Illinois, was named one of *Glamour's* top 10 college women in October for her active role on campus, including leading a strong voter registration drive and testifying on financial aid before the Massachusetts State Senate. Her Student Senate career has run the course from senator to vice president and president. She also serves on the board of the Experimental College, works at the Women's Leadership Initiative at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and is on the



Andi Friedman and Mellissa Galin

executive board of the Association of Tufts Alumnae.

Galín, of Valley Stream, New York, also knows how to squeeze a lot into her campus experience. An aspiring broadcast journalist, she writes for the *Tufts Daily* and spends two days a week as an intern at WBUR. That comes on the heels of last year's spring semester, which she spent studying in London.

One of the benefits of Explorations is the consistent contact with a faculty advisor, a professor who will be their advisor for up to two years, when they must declare a major. "Our advisor was the Associate Dean of Students Bruce Reitman, and he was great," says Friedman. "He was really there for the students. He came to many of the classes and shared his own opinions and experiences with the students. This allowed them to develop a relationship with him beyond that of administrator and student."

Galín had taught a Perspective class (seminars offered to freshmen that focus on a shared topic) and didn't need to be persuaded when Friedman asked if she'd be interested in co-teaching *Adolescent Fiction*. "I had had a great teaching experience last year and wanted an opportunity to create my own class," Galín says. "In the end, we were very proud of developing our ideas into a class that was both a lot of work and a lot of fun."

Domestic Violence

Anapama Naidu recalls serving as a volunteer in East Boston district court on behalf of Harbor Me, a battered women's shelter in Chelsea, Massachusetts, when a woman came in so badly beaten that one of her eyes was swollen shut and she could barely talk; she had also been raped. "Seeing her in that condition had quite an impact on me," she says. "I felt angry and frustrated. I wished I were able to do more to help her."

Samantha Schosberg has also worked as an advocate for abused women, and with the less-visible side of domestic violence. As a volunteer at the Cambridge-based Emerge, she has counseled men who batter. "I felt that to completely understand why domestic violence is so prevalent, I needed to grasp why some husbands abuse and how power and control is such a large

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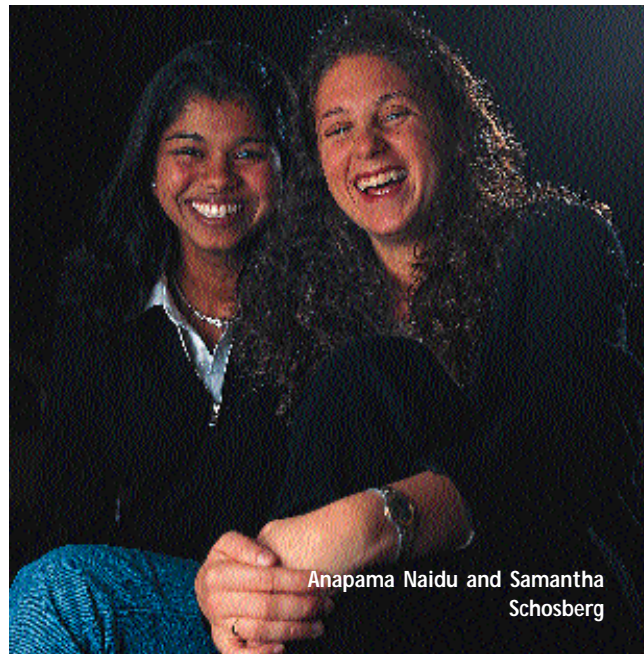
part of violence."

This past fall, Naidu and Schosberg brought their shared experiences and their deepening concern to bear in their Explorations seminar *Domestic Violence*, with faculty advisor Klaus Mizcek, the Moses Hunt Professor of Psychiatry.

Their wide-ranging syllabus touched on all areas of domestic violence, ranging from child abuse and husband abuse, gay, lesbian and bisexual domestic abuse, and date rape and stalking. That balanced viewpoint was important, they agreed, so that the class of 11 women students did not turn into either a male-bashing session or a women's support group.

"We wanted a class that taught about stereotypes, about why domestic violence has been overlooked for so long in the United States," says Schosberg. "We wanted to show that domestic violence can happen to anyone anywhere."

Both Naidu and Schosberg have devoted much of their college experience to learning more about domestic violence through research papers for courses, volunteer work, and internships in the district attorney's office and as a victim witness advocate and a domestic violence advocate, respectively. But it is perhaps from teaching that they have learned the most. "When you teach something, you have to know it cold. The students were really enthusiastic about the subject and would constantly question us," says Naidu. "We also assumed the role of advisor. Many of them came to us to seek help with problems of college life."



Anapama Naidu and Samantha Schosberg

"We wanted a class that taught about stereotypes, about why domestic violence has been overlooked for so long." —Samantha Schosberg

“I would say that we accomplished what we set out to do,” adds Schosberg. “We had a heated debate toward the end of the class concerning when battered women kill. I think the students really understood that battering is a very complex issue. We felt great about that because it shows they learned how to be open-minded. They grasped the tools they are going to need for the rest of their college years, as well as later on in life.”

Beyond Bebop

It is the music that moves them. Jazz. Ladder-climbing riffs and a mournful saxophone. A legato beat as smooth as ice, and just as frosty.

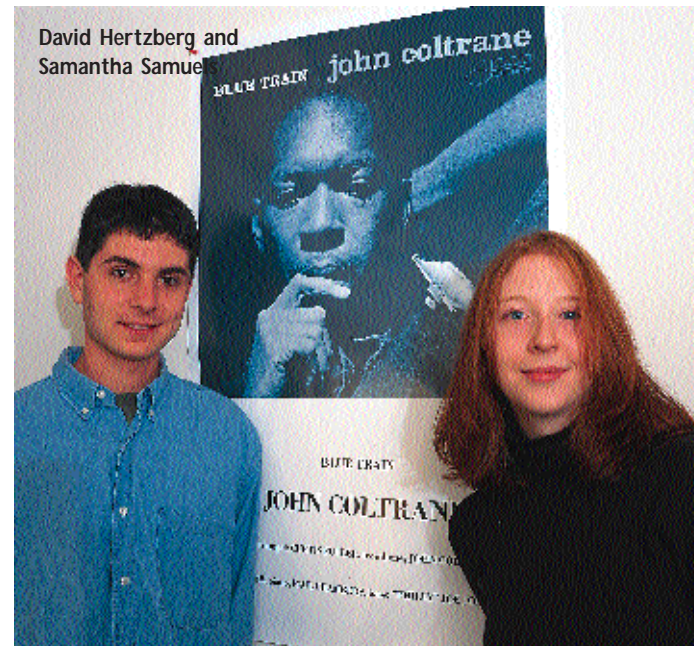
For David Hertzberg and Samantha Samuels, turning their love of jazz into an Explorations class, *Beyond Bebop: Miles and Coltrane*, was a natural progression.

“Jazz is our thing,” says Samuels, of Rye, New York, “and most of the freshmen had never really listened to it before.”

The two seniors were introduced to jazz as freshmen. Samuels, who picked up the sax in middle school, took her growing interest in jazz to performance teacher Stan Strickland, going on to hone her improvisation skills in the Tufts jazz ensemble. Early classwork in African American music with music professor Guthrie Ramsey, faculty advisor for *Beyond Bebop*, also fostered a love of jazz scholarship. “For both Dave and me, he’s been one of our favorite teachers,” says Samuels, an international relations major focusing on Africa. “He really sparked our interest in African American music and learning more about jazz history.”

Hertzberg played guitar in junior high in New York City, but when his band needed a bass player, it wasn’t his ability that made him the logical pick. “I was the worst guitarist,” confesses Hertzberg, who subsequently made the leap from bass guitar to upright bass at Tufts.

Great friends since they crossed paths in music theory and jazz ensemble, Hertzberg and Samuels have performed together in various jazz combos and in a funk band, Homunculus (which, by the way, means a small man, a dwarf or a manikin). When they saw ads for Explorations class proposals, it didn’t take much to take their love for jazz one step further. It helped, as well, that Hertzberg recalled the Explorations seminar he took as a freshman. “I looked up to my Explorations leaders and said, ‘Wow, they’re seniors.’ They already have so much experience at Tufts behind them, and they really seemed to have a direction in life.”



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–David Hertzberg

Hertzberg and Samuels chose to focus on the lives of jazz legends Miles Davis and John Coltrane, who played together at the beginning of their careers and who so strongly influenced jazz trends. “Davis’ influence spans nearly half of jazz history,” says Samuels. “His innovations trace the progression of jazz from bebop through fusion.”

By the end of the seminar, Samuels and Hertzberg hope their students have gained a sense of the vital traditions of jazz, developed a critical ear, and, most important, acquired a taste for something exciting and new. “A big part of our class is sharing music,” says Samuels. “It’s a good way to help new students get a great start at Tufts.”