

poverty

BREAKING THE CYCLE?

A REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAM OFFERS CASH TO THE POOR FOR MEETING HEALTHFUL GOALS

by John Bringardner / GSAS '03

It was the fall of 2005, and Michael Bloomberg felt good about his chances for reelection. His first four years as mayor of New York City had been marked by bold school and health initiatives, not to mention tremendous economic growth. But his opponent, Bronx Democrat Fernando Ferrer, was gaining ground by hitching his campaign to one major issue the billionaire couldn't boast about: poverty. Even as the city had prospered overall under the Bloomberg administration, poverty remained steady at 19 percent, one of the highest levels in the country. Attempting to defuse Ferrer's attacks, Bloomberg named a blue-ribbon commission to tackle the issue.

And they did. After winning a second term, Bloomberg pushed his commission for ideas. One member, J. Lawrence Aber, professor of applied psychology at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, suggested a study of so-called conditional cash transfer programs, known as CCT, that had effectively reduced poverty in rural Mexico and Brazil. *Oportunidades* had revolutionized welfare in Mexico by giving money to the poor in return for completing certain goals, like enrolling their children in school and making regular doctor visits. It was designed to break the cycle of poverty by providing poor families with the cash to meet short-term needs, like buying food, while incentivizing habits

that lead to better physical and financial health in the long-term. A quarter of that country now participates in the program, and by 2006, nine years after its start, extreme poverty in Mexico had dropped from 37.4 percent to 13.8 percent. The commission, and the may-

and run by two nonprofits—launched in 2007 with about 4,800 families and 11,000 children receiving benefits for an initial three-year run. The program works by offering a series of financial incentives—ranging in value from \$25 to \$600—for meeting any of a list of

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or, were intrigued. “I think Bloomberg liked it because we use incentives in every other segment of society,” Aber says. “Tax breaks for the wealthy, tax breaks on mortgages for the middle class. Why would we exclude poor people?”

Opportunity NYC—a CCT sponsored entirely by private groups

22 goals for both parents and children, covering education, health care, and job skills. Going for an annual medical check-up is worth \$200. Graduating from high school is worth \$400. No restrictions are placed on how participants spend the money, and it's not counted against eligibility for government

OPPORTUNITY NYC OFFERS \$25-\$600 FOR MEETING GOALS COVERING EDUCATION, HEALTH CARE, AND JOBS.



PHOTO © PHOTO LIBRARY

programs, such as welfare. The incentives are especially helpful for parents who, say, must take time off from an hourly paid job to take a child to the clinic. “It’s not bribing people to do the right thing,” Aber says. “It’s reducing the opportunity costs.”

This February, Aber and MDRC, one of the nonprofit groups running Opportunity NYC, released the first report on the program’s progress, with mixed results. By the end of 2008, more than \$14 million had been paid out to families. Ninety-eight percent of the participants received money, averaging more than \$6,000 per family in the first two years. While the program had cut “severe poverty” by nearly half, reduced food insecurity, and improved banking skills and savings—the short-term effects it was supposed to have—the researchers noted no change in student achievement, especially New York State Regents test scores among fourth and seventh graders. Though long-term poverty reduction is the ultimate goal, the program’s educational incentives had dovetailed nicely with Bloomberg’s earlier school reforms, and its limited effects on test scores have cast a shadow on Opportunity NYC’s future.

The three-year trial run ends this August. Though the Bloomberg administration has no plans to extend it as yet, Aber and his team will continue to follow participants to see whether the positive changes brought by the program survive the loss of benefits, the true test of its effectiveness. A final report is due in 2013. How the Bloomberg administration interprets those results will determine whether Opportunity NYC becomes known as a failed experiment or if some pieces of the pilot offer new tools for reducing poverty in New York, and perhaps the rest of the country. “It’s not the be all end all,” Bloomberg acknowledged at a March press conference. “The responsibility we have is to try to tune the program.” ■

dentistry

Handling With Care

STUDENTS HELP VICTIMS OF TORTURE COPE WITH TRIPS TO THE DENTIST

by Kevin Fallon / CAS '09



PHOTO © GETTY IMAGES
WHILE NOT A WELCOME SIGHT FOR MOST PEOPLE, THE VIEW FROM THE DENTAL CHAIR IS ESPECIALLY HARROWING FOR TORTURE SURVIVORS.

Harsh, blinding lights; the piercing sound of a drill; a stranger wielding sharp, metal tools near your face. Most people dread, yet deal with, these discomforts when they visit the dentist. But for victims of torture and sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder, the experience can be infinitely more intense, reminding them of a time when they were subjected to horrors at the hand of someone who intended them bodily harm.

With this in mind, a dozen select students are learning the nuances of treating these patients as part of the College of Dentistry’s Program for Survivors of Torture. Launched in September 2008 as the first of its kind in the nation, the program offers free dental services to survivors of torture and war traumas from more than 80 countries. The student dentists—trained by social workers, psychologists, translators, and immigration lawyers—treat up to

25 patients each week at the College of Dentistry and, to help prepare, sometimes even sit-in on patients’ physical exams or therapy sessions. “The goal is to give back to patients whose dignity has been taken,” says Steven Resnick, clinical assistant professor at the dental college and co-director of the program.

The challenges and obstacles to treating these patients are wide-ranging. Some have been tortured by sleep deprivation, usually by being subjected to constant bright lights and loud noises. “So you wouldn’t just flip on the light and shine it in their eyes,” Resnick says. Instead students start with it pointed to the floor, and slowly bring it up to the mouth. Survivors of waterboarding are often bothered by the suction hose, so they are allowed to hold it themselves to maintain control. Dentists must also reconsider machines that give off a burning smell, which may remind some of being scorched with lit cigarettes, and

dental masks, which may trigger fears of suffocation. Perhaps the most complicated factor, however, is that doctors were often complicit in the torture, notes co-director and clinical assistant professor June Weiss, so it can be difficult to gain trust or to persuade patients to sign consent forms, as many were once forced to sign false confessions. The key is to give detailed explanations of every step of every procedure, says Weiss, noting, “even down to ‘I’m going to put water in this cup.’”

The program is a companion to Bellevue Hospital Center’s Program for Survivors of Torture, launched in 1995 in response to New York City being a common refuge for those fleeing persecution in their home countries. While Bellevue provides comprehensive medical care, mental health care, social services, and legal services to victims of torture, war traumas, and their families, patients with dental issues had limited options. But the new program goes beyond just treating cavities and gingivitis. For example, dental students helped one patient quit chain smoking. He’d started as a way to cope with his ordeal, but lighting up inevitably brought back haunting memories. Another patient received a permanent appliance to fill the hole where several teeth had been knocked out by a rifle butt, so she no longer had to remove her denture daily and relive the violence. As Resnick says: “The question for these dentists is not just how good was this root canal therapy, but what impact did it have on the patient’s life?” ■

the insider

BEST OF NEW YORK

NYU FACULTY, STAFF, AND ALUMNI OFFER UP THEIR FAVORITES

by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

AS TEMPERATURES RISE, KEEP COOL WITH A DAY AT THE BEACH OR COCKTAILS ON THE HUDSON

MARATHON MAN

When Joe Salvatore, who teaches educational theater at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, started training for his first New York City Marathon last year, he fell into the familiar regimen of running and recovering. The first part he satisfied in **CENTRAL PARK**, which provides perfect running terrain with its six-mile loop, meandering paths, and unexpected hills. Plus, the final stretch of the marathon takes place in the park, so practicing there paid off for Salvatore, who met his goal of finishing in less than three hours and 40 minutes—with six seconds to spare. “The last two miles were probably the toughest,” he says. “Central Park South felt like it went on forever—like

Columbus Circle kept moving away from me as I ran toward it.” After, he rewarded himself with pizza and french fries—and a massage at **RENEW & RELAX**. At just \$50 for a 50-minute rubdown, Salvatore says, it’s one of the city’s most affordable spas.

50 THIRD AVENUE (BTW. 10TH AND 11TH STREETS), 212-388-9821; WWW.RENEWANDRELAXSPA.COM

ROCK THE BOAT

Growing up just outside the city that never sleeps turned Isabelle Dungan (GAL '06) into an expert night owl. And she knows that because outdoor space is such a hot commodity in the spring, most rooftop bars are either too cheesy or ultraexclusive. One exception is the roof garden café at the Met-

ropolitan Museum of Art, where Dungan says the open-air art exhibits and view of Central Park make it perfect for drinks at sunset. For a more unusual setting, climb aboard the **FRYING PAN**—an historic lightship built in 1929 that sat at the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay for three years before being resurrected as a funky bar docked at Chelsea Piers. Dungan has been visiting the Frying Pan since discovering its eclectic live music and DJs, and still loves to explore the ship’s unusual nooks and crannies, complete with rusty, barnacle-covered walls. “You feel like you’re on something that’s from another time,” she explains. “It’s not just your run-of-the-mill rooftop.” Try your sea legs on the massive dance floor or head upstairs to enjoy views of the Hudson River and the ship’s surf-and-turf menu.

PIER 66 (AT WEST 26TH STREET

AND WEST SIDE HIGHWAY), 212-989-6363; WWW.FRYINGPAN.COM

SAIGON SUB

New York magazine recently hailed the bánh mì as “the most addictive new sandwich in town.” Maybe it’s the layers of pork stuffed into a crispy baguette, or the combination of sweet and spicy pickled vegetables, hot peppers, mayonnaise, and cilantro, but New Yorkers can’t seem to get enough of the Vietnamese import. “It’s just gathered so much more mainstream appeal in the past year,” says Duy Nguyen, an assistant professor in the Silver School of Social Work who grew up eating Vietnamese cuisine. Many stylish eateries have given the sandwich a gourmet makeover—and price tag—but Nguyen notes that the classic bánh mì is simply cheap and tasty street food. “It’s not a meal that I would associate with sitting



JACOB RIIS PARK



BÁNH MÌ SAIGON BAKERY



FRYING PAN

CENTRAL PARK



down at a restaurant and ordering,” he says. “I expect more of a no-frills-type place.” So for the real thing, Nguyen suggests **BÁNH MÌ SAIGON BAKERY**, which was serving the sandwich long before it became a craze. The tiny counter is tucked into the back of a Chinatown jewelry store, but that doesn’t stop hungry crowds from lining up daily. The freshly baked bread is filled to capacity and, at less than \$4, is a rare deal for the Big Apple. **138 MOTT STREET (NR. GRAND), 212-941-1541**

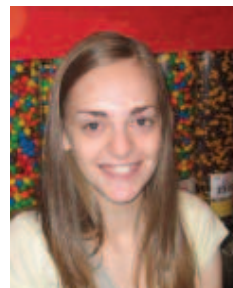
OUTER-BOROUGH OASIS

When things heat up in the summer, most local beaches are overrun with hordes fleeing the city’s hot concrete in search of a cool ocean breeze. So Brooklyn native Dante DeSole (STEINHARDT ’91) was surprised when he and his son stumbled upon **JACOB RIIS PARK** in the Rockaways. “I

thought it was odd that it wasn’t crowded,” he remembers, but this out-of-the-way oasis isn’t as easy to reach as Coney Island or Manhattan Beach. One must drive, or catch a bus or ferry, but DeSole says it’s worth the extra effort. And without any amusement park rides or concession stands, Jacob Riis is an ideal spot for more traditional activities such as surfing, picnics, and volleyball. Those seeking shelter from the sun can explore the grand Art Deco bathhouse—an architectural landmark opened in 1932 that now houses historic exhibits and adds to the shore’s striking view. “If you turn around, you can see the Manhattan skyline from the top of the beach,” DeSole says. “But you just don’t feel like you’re in the city.”

ROCKAWAY BEACH BOULEVARD (AT CHANNEL DRIVE) IN QUEENS, 718-318-4300; WWW.NYHARBORPARKS.ORG

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