

# WAGNER COLLEGE'S QUIET RENAISSANCE

Bigger donations, better students stream in as the Grymes Hill college's reputation soars

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**W**agner College is a school on the move and it's shooting for nothing less than a place among the national stars of higher education.

After years of wallowing in the backwaters of academe--and in red ink--the school is beginning to realize a return on its investment in Dr. Norman Smith, a Toronto-born educator who was named president of the College in 1988.

Though he arrived on the 105-acre, Grymes Hill campus unheralded at the tender age of 41 - fresh out of a deanship at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and untested in any president's seat - he has clearly risen to the challenge of running a \$40 million-a-year educational operation.

Smith said his first visit to the campus yielded such a clear vision of what Wagner College could be that his business and marketing plan for the school almost wrote itself.

"I was struck by the campus and what it wasn't," said Smith recently, recalling that he nearly shuddered after his first Ivy League-jaded glimpse revealed private cars parked in rag-tag fashion all around the school's main lawn, which itself was void of grass because the football team used it as a practice field. "It was a sea of mud," said Smith. Not these days. Thanks to about a \$30 million investment in any number of improvements - from new faculty hires to engraved trash receptacles - the rough-edged look is history. Now, there are discreet parking lots and newly tilled athletic fields. The walkways are being painstakingly bricked over and an \$11 million, state-of-the-art sports facility has been constructed, with the help of generous alumni like Donald and Evelyn Spiro.

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Classrooms have been carpeted and refurnished and the school has made a major commitment to keeping pace with the latest in computer technology.

In sharp contrast to 25 years ago, the residence halls are full and paying for themselves, and most of the school's 1,800 undergraduates hail from somewhere other than Staten Island.

But it's not just the physical plant that's been spiffed up.

Last year, the Institute of Mind and Body Research at Harvard University's Medical School chose Wagner's undergraduate science students to conduct the basic research component of a nationwide project investigating the effects of emotions on a person's physical health.

With the help of new provost Dr. Richard Guarasci, the undergraduate curriculum has been completely overhauled and last summer the American Association of Colleges and Universities cited the school's new, experiential approach to liberal arts as the best in the country.

And for the second year in a row, *U.S. News and World Report* placed Wagner in the "top tier" of colleges and universities in the North.

We've hired 80 new faculty since I've been here, said Smith, noting that among the 200 instructors now on board, the head of the school's music department graduated from prestigious Williams College, the head of the history department graduated from Johns Hopkins University and was a professor at Vassar College, and the head of the biology department also taught at Dartmouth College.

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"I see this school as a (potential) Swarthmore, a Haverford, an Amherst," he added. While students and faculty say they don't feel like they're among the elite just yet, they say the school is on its way. "It's made huge strides in becoming more of an Ivy League school" said senior business major Christina Rosensteel from Hanover, Pa. She is a golfer who chose Wagner over places like Villanova, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and Longwood.

"There have been fundamental changes, said Christopher Catt, a native Californian now in his fifth year as producer and head of the school's theater department. The differences include theater classes that are more academically oriented and training-based, less personal politics in the way lead roles in the school's musical productions are cast, and a school administration that is committed to a higher profile for the department.

The turnaround to an institution that is emerging as a regional powerhouse is evident almost everywhere, and it's all due to Smith, say those associated with the college.

"There have been major, major changes," said Walter Hameline, Wagner's athletic director and football coach, who has worked at the school for about 20 years and now operates from a spacious, light-filled aerie above the fitness center instead of from a cramped desk in a storage closet. "It all started to take place when Norman came on board."

"On Staten Island, we have a new synonym for excellence and the synonym is Norman Smith," said Kevin Sheehy, a Tottenville High School biology teacher who is a Wagner College alumnus and a 13-year veteran of the school's board of trustees. "The ascent is remarkable."

"This place is beginning to look like a shiny, new penny. He's [Smith] got a goal and he's going for it," said Ms. Rosensteel.

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"They've got the right idea. They need to continue with the right ideas," said Aaron Smith, a sophomore from Albany who plays quarterback and tight end on the school's Division I football team.

As noteworthy and pervasive as the changes are to those who frequent the somewhat secluded campus, they remain a well-kept secret on Staten Island.

Smith contends that he and his staff are in regular touch with Island high schools when it comes to freshmen recruiting, but he admits that the makeup of Wagner's student body has shifted dramatically during his 12 years at the helm - from 75 percent of the students calling Staten Island and Brooklyn home in 1988, to 75 percent coming from elsewhere these days.

"It's flipped," said Smith who is clearly not troubled by the change in demographics. "We have significantly upgraded our academic standards. We have started to create a buzz and the better students are coming to us. We want to think beyond the Staten Island world."

"Smith maintains that the school is not out to turn its back on Staten Island teens. It's just that he believes the caliber of student Wagner is looking for now is top-drawer, and serious students everywhere usually choose a college outside their immediate neighborhoods, - within a 4-hour travel distance - rather than sign on for more of the same for another four years.

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Today the bulk of the College's students come from upstate New York, southern New Jersey and the Bucks County area of Pennsylvania. But while Smith may not be going out of his way to discourage Staten Island residents from enrolling (he notes that they are still the single largest cohort on campus), he is clearly trying to distance Wagner College from the land mass on which it's perched. In fact, students say they rarely heard the words "Staten Island" when they were being recruited.

"You heard 'the city,' not much about Staten Island," admitted Aaron Smith. Hameline concurs. "I don't think you sell Staten Island to a prospective college student. You sell New York," he said.

Norman Smith won't apologize for that tack either. He

said that for the past four years, the school's marketing has been "heavily into visuals. There's this beautiful, bucolic setting, but it's also contiguous to the city. We're the grand compromise."

Publications used to market the school to prospective students and to big money contributors are filled with photos - many taken by Smith himself - of campus turrets and towers that soar majestically against a backdrop of the Manhattan skyline. Photos of off-campus, Staten Island locales are few and far between.

Students also say that Smith's no-nonsense personality makes for a campus atmosphere that is tightly controlled and more straight-laced than many. "They crack down on everything. Some people try, but they limit it [partying] said Scholz.

While President Smith might take issue with some of the student gripes, he too agrees there's still work to be done - about 10 years' worth - before the school is where he envisions it. For instance, though more than 10 percent of the students at Wagner major in theater and the performing arts, the school's only theater is in a building that dates from the 1920s.

Smith said now that the Spiro Sports Center is up and running, he is turning his attention to a theatrical upgrade. To this end, he is holding preliminary planning meetings with architects with an eye to constructing a new performing arts center directly across the quad from Spiro.

He also notes that the residence halls need to be refashioned to keep pace with the demands of today's students. "Apartment-like living," he notes.

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All of which means he will probably be digging even further into the pockets of Wagner alumni like Spiro, a 1949 graduate and chairman emeritus of the Oppenheimer Management Corp.; John Myers, a 1967 graduate who is now president and chief executive officer of General Electric Investments Corp.; Bob O'Brien, a banker at Credit Suisse/First Boston, formerly of Banker's Trust, who put together the \$29 billion financing-package for Henry Kravitz's leveraged buy-out of RJR Nabisco in the 1980s; and Kurt Landgraf, chairman of DuPont Europe.

The list is quite impressive. "They have been the fuel behind what has happened," said Smith. That made be so, but before Smith started knocking on their doors, hat in hand, they were very low-octane. "There is a tremendous amount of money," said Smith, who scoured lists of some 17,000 alumni shortly after assuming his post, rolled up his sleeves and began a wooing process that is paying off.

With his wife, Dr. Susan Robinson, now at the helm of the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Smith 53, says he can see finishing out his career at Wagner. He said he is periodically contacted by search firms looking to set him up elsewhere, but he admitted that he has made many close friends among the Wagner faculty and has nothing to prove by going elsewhere.

"I've been at Harvard," he said. He continued: "I might [stay]. If everything continues to evolve as productively over the next 12 years, I'd be hard-pressed to find a more interesting job."