Brian Greene — one of the preeminent researchers in the field of high-energy physics known as string theory — is both a best-selling author and popular speaker. One of the things he says he understands most fully about string theory is that he doesn’t understand it.

When Greene arrived on campus as the 2010 Newcomb-Tulane College Lecturer in mid-March, his popularity was apparent: starstruck physics students swarmed around a genial Greene at a reception held in Cudd Hall before the lecture, and Dixon Auditorium filled easily for the event itself.

“I think string theory is a testament to the human imagination,” says Bob Gardner (’10), “which is not to say it’s any less valid than quantum theory or relativity.”

Among the many questions it raises, string theory seeks to understand what “stuff” is really made of. It proposes that beyond the smallest particles known to man (quarks — which, yes, are smaller than the protons, neutrons, and electrons familiar to many as the smallest particles) exist tiny, vibrating strings. The theory also suggests that different types of matter are attributable not to differences in the strings themselves, but rather, to differences in the way they vibrate.

As Greene explained during his presentation at Tulane, entitled “Why Science Matters,” Einstein’s theory of general relativity, which explains the universe on the largest scale (on the order of stars and galaxies), and quantum mechanics, which deals with the smallest of subatomic particles, are at odds. Evaluated independently, both theories are considered valid. But, as Greene writes in his best-seller, *The Elegant Universe*, “As they are currently formulated…they cannot both be right.”

The seduction of string theory, then, lies in its equations, which work at both extremes of size. Some have even called it the “theory of everything.” The theory and its lofty title are not without critics, though. On the *Late Show with David Letterman* several years ago, Letterman asked Greene, “How is my life better for this?”

Greene, known perhaps as well for his research as for his ability and penchant for explaining science, was prepared with an answer.
Letter from the Editors

Tulians tend to agree with Louis Armstrong that it is, in fact, a wonderful world. They love to explore it, engage with it, and find ways to make it an even more wonderful place. In this issue of the Newcomb-Tulane Collegian & Review, we experience rural Bulgaria through the eyes of Vaune Hough-Snee ‘09, a Peace Corps volunteer. We hear about a campus visit by alumna Lisa Jackson ’83, the current EPA Administrator; as the guest of the John J. Witmeyer III Dean’s Colloquium, she explained why she has made it her life’s work to ensure a safer environment for all Americans. Alumna Catherine Freshley ’09 tells us about the 2010 Newcomb-Tulane College Lecture, in which Brian Greene, physicist and best-selling author, gave students a new way of understanding the universe through string theory. And First-Year Programs Manager Joi Raines ’98 and student Ryan Jones ’12 explain how the TIDES program helps first-year students explore the world of Tulane and New Orleans.

The Review section includes an excerpt from the new paperback edition of Tom Sancton’s Song For My Fathers. Sancton’s memoir, which chronicles his experiences as a white New Orleans youth who learned to play jazz from veteran black musicians, was the 2006 Tulane Reading Project featured selection; the new edition includes a post-Katrina epilogue. In April, our office co-sponsored a staged reading and concert of Song For My Fathers in Dixon Hall, featuring a performance by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Sancton’s class on memoir writing teaches students the art of recording their unique memories in literary form. The Review also includes work by two post-doctoral fellows in the English department, Melissa Dickey and Andy Stallings, whose courses show students how to preserve their experiences in poetry.

We hope you will enjoy the 2010 Newcomb-Tulane Collegian & Review. As always, we invite you to submit your news, ideas, and original work for possible publication in next year’s issue.

Best,
Trina J. Beck
Tom Moody

This Issue’s Contributors

TRINA BECK is director of Newcomb-Tulane College Programs. A graduate of Yale University, she has been on the staff at Tulane since 1998.

MELISSA DICKEY is an adjunct professor teaching creative writing in the English department; she is a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop.

CATHERINE FRESHLEY is a Tulane graduate; she is currently working as an associate interactive strategist at Peter A. Mayer Advertising in New Orleans.

VAUNE HOUGH-SNEE (’09) began her service as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bulgaria in May 2010, and will be working there until July 2012. Read more about her time in Bulgaria at bulgarskiblogger.blogspot.com

RYAN JONES is a junior studying musical theatre; he also works in the TIDES office and is an orientation team leader.

JOI RAINES is a Tulane graduate and is currently the manager of the TIDES and First-Year Programs Office.

TOM SANCTON is a former senior editor for TIME and a contributor to numerous publications, and he has published works of fiction and nonfiction. As a jazz performer, he has toured extensively and recorded more than a dozen albums. He continues to teach courses in creative writing at Tulane.

ANDY STALLINGS is an adjunct professor teaching creative writing in the English department; he is a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop.

Photo Credits

SHANNON BRINKMAN: page 15

GUILLERMO CABRERA-ROJO: pages 1, 6,7,8,9 (Jackson), 12

JACQUES COUGHLIN (NPR): page 9 (Thompkins)

HUELO DUNN: page 11

VAUNE HOUGH-SNEE: page 10

TOM MOODY: pages 5, 9 (Grossman, Berkowitz)

JOI RAINES: pages 3,4

JULIAN SANCTON: page 14
The Tulane InterDisciplinary Experience Seminars Program (TIDES) has greatly evolved since its inception nearly a decade ago. Now part of Newcomb-Tulane College First-Year Programs, which encompasses both TIDES and the Tulane Reading Project, the program has grown from eight original classes to the 83 course options that will be offered in fall 2010.

Originally, TIDES was conceived as a unique elective course that gave freshmen an opportunity to interact with faculty members who mainly taught on the senior level. The program now flourishes as a part of the core curriculum that orients students to the university and the city of New Orleans as a whole.

The original eight TIDES courses in 2002 included Leadership, Politics, Power and Change, instructed by Tulane personnel such as University President Scott Cowen and Dean James MacLaren, one of the architects of the entire program; Cities and the Urban Environment; the Music and Culture of New Orleans; World Cultures and Religion; and More Than Just Business TIDES classes. All five of these courses still remain, with many of the original faculty still instructing. And, they are now joined by a variety of new course offerings, including Alligator on a Stick—Critters and Culture of New Orleans; An Introduction to Clinical Medicine; Psychology in the Movies; and Who Dat, Fan Up, and Geaux: Sports and New Orleans.

The expansion of TIDES is due in large part to the positive response from the Tulane student body. The program also grew as professors developed ideas for new courses that they knew would be of interest to students. Through guest lectures in other TIDES sections, word-of-mouth reviews, and even urgings from former students, more and more professors came up with new topics to turn into small, discussion-based classes for incoming freshman students. An elective course prior to the university closure due to Hurricane Katrina in the fall of 2005, the TIDES program is now a requirement for all first-year students and, as a part of the Core Curriculum enacted in the fall of 2006, must be completed for graduation from the university.

A good illustration of the TIDES program’s growth can be found in the More Than Just Business TIDES class. When first added to the roster of TIDES classes, there were only four class sections of More Than Just Business. The course has since grown to more than 24 sections taught by 21 professors over two course subjects: the original More Than Just Business, and Law and Order. Students entering the A. B. Freeman School of Business must complete either More Than Just Business or Law and Order by the end of their first year.

The field trips facilitated through the TIDES Program have served to enhance the course by taking the student body off the beaten path and showing them that there is indeed more to the city of New Orleans than Mardi Gras and Bourbon Street. The Business TIDES courses were one of the first to hold an annual TIDES field trip. All Business TIDES sections visit the National World War II Museum to not only have the opportunity to explore one of the country’s finest tributes to the American military, but also to hear in person from several World War II veterans and others who were involved in the events in the museum’s exhibits. The students are able to experience this history in a way that is not possible through classroom instruction alone.
II veterans, dubbed the A-Team. This unique opportunity is equally appreciated by the TIDES students and the veterans alike.

Field trips have become a highlight of many other TIDES courses as well. Tipitina’s, the world-famous music venue, has become a destination where classes such as World Dance, The Blues, Songwriting for an Audience, and The Music and Culture of New Orleans enhance their course subjects. The History and Chemistry of Foods class learns about the chemical side of cheese at The St. James Cheese Shop and rum making at Celebration Distillation. Celebration Distillation, which produces old New Orleans-style rum, has also become a popular field trip for other TIDES classes such as The Myths and Realities of New Orleans, Food and Drink, and The Sweet Life, which also visits Laura Plantation to study the history and usage of sugar cane.

The TIDES Program has also organized annual field trips open to all TIDES courses regardless of subject. In November of 2009, with the assistance of the New Orleans Hornets, the first annual TIDES Night at the Hive was held. In addition to the opportunity to attend a Hornets game, TIDES students were able to attend seminars with different individuals in the Hornets organization, and hear first-hand where an interest or major could lead in the professional sports world. This event was attended by students and instructors from over half of the TIDES classes; there are plans to expand this number in 2010.

Now entering its eighth year, TIDES continues to draw from the ideals that initially inspired the program. It remains steadfast in its mission to provide an academic experience that enriches students both inside and outside the classroom environment, and to help students adjust to life at Tulane and in the city. New course topics are added every year, but one thing always remains the same: TIDES provides a welcoming sense of exploration in the freshman year, and gives students a positive start to their collegiate journey in New Orleans.
This May, we awarded diplomas to the first class of students to matriculate post-Katrina. These students were also the first class to enter as Newcomb-Tulane College students, united as one undergraduate body. Less than a year after Katrina, these students demonstrated their confidence in Tulane and the city of New Orleans by enrolling for the fall 2006 semester; as one would expect, theirs was a significantly smaller class, but the precedent they set has led to record application numbers in the years since. This fall, we welcome a freshman class whose quality and size — 1630 students — we hardly dared to hope might be attainable just five years after the disaster. We owe the class of 2010 a debt of gratitude for spreading the word that Tulane was coming back strong. In these pages, we have included photographs of some of the most outstanding students from this extraordinary class, taken at the 2010 Newcomb-Tulane College Senior Awards Ceremony.

Newcomb-Tulane College continues to strengthen and develop the academic support services and programming that we believe are the cornerstone of a productive and successful undergraduate career. The Academic Advising center has just moved to its new home in the Richardson Building, where the advising staff will continue to help students navigate their undergraduate career while also planning for their future. With career services and tutoring now overseen by the college, we continue to streamline this process, making it easier for students to prepare for the transition from student to professional life. The Advising Center is kicking off the school year and welcoming students to their new home in Richardson with a week of free Pinkberry frozen yogurt — a welcome treat in the August heat.

Interest in study abroad is at an all-time high. We had over 300 applications last year from students wanting to spend one or both semesters of their junior year abroad, marking a threefold increase from just a couple of years ago. Our two new study abroad advisors are kept quite busy managing over 100 different programs in all parts of the world. I believe the study abroad experience adds immense value to students’ education, so I am very happy to see more and more of our students taking advantage of the opportunity.

I am happy to report that we have hired an associate director for the Honors Program, in order to provide a higher level of service to our top students. Dr. Scott Pentzer holds a Ph.D. in Latin American Studies from Tulane, and has extensive experience working with students; he has taught Latin American history at Southern Methodist University, served as an officer for the Fulbright U.S. student program, and directed study abroad programs in Costa Rica for the Associated Colleges of the Midwest. With his assistance, our students will have even more of an edge when applying for prestigious scholarships and fellowships.

Finally, our Cocurricular and First-Year Programs have continued to increase the amount and quality of the programs they offer. The 2009 Tulane Reading Project featured Junot Diaz’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and students packed McAlister Auditorium for Diaz’s reading and discussion of the book. In November, the John J. Witmeyer III Dean’s Colloquium was honored to present Lisa Jackson ’83, the current EPA Administrator; see page 8 for more about her visit. The second annual Newcomb-Tulane College Lecture, in March, featured physicist Brian Greene, discussed in our cover story. The popular Jazz at the Rat program continued with jazz artists ranging from local chanteuse Leah Chase to hot young trumpeter Maurice Brown, and the weekly Dean’s Coffees continued to draw throngs of students eager for a free cup of coffee and Krispy Kreme donut to kick off their weekend. We also awarded over $50,000 in grant money to students for research, travel, projects, and unpaid internships through a variety of competitive grant programs.

It is humbling and gratifying to see how far we have come over the past five years. As we welcome this year’s entering class, we want to let the class of 2010 know that we will never forget the role they played in bringing us here.
String theory should allow us to understand how the universe started, he explained. Greene clarified that “the big bang,” a popular theory, offers an explanation for how the universe evolved from the instant after it came into being, but does not actually account for that initiating event. String theory might.

“If we can understand how the universe started,” Greene said, “it will alert us to our own place in the cosmos in a deep way.”

Letterman didn’t seem satisfied with Greene’s answer, and asked about the possibility of the universe being created by an all-powerful being. Greene said that although that can’t be ruled out, “it’s not a very satisfying explanation from a scientists’ point of view.”

And so, five years later, the quest to prove the “theory of everything” continues. The theory’s tangible effects on our daily lives will remain unknown until the science is more fully understood, but it is clear that its potential to shape our culture is significant. When Greene says it is the developments of quantum mechanics that led to the invention and advancements of cell phones, the propensity for cultural influence is clear.

Despite the decades Greene and other physicists have devoted to proving string theory, the existence of strings has yet to be confirmed. When Greene compares the size of a string within an atom to a tree within the known universe, it’s not difficult to appreciate the researchers’ challenge. Many think that string theory will never be proven, and even Greene doubts it will happen in his lifetime.

As James MacLaren, Dean of Newcomb-Tulane College and physics professor says, “There has not been any direct experimental evidence to confirm string theory’s predictions. That is the acid test of scientific theories — from Newton to Einstein.”

James Clarkson ('10), now a Ph.D. candidate in physics at University of California, Berkeley, agrees. “String theory is more of a mathematical hypothesis about physics since it has no way to be experimentally tested in the foreseeable future,” he says.

Greene remains resolute though, his dedication to the theory stemming primarily from the math. He says it is “too promising to be ignored.” The equations don’t work in a world with only three dimensions, however; they work in a world with 10.

Strings supposedly vibrate into these additional, miniature dimensions and Greene compares strings vibrating into the different dimensions to air traveling through the twists and turns of a wind instrument. The shape of the twists determines the notes the instrument makes.

Though understanding more about the extra dimensions and calculating how strings vibrate would be significant — Greene says, “It would be the first fundamental explanation for why the universe is the way it is,” — identifying the shapes of the extra dimensions is a task of impossible proportions.

When Greene was a Ph.D. candidate at Oxford University, working on his thesis in 1986, there were five or six known shapes for the extra dimensions and his research involved calculating how strings would vibrate in one of them. The number of possible shapes grew rapidly though, to approximately 10,000 in the 1990s. This many still could have been examined individually. “That is what graduate students are for,” Greene says, jokingly.

There are now 10^500 imaginable shapes and the impossibility of proving the right ones has led some researchers to give up. For many, such as MacLaren, it is a sure sign that the theory doesn’t work.

“[That number] makes me wonder how you would ever know if you had a ‘correct’ one,” he says.
Others, Greene says, have taken a more radical
tack, believing that there are potentially “many
universes out there, with our universe being but one.
We live in this universe because the shapes of the
extra dimensions give rise to the [properties of
matter and force particles] that are compatible with
our existence. Other universes are inhospitable with
life as we know it.”

Admittedly, when Greene proposes that there are
potentially seven additional dimensions, that time
travel is possible, that thought and emotion could be
controlled by the vibrations of tiny strings, and that
space and time are not constants, but malleable, it
can be hard to take seriously.

But, Greene says, “Mathematics has been
sure-footed so many times that maybe we should
take it seriously.”

As devoted as Greene is to his research, he seems
to be equally devoted to promoting science
education. And it’s not just that he is passionate
about his field of study, as most scholars are, it’s
more than that.

“We are right now in the midst of a rapid cultural
shift,” he says, “where science and technology are
becoming ever more a part of our everyday lives.
The fact that we as a culture recoil from science, the
fact that we as a culture do not put science in the
category that we put great musicians, great leaders —
you see the disjuncture and how this can have deep
and profound ramifications.”

Greene references current political hot buttons —
like global climate change, the energy crisis, and
natural disasters — saying they are important
scientific issues meriting informed decisions by
politicians and voters alike.

MacLaren discusses the importance of science
from an economic perspective. “There has been a
shift to service industries,” he says. “Real economic
growth, in my opinion, comes from innovation and
technological development.”

Noting our culture’s emphasis on arts and also on
sports, Clarkson says, “I feel that our technical
advancement, hence quality of life, would be greatly
improved if this emphasis were shifted even slightly
in the direction of science.”

According to Greene, the greater emphasis on
other components of our culture is partly a product
of how science is often taught in schools. “Students
are taught to memorize numbers and formulas at the
expense of the ‘big idea.’ And if students don’t
understand why it is important, why it matters to
them, then they are ill-equipped to enter the world.”

Comparing teaching science to teaching English,
Greene says, “When you’re reading novels, it feels
relevant,” and links to students’ daily lives are
obvious. However, with science, he says, “We need
to make those links obvious. They’re there, just a
little removed.”

Gardner says the complexity of math, and therefore
physics, limits the subject’s pop culture appeal.
“This turns most people off; they lose sight of the
big picture. However, as Greene said, if we find a
way to keep that big picture involved in the learning
process, math [and physics] goes from being
intimidating to exciting,” he says.

Greene suggested early in his talk that science is
just as important to a full life as literature, film, and
music, and he borrows from Marcel Proust to close
the evening.

“Marcel Proust I think said it best. He said that the
ture act of exploration is not in finding new
landscapes, but in fashioning new eyes. That is what
we are doing,” Greene says, “we are fashioning new
eyes to see the universe.”
In November 2009, Lisa Jackson, class of ’83, returned to her hometown of New Orleans for the first time since taking office as Environmental Protection Agency Administrator under President Obama. The main purpose of her visit was to speak at the 13th National Brownfields Conference, a forum designed to address the reclaiming and rehabilitation of properties that have been damaged by commercial and industrial use. Amid a busy schedule that included a tour of Global Green’s rebuilding efforts in the Lower 9th Ward’s Holy Cross neighborhood, as well as a visit to the Pontchartrain Park area where her mother’s home flooded after the Katrina levee failures, Administrator Jackson found time to visit her alma mater as the guest of the John J. Witmeyer III Dean’s Colloquium. This annual lecture program, coordinated by Newcomb-Tulane College Cocurricular Programs, brings a prominent Tulane graduate to campus to discuss his or her career, which in Jackson’s case began with a summa cum laude undergraduate degree from Tulane’s chemical engineering program.

During her well-attended talk in Freeman Auditorium, titled “From the Green Wave to a Greener Future,” Jackson explained why issues like brownfields rehabilitation are among her top priorities in her current position. The word “environmentalist” tends to conjure up a certain stereotype: educated, fairly affluent, usually white. Yet those who are most likely to suffer from daily exposure to toxins from Superfund sites, chemical plants, or oil refineries seldom fit this stereotype. As the first African-American to head the Environmental Protection Agency, Lisa Jackson wants to spread the word that no one, least of all underrepresented populations, can afford to ignore environmental issues, and that politics should never get in the way of efforts to create a cleaner, healthier environment for our nation’s children.

Back in November, no one could have predicted the environmental catastrophe that EPA would face in summer 2010 after BP’s Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Jackson has found herself making more visits to her home state in recent months, albeit under circumstances that she never would have wished for. In communicating her agency’s response to the disaster, Jackson has embraced current technology, using Twitter to provide citizens with direct access to her latest updates. Her accessible, gracious personality is evident in her brief messages; a recent one noted that she was “very grateful” to the thousands of volunteers who, like her, spent the July 4th weekend working on cleanup efforts in the...
Gulf. Yet even while dealing with this unprecedented disaster on a daily basis, Jackson continues to work on the even bigger picture of creating a healthier environment for all Americans. She recently proposed new rules designed to cut sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions, a move that she believes will ultimately save billions in health care costs — and, even more importantly, save up to 36,000 lives per year.

### About the John J. Witmeyer III Dean’s Colloquium

The John J. Witmeyer III ’68 Dean’s Colloquia invite distinguished alumni back to campus to meet with students, visit classes, and give a public lecture. Previous guests of the Witmeyer Dean’s Colloquium include:

**Gwen Thompkins** (’87) is a New Orleans native who is currently the East Africa correspondent for National Public Radio.

**Elyse Lursay** (’89) majored in art history and is an appraiser and historian in popular culture. She is one of four hosts on the PBS program, “History Detectives.”

**Dr. Robert I. Grossman** (’69) is a leading neuroradiologist, author of one of the standard texts in his field, and is the Louis Marx Professors and Chairman of the Department of Radiology at New York University.

**Sean Berkowitz** (’89) graduated *summa cum laude* and was one of the lead prosecutors in the government’s case against Enron.
It’s pouring rain in the city of Vratsa, and 200 Peace Corps trainees, staff members, and soon-to-be host families are assembling the pieces of a puzzle. We trainees seem nervous to be out and about in real-life Bulgaria. We’ve spent the past week sequestered in the Rila Mountains for our initial orientation, but suddenly all those hours of policy, procedures, and mastering the Cyrillic alphabet seem to have left us woefully underprepared for the task of living here. We’re about to meet our host families. These are the people with whom we’ll spend the next three months of training, the families whose hospitality will guide us to the day we make our oaths and become full-fledged volunteers.

But no one is thinking about that day, or the two years of service that will follow the oath. Instead, the question hanging in the steady drizzle of rain is: “Will they like me?”

I look down at the blue, zig-zagged puzzle piece in my hands. Emilia and Ruslan, it says, are a hard-working retired couple. They tend several agricultural plots in the region, selling their crops from home.

There’s another note:

Nice, clean house with small garden. Outside toilet. Non-smokers.

Now, most people assume that “outside toilet” goes without saying in the Peace Corps. After all, the organization is associated with sweltering, exotic locales, generally in the Third World. But here we are in modern Bulgaria, in what was more recently (until 1989) part of the communist Second World, now a member of the European Union. That an indoor toilet is even an option only adds to the nickname for serving in this region: the Posh Corps.

I lurch through the crowd to the table with my training site’s name on it, what I’m told is a town of about 2,000. Before I register that he’s holding a matching puzzle piece, a small, dark man with bright blue eyes and very little hair waves his cane at me and exclaims to anyone who will listen, “Tova e moeto momiche!”

Or: “That’s my girl!”

This must be Ruslan.

Each day with my new family begins with an array of wake-up calls. The first comes from our over-achieving rooster around 4 AM, which is followed in kind by the snorts and groans of Rambo, our cow, and Rocky, our guard dog. (For whatever reason, naming your livestock after Sylvester Stallone characters is big here.) Then come the noises of Ruslan and Emilia as they water the garden, hitch up the donkey cart, and fry breakfast. They’re trying to beat the sun; in the afternoon, when I’m studying or teaching, they’ll retire from the heat and sleep again. Then it’s out to the melon patches to collect the day’s harvest, kilos and kilos of cantaloupe to sell — on credit — to the neighbors.

Yet in spite of their rigorous schedule (and trust me, I’ve given Emilia enough shoulder massages to know that the labor takes its toll), they always make time for one leisure activity: watching dubbed-over Turkish soap operas. From “Perla” to “Listopad” (these are the Bulgarian names for the shows), pensioners here can’t get enough of their convoluted scandals and tastefully chaste romances. My favorite is “Dvama Zavinagi,” the story of two star-crossed lovers who will stop at nothing to be together. Yes, even though the ever-pure heroine has been forced into an arranged marriage with a moustachioed villain, she flees to Istanbul with her soulmate, where they are
pursued by a variety of relatives, all intent on carrying out an “honor killing” to clear the family name. Honestly, you haven’t seen a melodrama this virginal since “Twilight.”

I love the turski seriali. Not only is the clear, slowly articulated dialogue helpful in learning Bulgarian, the shows also provide an instant conversation starter. Sure, Bulgaria was under control of the Ottoman Empire for nearly 500 years, and there are still some hard feelings on both sides (communism wasn’t too kind to the country’s large Turkish minority), but the soaps blur those lines. There are plenty of people here, both ethnically Turkish and Bulgarian, who love nothing more than a good debate about the merits of the new actor playing Shefket versus the old. In fact, when the electricity cuts out — a common occurrence — we head out into the street, where we and the neighbors stand speculating in the dark about the plots of shows that we cannot watch.

It doesn’t take long to realize that I’m living in a community that consists almost exclusively of the elderly and the underage. My training site abounds with children, who appear from behind trees, calling my name, offering me puppies, and so on. They flock to our summer camp, as there’s literally nothing else to do. Then there are their grandparents, and of course the livestock (most people in small towns at least have a chicken or two in their garden, if not a sheep or donkey). But there are very few people between the ages of 20 and 50. This demographic has gone elsewhere for work or education, to the big cities like Sofia or Varna, or to other E.U. countries. There’s better money to be made, everyone knows, in picking oranges in Greece, or cleaning houses in Spain, than there is as a doctor or teacher in Bulgaria.

That a twenty-something from America, no less, should come to their town both baffles and delights everyone around me. Even when my vocabulary consists of little more than, “Yes, please!” I find myself invited na gosti — as a guest — to the homes of countless babas, or grandmothers. They pile my arms high with homegrown peaches, ask about my family, and insist that they’ll find me a proper Bulgarian man during my time here—a not inconceivable feat, as many volunteers do end up marrying locals. And although I’m not yet in the market for matrimony, I can see why—I’ve never felt both so absurdly out of place and so at ease as I do with my new family, kyuchek (belly dancing) music blaring, jokes rolling. We bicker like real parents and child (“Mom! I can do it myself!” or “Vonka! That kebabche isn’t going to eat itself!”), and though I sometimes long for the amenities of city life (where no one uses donkeys as a means of transportation, I’m constantly reminded), I know that my impending move to my permanent site is going to be hard for all of us.

Emilia looks out of place in Vratsa. Her good dress is a time warp next to the stilettos and t-shirts around us; I hope I haven’t caused her any distress by bringing her to today’s Swearing-In ceremony. The press are everywhere. Yes, it’s official: I’m now a Peace Corps Volunteer. Tomorrow, I will travel across the country, laden with a sack of melons and tomatoes (“But Vonka—what will you eat?”), to begin my service. I will live alone in a Soviet-style bloc apartment, teaching English at the local schools. And Emilia?

She pulls me into a crushing embrace as she tells the radio interviewer in front of us, “Tova e moeto momiche!”

“Da,” I agree, “Az sum neynoto momiche.” I’m her girl.

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are those of the author and do not reflect any position of the U.S. Government or the Peace Corps.
On Friday, May 14, 2010, over 120 graduating seniors were honored with departmental and college-wide awards at the annual Senior Awards Ceremony. Here are just a few highlights.

The newest members of the William Wallace Peery Society, established in 1964 to honor those students who have earned among the highest cumulative GPAs over the course of their undergraduate careers.

Deans and faculty members from each of the five schools were on stage to present the awards.

Hundreds of family members and friends were on hand to honor the award recipients.

Dean James MacLaren congratulates Peery Medal recipient Matthew Griffin.

The Rob Kohler Trio (Rob Kohler, Lee Kohler, John Doheny) performed for the crowd before the ceremony got under way.

An ecstatic crowd exits McAlister after the conclusion of the ceremony; most make their way to Wave Goodbye.
Life takes strange turns. In August 2007, nearly four decades after I stepped on an Illinois-Central train to go off to college, I came back to live in New Orleans. I never expected to do that. I had made my life elsewhere — mainly in Paris, where I'd spent the majority of my adult years. I lived in a different culture, ate different food, even spoke a foreign language much of the time. New Orleans, though never far from my heart, seemed very distant from my daily life.

Then came Katrina. Seeing those images of my shattered city on television — then seeing it with my own eyes as a journalist two weeks after the storm — stirred up powerful feelings. I felt that, somehow, I had to do what I could to help the city recover, and help my elderly parents, both in their nineties, cope with an increasingly difficult existence there. I started to think that, after nearly four decades living away, it was time for me to move back to New Orleans.

It was Tulane University that provided the vehicle for my return. Shortly after the hardcover edition of my memoir Song For My Fathers was published in 2006, Tulane chose it for their Fall Reading Project. To my publisher’s delight, the university bought some 2000 copies and handed them out as required reading for all the incoming freshmen. As part of the program, I was asked to give a lecture on my memoir and received a luncheon invitation from Tulane’s President, Scott Cowen.

Over a shrimp and avocado salad at Mat and Naddie’s restaurant near the river, we talked about my book, about Tulane’s post-Katrina problems, and the New Orleans recovery effort — an effort in which Cowen, as one of the city’s main employers, was playing a major role. I told him how moved I was to be back in the city, that I was feeling the “tug of my roots” in the wake of Katrina, and toying with the idea of coming home. He leaned forward slightly and said, “You know, it’s a shame Tulane let you get away.” I supposed he was referring to my undergraduate choice of Harvard over the hometown school. But if he was throwing out a feeler, I was ready to grab it. “That can be rectified,” I replied.

Suddenly the discussion turned to the possibility of my coming to Tulane in some capacity. I didn’t quite realize it at the time, but I was part of Cowen’s master plan for drawing people to New Orleans who could celebrate its culture and contribute to its rebirth. That was the main reason my book had been chosen for Tulane’s first post-Katrina reading project.

“Would you like to come for a full year, half year, or just a couple of lectures?” Cowen asked. I hadn’t really thought about it in concrete terms. I owned a nice house near Paris, with a garden full of hollyhocks, roses and fruit trees, and had no burning desire to abandon that comfortable life. I also knew my unreconstructed Parisienne wife, Sylvaine, a sculptor, was not anxious to pull up stakes and move to a crime-ridden, roach-infested, hurricane-battered city across the ocean. But now I thought about my parents and I knew that if I wanted to be close to them in their time of need, I had to make a commitment now.

“I guess a year,” I told Cowen.

Within a few weeks after my return to Paris, I received a formal invitation to come to Tulane during the 2007-2008 academic year as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities, an endowed visiting professorship that carried with it a certain amount of prestige and a generous stipend. With a deep sense of gratitude, mixed with a little disbelief at my good fortune, I immediately accepted.

We arrived in New Orleans on a sweltering day in August 2007 and moved into a rented half-shotgun...
on Oak Street, near the Tulane campus. There was everything to do — unpack, buy furniture, prepare my creative writing course, contact art galleries about showing Sylvaine’s sculpture, get back in touch with the local music scene.

I had played only rarely during my long years in France, but once I returned to New Orleans, music became a big part of my life again. I was fortunate enough to land a steady stream of spot jobs — weddings, parties, Mardi Gras balls — and occasional engagements at Snug Harbor and Jazzfest. But my most frequent venues were the Palm Court and Preservation Hall, the place where my jazz Odyssey first began.

As we settled into our new home, Sylvaine struggled at first with the heat, the roaches and the heavy food. Not surprising for a French transplant, but even I found that living in New Orleans took some getting used to. Though I had grown up here, certain things now seemed strange: the affected, metal-file raspiness of girls’ voices; the ear-splitting din of many New Orleans restaurants, some of which approached the decibel levels of an airport runway; the off-putting familiarity of “waitpersons,” who introduced themselves by name and addressed my wife and me as “you guys”; the propensity of men of all ages to run around bare-chested as if New Orleans were a beach resort and not a major American city; the loudness of the locusts at dusk; the cultural incongruity of ordering espresso at a Starbucks’ drive-in in a city that supposedly prided itself on its European roots.

Tulane, however, immediately felt like home. Though some new structures had been added over the years, the look and feel of the campus, with its oak trees, thick grass lawns and gray stone buildings, was relatively unchanged since my childhood. My links to the university went farther back than I could remember. My father had graduated from Tulane in 1935 and taught journalism there for a few years in the 1950s. Thanks to my dad’s alumnus status, I had access to all the campus recreational facilities as a kid. The old student center — with its swimming pool, billiard tables, and bowling alley — was my regular weekend hangout. I never imagined that I would be teaching there one day.

As Mellon Professor, I was required to give one course. What I taught and how I taught it was up to me. Never having done this before, I had to improvise. I decided to offer a creative writing course called “The Art of the Memoir.” My training for this was having produced one memoir plus twenty-two years’ experience as a writer, editor and correspondent for Time Magazine. I knew I could teach journalistic writing, but could I teach literary nonfiction? The bigger question was whether or not a group of twentysomethings could attempt a meaningful coming-of-age memoir while they were still coming of age. One of my friends, a former English professor, scoffed at the idea. “Memoir from college kids? You can’t get wine out of an empty vessel.”

He could not have been more wrong. My class, a dozen junior and senior honors students, impressed me with their energy, passion and writing skill. At the end of the semester, most of them turned in finished projects whose quality astounded me. One student took the initiative to have all their work printed and bound by an online publisher under the title Collected Memoirs and gave it to me as a farewell present. That volume will forever have an honored place on my bookshelf. When my tenure as Mellon Professor ended, Tulane offered to keep me on staff for a few more years and I gladly accepted.

Rediscovering my hometown sometimes reminded me of the Benny Grunch tune, “Ain’t There No More.” Schwegman’s supermarkets, K&B drugs, the majestic Maison Blanche and D.H. Holmes department stores on Canal Street, the Pontchartrain Beach amusement park — ain’t there no more. Most of these places had long since disappeared, part of the natural ebb and flow of modern civilization. What was more distressing was the things that had been wiped off the map by Katrina. Large swaths of the Lower Ninth Ward were destroyed or heavily damaged, along with Gentilly, the lakefront, and the low-lying Broadmoor neighborhood uptown where I had spent much of my time growing up.

And yet, signs of rebirth were everywhere. When I toured the flooded city as a journalist two weeks after Katrina, I feared it might never recover. But by the time I moved back to town two years later, reconstruction was well underway in many places...
and the hated FEMA trailers were starting to give way to refurbished houses. New restaurants were popping up, new schools were being built, tourists were starting to come back. A few months after my return, the St. Charles Avenue streetcar reappeared along that elegant, oak-shaded thoroughfare, and the familiar clang of its bell quickened my pulse. The avenue itself, lined with some of the city’s most elegant homes, had largely escaped Katrina’s wrath, as did the French Quarter, the Garden District, and the Central Business District along Canal Street. A visitor walking around those parts of the city today might never suspect that a cataclysmic storm had ever passed through. The new buzzword around town was “revitalization” — not just recovery but a phoenix-like revival from which the city would emerge stronger than before.

Big problems remained: one-third of the population had not come home; the criminals and drug dealers, however, had returned en masse after a brief post-Katrina hiatus, making the city once again the nation’s murder capital; the politicians were as corrupt and inept as ever; and the streets had more potholes than a Third World backwater. It would take years, perhaps decades, for the city to recover fully, and many things were lost forever. But I was convinced that New Orleans would endure — not only the physical city with its historic landmarks, but, perhaps more important, the soul and culture that made this such a special place.

My son Julian once wrote a gently mocking piece for *Vanity Fair* about the fanatical cult of nostalgia that grips New Orleanians and makes them romanticize their past. He’s right, of course, but how could it be otherwise? The city is mired in its own history — not just capital H history like the Louisiana Purchase and the Battle of New Orleans, but the history that each person, each family, each neighborhood accretes, layer by layer, generation by generation, in this hot, humid, low-lying port town. History is inescapable here. It washes over us in endless waves and cycles, like our frequent rain storms and hurricanes. It resides in our hearts and minds.

Audubon Park, a former sugarcane plantation, lies just across St. Charles Avenue from the Tulane campus. I often change into running clothes in my office and go jogging there. With its majestic oaks, its dense carpet of St. Augustine grass, and its dark lagoon, this park goes as far back in my mind as I have memory. I did somersaults on the grass with my sisters as a kid. We sat by the water’s edge and threw bread crusts to the ducks while our mother painted watercolors near the footbridge. I played touch football here, and fished in the lagoon, and gave my girlfriend her first kiss on the banks of the murky pond. All of this passes through my mind like reels of an old movie as I run along the paved jogging path.

When I reach the back end of the park, my pulse pounding from exertion, the trees fall away and I suddenly see the broad expanse of the Mississippi, Mark Twain’s river, Huck Finn’s river, my river. The barges, freighters and tankers that chug through its muddy waters are headed to every corner of the world. But in my mind, they all start from here.

A few hundred yards back from the riverfront, I pass the gnarled, sprawling oak that is supposedly the oldest tree in the city. It has stood here for some 275 years, since Louis XV ruled Louisiana as a French colony. This noble oak has braved countless hurricanes, floods and the assaults of graffiti-carving vandals. Its trunk is ten feet wide at the base, and its lower branches, like the tentacles of a giant octopus, dip all the way down to the ground. But the most amazing thing is the hunched up roots that stand four feet high in places and descend God-knows how far into the soggy earth. Roots are like that. They are mostly invisible, but they hold up all the rest. And when the wind howls and the water rises, they represent the only survival and salvation.

Everybody has roots somewhere — my wife’s are in Paris, my mother’s were in Mississippi. Mine happen to be in New Orleans. I did not think much about them during the forty years I lived away, but they enveloped me upon my return like a mother clutching a long lost son to her breast. And I clutched back. After running away from my roots for decades, perhaps unconsciously, I now understood what it meant to bond with one’s past. I was back in the land of my fathers, living and dead, and heard their haunting songs. It is the same thing Ulysses felt in his heart when he awoke, confused and bleary-eyed, on the shores of Ithaca. Call it nostalgia.
POETRY
BY MELISSA DICKEY

ANOTHER ALTERATION

To produce an image we must conjure one in mind:
    There. Sound imagined:
    Crinkled flutter. The leaves perform a crinkled fluttering

But it is pure interruption. The cricket:
    Keep time. Mid-morning
    Shadows cross the screen:

Light cast on a pool floor
    (You know those little waves)
    And the loud fridge the loud fridge moves the whole room –

He descends the stairs
    Crumpling around the stove, dropped keys in a bowl –
    Left to admire leaves, he sits where I sat in the chair.

HE Wants Pictures OF CITIES so I Bring Him The Sea

We arrive as a couple.

Fifty horses run
at our small car, neighing
our windows down, eyes

level with ours. At night
he can’t see the stars, he says,
too small.

We sunburn on our first anniversary,
asleep on the beach.

It’s always just me and the ocean.

Then back through sagebrush, site of
the skeleton, air sweet and sick
and we walk.
SHADOWS LIKE THIS ONE

Writing lines in lines
half thought an unworn shoe
I try to be more like
a ribbon a wildflower
an asymmetric shape

Left with capital letters
analyzed handwriting
the slant neurosis
shadows refine light
fiddling the wall

Painted brink painted everything
who is in me now
proud purse of coins
my summer love
quiets down

Field empty of field
what makes it
all as large
moved you by distance
dear distance

GRANTED

The oak across the street has been sheared
by the city.

I hope they know what they’re doing.

When you walk naked you walk
more carefully. As if on tiptoe.
Your arms hovering

near your stomach. Yes, I see you,

retaining a singular integrity
like spring snow.

I am a little worried.

We have different relationships to windows.
EMERGENCY

Risky dandelions
inhabit the under-
whelming under-
current of a listing

offshore wind. The tide-
pool tries our cook-
fire on for size
and yeah, not bad,
or the isthmus
just then derails.
I wind my nakedness
up as I would

a clock. Okay then,
what will my sirens
solve when they
activate?

Will they stand
proclaiming song
or no song is
not sufficient?

Unwrapping the world
from its twist-tied
cellophane, at last
established: it's sweet.

CAFE INITIATIVE

Rehabilitation of
The vowel: prioritized.
For sport?
Not for sport.

Pull the ladders back,
Says the xenophobe.
Why?
Exit strategy.

Out in the Internazionale
We're the freshest
herons, each a locus
of doom (for the fish),
Unshakeable. The man
Asked his daughter
Can you say
debacle, Jen?

Debacle, she said.
The interview went:
Intolerable?

I couldn't
Answer. Overloading
The cannon. Lording it
Out in the cane.
You:
Assume the fish
Will rise with the tide.
Hunt.

Me: . . . Hungering.
**ROME, ALWAYS!**

This depressingly not love we are everywhere in and aware of nevertheless erupts from historical calm overstuffed with columns and hung art. Dress up nice it suggests, but who's listening: stumbling among potholes, puddles, where always it's enough to arrive unstained and not late for vows.

Hike those trousers up! This escalator lifting into song's a catch-all, wherever in the distressing not music we are. I could not hope to tell you how fine, how splendidly spun the mesh there and blank as gauze –

**ROME, ONCE**

The condition was unrequited orgasm or not orgasm enough:

a yanked picnic
blanket. Irritable,
exiled among
elegant piazzas, woozy
with textures post-ripasto. Alive

as the rich are
out in their statue
gardens. A humid
clumping of cocoa powder
on the café’s plastic
blue plaid tablecloth

my forearm hairs clumped
with also, sipping
sharp espresso under
torrents of sun squalor,
sun scowl, sun
decay. Like skips

in a ceiling fan’s
endless circling, sleep
hiccups – and then

from nowhere rain arrived
and exhausted I stooped
to the marble steps,
slept –
NEWCOMB-TULANE COLLEGE is the academic home for all of Tulane's undergraduate students, who are taught by faculty in the School of Architecture, the A. B. Freeman School of Business, the School of Liberal Arts, the School of Public Health, and the School of Science and Engineering. Newcomb-Tulane College comprises several student-service offices: the Academic Advising Center, the Center for International Studies, Cocurricular and First-year Programs, the Honors Program, ROTC, Teacher Preparation and Certification, and the Office of the Dean.

Newcomb-Tulane College's main offices are located in Robert C. Cudd Hall on the historic St. Charles campus. Built in 1901, the distinctive Dutch Gothic (or Italian Renaissance Revival, according to some sources) building originally served as the university refectory, or dining commons. Since then, the building has served in a variety of capacities, providing classroom and office space and acting as the home for several different departments. Over the years, a number of piecemeal additions and adaptations obscured most of the building's architectural interest. In the 1990s a group of donors provided the funds to restore the building and remodel the interior as the home for Tulane College, formerly the men's undergraduate liberal arts college. The building was reopened and placed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1999. In 2006, following the university’s post-Katrina restructuring, Robert C. Cudd Hall became the administrative home of the newly created Newcomb-Tulane College, housing the Office of the Dean and the Office of Cocurricular Programs.

In the more than 150 years since its founding, Tulane University has subscribed to a few basic principles: a belief in the enduring value of liberal arts and professional education, a conviction about the importance of extracurricular activities and accomplishments, and a justifiable pride in the achievements of its talented students, dedicated faculty, and distinguished alumni.