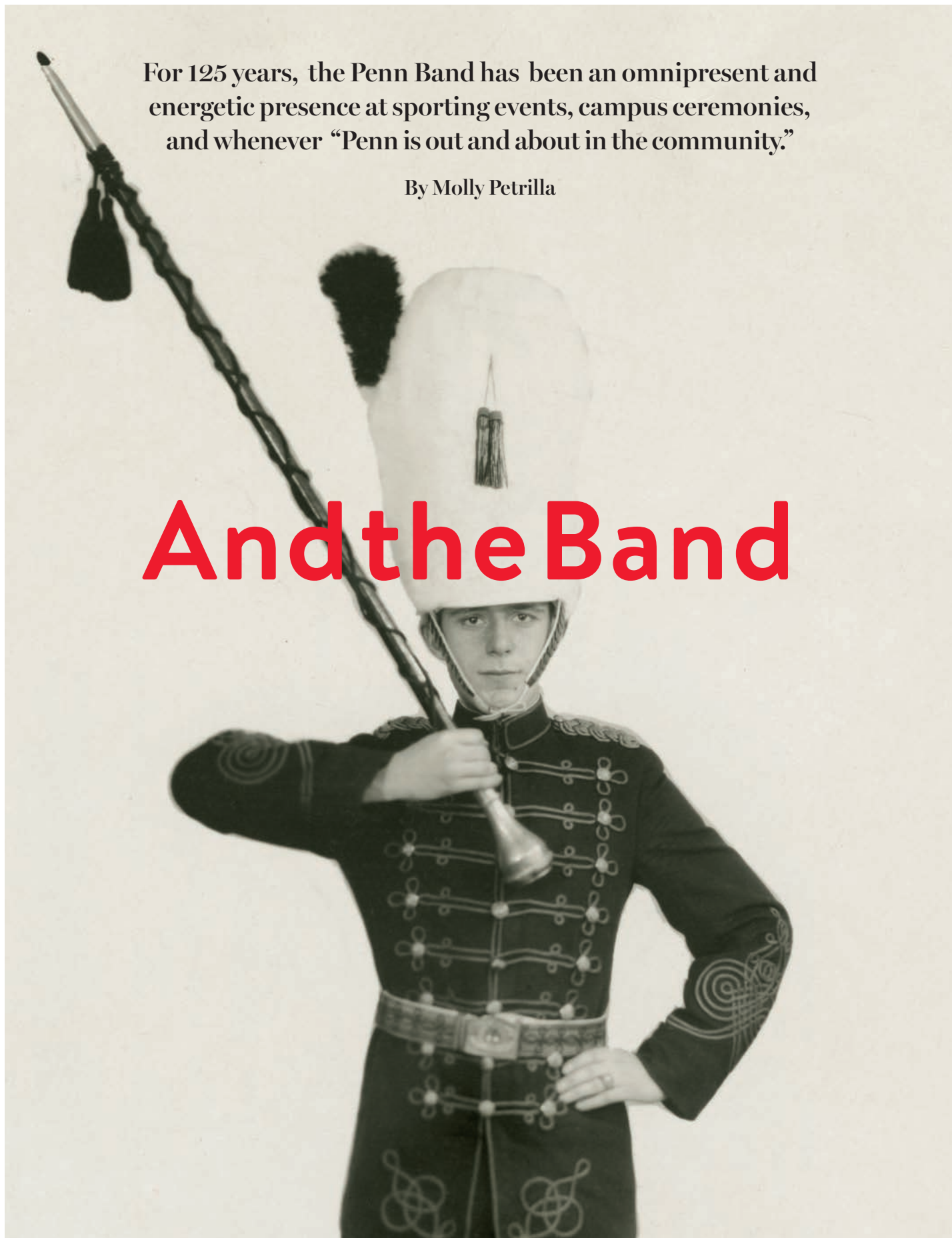


For 125 years, the Penn Band has been an omnipresent and energetic presence at sporting events, campus ceremonies, and whenever “Penn is out and about in the community.”

By Molly Petrilla

And the Band





Played On

Previous spread: Unidentified drum major in full uniform, with mace and busby (tall furry hat), 1920; Penn Band stalwart and director Greer Cheeseman in red-and-blue blazer, with balloon, 1980.

Below and opposite: Original band members on the steps of the Furness building (now Fisher Fine Arts Library), 1897; Cheeseman (slightly older, no balloon) surrounded by today's Penn Band, 2022.



Pop into Franklin Field or the Palestra on any game day and you might hear them before you spot them in the stands. The rumbling bass drum that reaches inside your stomach.

Piccolos chirping and brassy horns shouting. The cheering and heckling and chanting. Those familiar Penn songs they play, with detours into pop and classic rock and some beyond-niche stuff, like the theme from *Thomas & Friends*.

Even if you never go to a sporting event, you'll still encounter the Penn Band during your time as a student. They spice up move-in days and Convocation at the start of freshman year and keep the guest spots going right up through Commencement when they whoop it up beside the Button sculpture as seniors stride past in caps and gowns.

"The band is one of the few groups on campus that is nine months a year, four years," says its longtime director, R. Greer Cheeseman III EE'77. "We're everywhere, and we do a lot."

It's been that way for 125 years now—and it likely began with three words, bellowed across the Quadrangle in frustration: "*Shut up, fresh!*"

A. Felix DuPont C1901, a freshman at the time, just wanted to share the joy of his cornet playing that fall afternoon in 1897. Even though it led to some less-than-polite calls for him to stop, his impromptu performance on the Quad balcony also helped him meet likeminded student musicians—and ultimately create the University of Pennsylvania Band.

Today the Penn Band's history is overflowing with that kind of lore, some tales more easily verified than others. There's the story of Cheeseman launching the toast-throwing tradition at Franklin Field. The couples who met in the band and later got married, then had kids who joined up. The presidents and celebrities who've



heard them play, and the history-making games they've boosted from the stands.

That's what happens when a student group has stretched through at least five generations of students (and counting), and when it's both notoriously rowdy and present for many of the University's biggest moments year in and year out.

"The band is so wrapped up in all of Penn's traditions," says Brian Greenberg W'91, a trumpet player who serves on the band's alumni board. "And when Penn is out and about in the community, the band has always been its calling card."

The group officially marked its 125th anniversary on December 15, 2022. On that day in 1897, a group of 27 students—

including unsolicited Quad cornetist DuPont—held their first band rehearsal in the basement of what is now Hayden Hall.

For several decades by that point, American universities had been transforming from commuter schools into places where students actually lived as well as learned. "College students, when they got together in a dorm, could only drink so much, so to speak," says Kushol Gupta C'97 Gr'03, a Penn Band alum who is now its assistant director and devoted historian. "They wanted to do activities."

Different kinds of student groups began to form at Penn in the second half of the 19th century: the Glee Club, the University Orchestra, the Mask and Wig Club, a football team. Marching bands had been part

of American life since the military ensembles of the Revolutionary era, but they were having a major moment in the US right then thanks to composer John Philip Sousa, whose military marches (including "The Stars and Stripes Forever" and "Semper Fidelis") are still ubiquitous today.

"Sousa helped drive marching band activity to the forefront," Gupta says. "All over the country, colleges were starting their own marching bands, and Penn was no different in that regard." Except that the Penn Band quickly became, Gupta notes, "a pacesetter here in this region of the country"—which it has remained ever since.

In its first year alone, the band played at student rallies, marched in parades, performed inside the brand-new student

union Houston Hall, and played twice in front of President William McKinley. They also became a fixture at Penn football games inside the new Franklin Field stadium, where they were usually the only collegiate band on hand.

Once linked up with Penn football, the band was soon traveling by train and even boat to games near and far. “We’re one of the first college bands we’re aware of that actually traveled for athletic events,” Gupta says. And they’re still at it today—from daylong bus rides to Dartmouth to cross-country flights for NCAA tournament games.

The Penn Band has about 130 members right now. They come from 27 states and 10 countries (data that Gupta carefully tracks, along with his history-keeping efforts) and are enrolled in all four undergraduate schools at Penn, though most are in the College of Arts and Sciences.

“The band is big enough that you will find diverse groups of people, but small enough that you’ll know everyone in it,” says Emily Elenio C’19, a saxophonist and past president of the band. “It was the first time in my life I felt like I was in a place I truly belong.”

“It’s a shared common interest,” Greenberg adds. “No one makes fun of you for being in the band when you’re with the band. Everyone understands. Everyone wants to go and practice music on a Monday night.”

As with any student group, some members are more committed than others. That’s fine with Cheeseman, who quips in his annual recruiting speech, “All we’re looking for is a positive attitude and a pulse.”

It isn’t the only outlet at Penn for instrumentalists. There’s the orchestra, wind ensemble, jazz groups, even the all-flautist Penn Flutes. What sets the band apart is that they don’t spend several months practicing for a formal, one-night-only concert. “We do a different show every week, and we’re playing for a lot of people,” Cheeseman says. In fact, during a

He’s (Still) With the Band



Greer Cheeseman (above, circa 1976) wasn’t the only 20-something in Philly who lined up for midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in the late 1970s. He also wasn’t the only one there launching toast at the screen when Tim Curry’s character raises his glass in “a toast to absent friends.”

But as far as he knows, he and a few pals were the first to try recreating the experience at Franklin Field during the line “Here’s a toast to dear old Penn” in “Drink a Highball.”

“We took a couple loads of toast to a game once, and then it just took off from there,” Cheeseman remembers.

It’s now an entrenched tradition at Penn, with students and fans throwing toast onto the field, the track, or some of the seats in front of them (depending on their arm strength) in between the third and fourth quarters of every home football game—much like the scramble-style halftime shows and red-and-blue “P” sweater uniforms that Cheeseman also helped cement.

In fact, Cheeseman has been part of every major moment in the Penn Band’s last 50 years. After joining up as a freshman tuba player in 1973, he became a drum major his junior year and has stayed on ever since—first as assistant director and then, since 1994, as director.

The group’s rehearsal room walls are scattered with proof of his legacy: newspaper clippings from his time as drum major, a large banner recognizing his service to the band, memorable photos he’s appeared in through the

years. “It’s undeniable that the Penn Band wouldn’t be the same without his spirit, dedication, leadership, and faith in what the group can bring to this campus,” says Amanda Palamar C’23, a drum major for the band.

Serving as the adult leader of a student-run group can be thorny, but current and past band members say Cheeseman manages it well. “It’s a student-run organization, but Greer is the rudder that keeps the ship steady,” says Brian Greenberg, a member of the band’s alumni board. “It can be crazy and fun, but he doesn’t let it get *too* crazy and *too* fun so that it’s a problem.”

“I see myself as more of a coach than a director,” Cheeseman explains. And like a coach, when his band team travels to away games, he goes with them. “I didn’t think it was odd until I noticed that no one else seems to do it,” he says. “It’s not that I don’t trust them, but I just feel responsible. I think there should be an adult on the trip. I just want to make sure everything’s OK.”

Sometimes that means picking up a trumpet to fill in for missing musicians, as he did at a 2018 NCAA men’s basketball tournament in Kansas. At other moments, it means playing chemistry exam proctor, as he did for former band president Emily Elenio on a trip to Los Angeles. In 2014, he sat for hours with Elenio’s partner at an emergency dentist in Florida after the student fell and broke several teeth.

Looking back at her four years in the band, “I’m struggling to think of many times that Greer *wasn’t* there,” Elenio adds. “We do a hundred-plus events a year, and Greer travels with us to pretty much all home *and* away football and basketball games. It’s remarkable how he manages to be so present”—especially considering that he has a family and a day job: director of IT for Penn’s Development and Alumni Relations.

He’s also cultivated a strong relationship with Penn’s administration, ensuring the band is a staple at Commencement, Convocation, and other high-profile events. Back in his own student days, the band “wouldn’t get a sniff of some of the events we do now,” he says.

But he still honors the group’s desire to be goofy. “Greer is passionate about the band, but he doesn’t take it too seriously,” Greenberg says.

Photo by Vincent Palusci C’80 courtesy Penn Band

As Cheeseman himself sees it, someone with a degree in music or conducting would be frustrated in his role. “They would be overqualified,” he adds. “Our job is to show that they’re a fun group: sound good, look good, behave.”

Same goes for the director himself. “There’s a lot of different types of band directors out there,” says Gupta, Cheeseman’s longtime assistant director. “Greer’s a performer in the showman sort of way.”

“I do love the spotlight, I won’t deny it,” Cheeseman says. “I have a flair for the dramatic, let’s put it that way.”

That became obvious early into his own freshman year at Penn, when he’d put a cover on his tuba, turning himself into the olive in the martini glass formation as the band played “Drink a Highball.” He donned costumes as drum major, dressing based on the theme of each halftime show: a Dorothy gown for *The Wizard of Oz*; a toga for a Greek theme; at one point, he even became Moses parting the Red Sea.

The costume thing wasn’t a tradition in the band, nor did it become one. “That was all me,” Cheeseman says. “Nobody did it afterwards, nobody did it before.”

Palamar remembers her confusion when an adult got up in front of the band at her first rehearsal and the students around her began chanting “Magic! Magic! Magic!” And there was Cheeseman, entertaining the group with actual magic tricks, which he’s been performing since high school. (More recently, Penn band members chanted “Greer! Greer! Greer!” when the director deftly snagged a loose ball during the men’s basketball team’s 2022–23 home opener.)

As for why he’s stayed with the band for this long—he’s now a grandfather of six, 46 years removed from his own student days—“it’s still fun—that’s the bottom line,” Cheeseman says. “I enjoy being around the kids, and I think it keeps me young and active. They still accept me as one of them, which is nice.”

Like when he’s filling in on trumpet and it’s time to play “Industry Baby” by Lil Nas X. “He’ll give a huff and dramatically roll his eyes, pretending he doesn’t like us young kids’ songs,” Palamar says. “But of course, he continues to play alongside us and support our student leadership.”

Band members on the way to Ann Arbor for a football game against the University of Michigan, 1940, and in the Franklin Field stands at Penn’s Homecoming game in October.



typical academic year, the Penn Band performs together well over 60 times.

Unlike other music ensembles—or even a traditional marching band—the Penn Band has been a true “scramble band” since the early 1970s. That means they

still move into formations during half-time of football games, but they get there in mad dashes rather than organized steps. As their website puts it: “You can run in a circle, you can run in a very screwed up line, you can fall down on the

The band performing on Franklin Field in the early 1980s, when the uniforms were blue sweaters and white pants (so we're told), and this year, in red sweaters and khakis.



ground and writhe around, you can steal someone's trumpet and make them chase you ... you get the idea. Just go crazy until you're supposed to be at Point B. Then we park in that formation, play a song, and repeat the process a couple of times."

Classic marching band uniforms are gone, too; there's not a brass button or feather plume in sight. The Penn Band races around, clutching their instruments while dressed in sweaters and khakis, as a chosen student reads their show's script—a new one is written for each football game—via the Franklin Field loudspeaker.

Of the "probably some 270 college bands in the country," Gupta says, "only maybe 10 of them do the scramble style." Scramble isn't something high school marching bands dabble in either. "It's a totally new experience for all of our students, but they buy into it," Gupta says. "It's a really good fit for students in the Ivy League, especially Penn, because it doesn't demand as many hours of practice on the field."

"This is a group that wants to be rowdy and have fun," adds Cheeseman, "and I think that's what we do."



On May 16, 2016, about a year after *Hamilton* revolutionized Broadway, its superstar composer/lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda Hon'16 sat on a small stage on Locust Walk, watching the Class of 2016 pass by on their way to Franklin Field, awaiting his turn as commencement speaker later that morning.

Directly across from him, clustered beside the Button: the Penn Band, playing "My Shot" from *Hamilton*. They were the first band to cover music from the blockbuster show, Gupta notes.

As snare drums snapped and a xylophone pinged, Miranda grabbed his phone and started filming. Later he even danced with them. "I was personally excited by how he really seemed to enjoy the band, even when we weren't playing 'My Shot,'" Elenio says.

It wasn't the first time that the Penn Band met a celebrity or livened up a major campus event. Sousa himself conducted

A Lifetime Commitment for Some

She played the glockenspiel

and he played the euphonium. They met during freshman move-in, but it wasn't until the Penn Band road-tripped to a Dartmouth away game that they grew closer.

"After 11 hours on a bus each way, you may as well get married," jokes Roslyn Scheiber Palusci C'80, the glockenspielist. In fact, she and her now-husband, Vincent J. Palusci C'80, know a second married Penn couple who clicked on that same bus trip.

It's not an unusual story among band alumni: couples who met with instruments in hand, then stayed together long past graduation. As the longtime director, Cheeseman says he "must get invited to two, three [band] weddings a year, which is pretty cool."

Elenio, who graduated in 2019, has been with her partner, a fellow band alum, for nearly five years. They just bought a house together. Soon she'll be serving as bridesmaid for a band friend who is marrying another band friend.

"You spend a lot of time together," says Greenberg, attempting to explain the Penn Band's long track record as matchmaker. "You get to know each other quite well on the bus."

Gupta, who also met his wife in the band, says the group offers a shared experience—many, in fact. "When you travel together, go to all these places, live together in off-campus housing, you build bonds that just last,"



he says. "That's been a timeless feature of our organization."

Some of those band couples even have children who go on to join the group. Vince and Roz's son John Palusci C'09 WG'15 and daughter Katie Palusci Siegel W'11 were both active band members during their own Penn days. That's also where John met

Meredith Boehm Palusci C'09 Nu'10 GNu'14, who is now his wife.

"Band spawn, we call it," Greenberg says of these inter-band relationships and multi-generational families. But it's not only marriages that form. "I met all my friends on Franklin Field on the 50-yard line," he adds.

Consider the band's current team of directors: Cheeseman, Gupta, Adam Sherr C'90 GEd'00, and Robin Coyne Nu'12 GNu'15 (the band's first woman director), all of whom were once members of the band themselves, and who now balance their band gigs with full-time day jobs.

Alumni also return with their instruments to play with the band at Homecoming (there were 90 on the field this year) and Alumni Weekend, or even to help cover parts at a basketball game when needed.

"We refer to Penn Band Nation," Greenberg says. "If a student or even another alum calls and says, 'Hey, I was in the band,' everyone is taking that call. We're just there for each other all the time."

The Penn Band, adds Greenberg, "is the longest and most successful relationship of my life."

them several times before his death in 1932. They've since played in front of former presidents Ronald Reagan and Lyndon B. Johnson (separately), Al Gore (they chose "You Can Call Me Al" as his entrance music, which later became his campaign song), Dolly Parton, and at the 2019 Commencement, Jon Bon Jovi Hon'19. "The events are never about the Penn Band,"

Gupta says, "but we're always there as an accessory and to augment things."

In 1962, they became the first college band to march in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. "They raced up to New York the night before, did the parade, then raced back to Franklin Field the next day to do the Penn-Cornell game," Gupta says. They played the 1964

World's Fair and the Miss America Pageant Parade several times. They put out multiple albums (a tradition that continues today), and when the Penn men's basketball team reached the 1979 Final Four in Utah, the band went too.

Today the high-profile NCAA basketball tournament covers the band's transportation, food, and lodging. "But back then, we were on our own," remembers Cheeseman, who was the assistant director at the time. "We had to scrounge to get buses. We slept in the Salt Palace [Convention Center] and we were showering in the locker rooms."

By the mid-1980s, Penn Band membership had ballooned to well over 200 students, making it the largest student group on campus, according to Gupta. They rehearsed inside the Annenberg Center, "and it smelled like a locker room because there were so many people," Cheeseman recalls.

Of course, there are darker times throughout its history, too. Gupta readily acknowledges that "looking at the past through the filter of present day is always disappointing"—including women not being allowed to march on Franklin Field until 1970 ["Gazetteer," Nov|Dec 2020]. But he says the group has been continuing to evolve along with the rest of Penn. "We're changing with the times in a way that really does reflect the student body," he says, noting that certain songs and traditions have been removed from the group's repertoire due to their troubling roots.

But one thing that hasn't and won't change, Gupta says, is the band's role in students' lives at Penn. "We want this to be their happy place," he says—a term Elenio also uses when describing her years with the band.

"There's all sorts of things that come and go, but the core of it remains the same," Greenberg notes of the Penn Band experience. "It's not about age, race, gender. We're just bandos. We're just friends."

Molly Petrilla C'06 is a frequent contributor to the *Gazette*.