All in the Family

WCC’s John Fellas leads the charge to keep alumni just that — family

By Barbara Moroch

For many, graduation day marks an ending of sorts, the culmination of years of study toward a much-coveted degree. But for WCC Alumni Director John Fellas, graduation day is just the start — of what he hopes will be a lifelong association between the college and its graduates.

WCC’s Alumni Department is in the midst of a renaissance, energized by Fellas’ commitment to the college and its student body — past and present. Over his 19 years with the College, Fellas has worked in a number of capacities for the Foundation. Now, within the walls of his paper-strewn office, big ideas are coming to the fore to further involve and engage alumni.

Toward that end, the WCC Alumni Association was established last year, when more than 100 alumni volunteers came together and adopted a set a by-laws to create the Association. An elected 15-member Alumni Council is charged with the governing of the Association, whose mission it is to strengthen the bond between the College and its graduates through networking, outreach, and special events.

“This boon in alumni involvement is a wonderful source of new volunteers for the College,” says Director of Volunteer Services Adele Shansky. “It helps do what our volunteer corps is known for — providing more help and services to the College than could otherwise not be provided.”

Fellas couldn’t agree more. “We never had a formal Alumni Association before,” he says. “Our goal now is to put on a full-court press, so to speak, by giving alumni opportunities to stay connected and support the College and its students.”

Support of the school is, indeed, the challenge for Fellas and the Alumni Association. He explains that most often, graduates identify most with the four-year college they go on to, after their time at a community college. “How do we change that thinking?” asks Fellas. In fact, it’s an issue that two-year institutions nationwide wrestle with. Most four-year colleges and universities have an alumni base that is active and contributing, but the national average for alumni who give to their community college is under one percent.

That’s a statistic that needs to change — at least where Westchester Community College is concerned — and they are making great strides being made to move the needle on their own numbers. In the days before the Association, the College had 30,000 active alumni records with only enough money to produce a newsletter twice a year. Now, Fellas and the Association have worked to double that number, and have instituted a monthly e-newsletter that reaches more than 15,000 alumni.

Also notably, the Association has expanded the definition of “alumni” to include not only graduates of the school, but those who have taken at least 24 credits at WCC. “Our thinking is that someone who has taken at least 24 credits means they have been here long enough to feel vested in the school. Hopefully, that involvement will lead to investment,” says Fellas.

Of late, there have been a series of successful events that Fellas and the Association have sponsored to reach out to alumni. Most recently, they partnered with WCC’s Center for Financial and Economic Education for a “Financial Education Day,” held this year on March 23. This free event offered workshops, private consultations and expert advice on a host of financial topics. Free to the public, the event drew more than 200 participants, and the majority were WCC Alumni.

“Community college alumni identify more with specific activities than they do with their graduation class year, and more than half of our alumni live in Westchester, so it’s easy to bring them together,” explains Fellas. With that in mind, the Alumni Department has worked to identify alumni involved with activities on campus — like College athletics, fraternities such as Phi Theta Kappa and Kappa Sigma Kappa, programs such as the Honors Program and the Speech and Communications curriculum. More traditional events include an annual Holiday Party and reception for the 50 Year Reunion Class.

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This year, the Native Plant Center at Westchester Community College, founded as the first national affiliate of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas has held a year-long celebration of its 15th anniversary. The Native Plant Center, or NPC, continues to be recognized as a leader and resource in educating people about the use of native plants. “Native plants form the basis of the food web for what’s left of wild nature” says volunteer Carolyn Summers, an authority on Native Plants, a leader of the NPC and member of its Steering Committee. “I’m trying to help people make the connections between the plants in the gardens and the role they play in the environment.”

With the continuing focus on environmental advocacy and sustainability, the NPC is leading the way. Its “Go Native U Classes” encourage its participants to improve their own personal ecosystems by creating a native meadow, attracting beneficial insects, identifying native plants and flowers and advancing their usage in their own gardens. Participants in regular classes in Go Native U can obtain a certificate in Sustainable Gardening. Classes are taught by qualified, experienced professionals.

NPC Director, Carol Capobianco brings a focus to the Center: the embodiment of its local flora identity. Lady Bird Johnson had a vision. She felt that wherever she traveled in the United States, the land should speak “its own language in its own regional accent.” The uniqueness of Texas, California, and New York should be revealed through the flora. Native plants, Mrs. Johnson said, “give us a sense of where we are in this great land of ours.”

This thinking led to the founding of what was to become the initial center in Austin Texas, the institution that inspired our very own NPC in Valhalla, NY. And, WCC’s Native Plant Center is powered by volunteers including our own Campus Green Thumbs who work hard beautifying the College.

In addition, every year, the Native Plant Center holds a Plant Sale in April. This event is the major fund-raiser for the Center which is an entirely self-sufficient organization, requiring substantial volunteer support to maintain itself. Specialists and gardeners always enjoy this wonderful event which benefits the NPC, homeowners and WCC alike.

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Spring Career Day was on April 17, in partnership with the Career & Transfer Center. This event invited alumni back to campus to mentor students on career choices, using their own experiences as an example of what the future holds for them. The day featured various job-hunting tactics including resume workshops and interviewing skills. A new College Connection Program has been developed, where alumni who have gone on to four-year institutions will partner with recent WCC graduates heading for the same university to “show them the ropes.”

And then there’s the WCC Alumni Online Community with over 1,400 registered members and growing. A part of the site is a Perk’s Card Program offering special deals and benefits such as retail discounts, entertainment discounts, insurance programs, cash back shopping and more.

“In the end, our alumni are the best testimonials for what WCC is all about,” says Fellas who, along with the Association volunteers, will continue to offer plenty of reasons to keep them — all in the family.