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QUEENS COLLEGE FACULTY | STAFF NEWS

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Listening to Songbirds to Understand Language

The laboratory of David Lahti (Biology) is a case study in rapid development. Open for less than a year, the 900-square-foot space in the Science Building is filled with computers, audiovisual equipment, spectrophotometers, a molecular lab, and 16 undergraduate and graduate students exploring everything from baboons and botany to changes in human morality. Everyone affiliated with the lab contributes to the Online Bibliography of Environmental Thought, which Lahti has been putting together for the International Society of Environmental Ethics. But most of the projects involve birds.

“Learned behavior is my special interest,” explains the professor, who began teaching at QC in 2009. “The development and evolution of learning is better understood in birds than in any other organism. Songbirds are the only terrestrial animals besides humans that learn how to produce very complex vocalizations. Our studies of bird song have implications for the evolution and diversification of human language.”



One current project tracks and analyzes the songs of house finches, building on the work of Paul Munding (Biology), who began recording them in the 1950s. “The house finch was introduced to Brooklyn in 1940,” says Lahti. “We can trace its spread through New York and surrounding states and document changes in its language. We are starting a consortium where anyone

who records a house finch anywhere in the United States can send us their recordings.”

Lahti and his students also investigate several species of weavers, a highly social African bird that was the subject of his second dissertation, on ecology and evolutionary biology. He earned his first doctorate in moral philosophy and the philosophy

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Last summer, on a QC-funded trip to Ethiopia, Khaleda Khan and David Lahti ventured into the field with Girum, a nature guide now getting support from Lahti’s lab through its outreach to promising African biologists. Their research subjects included Rüppell’s weaver (inset).



Music was part of the menu when the Research Center for Korean Community held its recent gala.

Korean Center Marks First Anniversary

A year after its debut, the Research Center for Korean Community held its first international conference, marked by celebrations on and off campus. The festivities began on Oct. 7, at the Korea Village in Flushing, where the research center held a gala that drew 250 attendees.

“Thanks to the Seoul Tourism Organization’s sponsorship, we were able to accept non-Korean guests free of charge,” reports Distinguished Professor Pyong Gap Min (Sociology), founder of the center. “Many people related to the

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of biology. As his CV suggests, Lahti isn't limited to avian topics. On a QC-funded trip to Ethiopia last summer, he collected data on many organisms for a natural history guide. Another Africa-based project looks at the relationship between a people's ecology and social organization and their evolving views of right and wrong.

Lahti's academic evolution has taken him from Gordon College in Massachusetts, where he majored in biology and history, to Oxford University and the University of Michigan for his PhDs, and then to post-docs at the University of Massachusetts and with the National Institutes of Health. He came to QC, he says, "because I wanted to do research at a place friendly to someone with interests as broad as mine. Our department has a wide-ranging faculty, and the diversity of my interests is encouraged."



Rüppell's weaver is known for its elaborately woven nests; here, Lahti checks one for eggs.

Art That Works

"Art can be socially useful," observes Maureen Connor (Art). "There are so many problems that exist in the culture; why shouldn't artists be part of the solution?"

Apparently, the Rockefeller Foundation shares that sentiment. Earlier this fall, Rockefeller awarded a two-year, \$200,000 grant to QC and the Queens Museum of Art (QMA) to develop a pilot that could prepare the college to offer a master of fine arts degree in social practice.

A new, publicly oriented field of artistic exploration, social practice includes strategies as diverse as urban interventions, utopian structures, guerrilla architecture, green sustainable projects, and street performance. Connor, Debra Priestly, and Gregory Sholette (Art) will lead the pilot at QC, which is one of a handful of colleges to have—or consider having—a social practice program. As part of the pilot, QC and QMA will solicit proposals for yearlong projects for the Corona neighborhood; both graduate and undergraduate students will have the opportunity to participate as interns, apprentices, researchers, and assistants.

The collaboration was initiated by the museum, which has been working in Corona for six or seven years. "It's important to be a responsible partner in your own community," says QMA Executive Director Tom Finkelppearl, who wanted his institution to partner with QC because "it has an excellent, respected MFA program." Among the museum's social efforts to date: *Healthy Taste of Corona*, a bilingual cookbook featuring recipes that were contributed by local politicians



Maureen Connor, seen here in her art studio, welcomes the opportunity to involve students in social practice projects.

and restaurants and then adjusted by nutritionists at Elmhurst Hospital.

At QC, the pilot got off to a great start with a presentation by InCUBATE and The Yes Men, two groups that are active in social practice. InCUBATE—an acronym for Institute for Community Understanding Between Art and The Everyday—is a Chicago-based research organization that experiments with alternate methods of arts administration and funding; its initiatives include hosting a monthly meal that costs \$10 apiece, awarding the proceeds to a project chosen by the people in attendance. The Yes Men are performance artists whose work involves impersonating, and thereby publicly humiliating, corporate executives who put profits ahead of everything else. The event played to a standing-room-only crowd in Klapper Hall—proof that social practice holds plenty of interest for QC students and faculty.



The Business Breakfast Club

Young executives at five New York companies shared their strategies for thriving in a tough economy at the QC Business Forum on October 15. Panelists at the early morning event included (l-r) Steve Chen of Crystal Window & Door Systems, Patricia Flores of Publimax Printing, Benjamin Levine of Douglaston Development, and Jerry Pi of Pi Capital Partners LLC.