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# COMMON KNOWLEDGE

A publication for School for New Learning alumni



## LOOKING BACK LOOKING FORWARD



Summer 2019  
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Photo by Jeff Carrion



**5 min**

WITH INTERIM DEAN

**DON OPITZ**

## KEEP LEARNING

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Since I was made interim dean last summer, a lot has been happening. Our big news is the adoption of a new name, the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, as part of a larger strategy to be more competitive in the adult learning market. Further updates on this development are forthcoming, so stay tuned!

We launched a new professional studies major in computing, and we obtained the university's approval for another major in health care administration. We also welcomed new cohorts of students in business administration at Harper College and the Chicago Police Academy.

Even as we've grown our new enrollments, over the academic year we've graduated hundreds of students at the bachelor's and master's levels. ("Hint, hint" to our graduating undergraduates—the Double Demon Discount awaits you!) We completed our on-site program for a cohort of BA students at Fifth Third Bank, and several have now graduated. Our students are doing wonderful work, and they're receiving due recognition. As just one example, military veteran and bachelor's degree recipient Michael Slaughter (SNL '19) uses artwork to raise awareness of and support for veterans reintegrating to civilian life.

We are also very proud of our alumni. We've enjoyed hearing from a range of you who "pay it forward," as St. Vincent calls us to do. Don Fitzgerald (SNL '93) retired as vice president of merchandising from Mariano's, but he continues to teach business part time at DePaul. James Mumm (SNL '02), son of SNL Adjunct Faculty Maureen Dolan, was named campaigns director of Greenpeace USA. Patrick Matara (SNL '16), a graduate of our former on-site program at Tangaza University College in Kenya, was invited to speak last October to UNICEF in New York in observance of the UN's International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Ronnie Malley (SNL '17), founder of Intercultural Music Production, co-wrote the play "American Griot," about early African Muslim slaves' contributions to American blues music.

On a somber note, we said a final farewell to our founding dean, Howard Sulkin (DHL '90), who passed away in 2018.

Pamela Tate, former president and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, has been SNL's Adult Learning Fellow in Residence this year. We congratulate her on her induction into the International Adult and Continuing Education Learning Hall of Fame and her recognition as the first recipient of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning Pamela Tate Rise Award, which was named for her.

As interim dean of SNL, I'm proud of our students and alumni, and I'm grateful to our donors, whose generosity surpassed this year's goal for the Blue Demon Challenge! I'm excited about our ever-evolving work in advancing the learning of adults. I welcome you to drop a line, or simply drop in. We love to hear from you!

Keep learning,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donald L. Opitz".

Donald L. Opitz, PhD (CSH '91), Interim Dean



# “Aha” The *Aha* moment

Alumna discovers skills she didn't know she needed

Cortney Sigilai (SNL '15) was on her way up the corporate ladder when she decided to enroll in DePaul's Master of Arts in Educating Adults (MAEA) program.

“Before the master's program, I had already taken a deep dive into my professional career, but I wanted to go further. I wanted to understand how adults learn, what motivates them and how to tap into the latest knowledge to further develop my skills and expertise,” says Sigilai, who has worked for CareerBuilders.com and GE Capital, among other companies, and is now assistant vice president and senior learning specialist at Byline Bank.

What she discovered was that she could immediately transfer the skills she was gaining in the classroom to her workplace. “What was unexpected was how quickly I was able to apply the knowledge and how immediately desirable it was from the industries that I worked in,” she says.

At a certain point in the program, Sigilai also discovered something about herself. “One of the things I noticed was that I really liked being able to help people find their ‘aha’ moments,” she says.

This newfound knowledge, combined with the specific concepts she mastered, enabled her to direct her current workplace in the kind of employee training redesign it needed to succeed. In the process, Sigilai

“A lot of what I learned in the classroom I was able to use in the workplace to help them make improvements.”

became a sought-after candidate by other companies. “From recruiters I found out that I was a desired candidate because of my dynamic knowledge in the field of adult education, which I credit to my degree from DePaul,” says Sigilai, who also has a BS in applied speech communication and an AAS in legal studies.

As an entrepreneur who co-founded TréLuxe, a company that makes products used on curly hair, Sigilai has leveraged her MAEA degree to grow her business. “Not only do we provide products, but we do a lot of webinars and educational sessions with retailers on how to market to curly-haired customers,” she says. “I use the knowledge that I received from the MAEA program to guide the retailers and the buyers on how to better connect with their curly-haired customers.”

“My success wouldn't have happened without DePaul,” she adds.

# Sharing Knowledge and Expertise

The Chicago-focused Community Engagement Network offers collaborative learning for success

It began with an idea.

What if there were a consortium of institutions of higher education that came together to promote social change—and it all started with DePaul?

“Arthur W. Chickering, a very well-known and long-standing authority in the field of adult learning and development, agreed to provide some initial funds for us to be a demonstration program that we could then take to other institutions,” recalls Professor Catherine Marienau, who directs SNL’s Master of Arts in Educating Adults program.

With that, the Chicago-focused Community Engagement Network (CEN) was born.

Since its launch in 2017, SNL has hosted eight CEN gatherings, including one this past March (see sidebar).

With topics ranging from “Creating and Building Networks for Social Action” to “Asset-based Community Development,” CEN gives SNL students, alumni, faculty and staff a chance to learn from each other.

“I’ve seen students and alumni involved in social-change efforts in Chicago communities doing really incredible grassroots work, but while they might be in class together, they don’t know what each other is doing,” says Marienau, who joined the full-time SNL faculty in 1983. “Here we have this SNL community of people who have lifelong-learning skills, they are very self-reflective, and many of them have incorporated social change into their degree programs. Through CEN, we are able to provide a forum for them to meet, learn from each other and exchange ideas and resources.”

Ernest Sanders (SNL MA ’19), who earned a master’s degree in applied professional studies in June, has served as both a

CEN presenter and a participant. Having worked in the nonprofit world for more than 30 years, he currently heads his own organization, COMEUNITY Based Solutions, which provides comprehensive strategies and solutions to improve organizations, neighborhoods and their resources.

“So many of us are concerned about work, societal and school-based issues. How then do we leverage each other’s expertise to provide some solutions to some of these issues?” he says. “CEN has definitely been informative and resourceful. I know some of my classmates have infused their workplace with some of the [shared] policies and practices, which is what these events are really about.”

Janise Hurtig, a part-time SNL faculty member, served as an ethnographer chronicling CEN through observation, surveys and one-on-one conversations. “The idea was to be able to map the way the project was developing, but also, from an



ethnographic point of view, to try to capture what [the experience] means to different people," she says.

Based on these investigations, a recipe for success emerged. Before the event, the topic is chosen by CEN participants. And each event includes this winning format: highlighting the work of one or more alumni who are doing community engagement work, giving participants time to speak either in a panel or in some kind of dialogue, providing more intimate breakout groups for participants to share and learn from each other, and concluding with a final summary of knowledge shared and learned.

"These elements have been key to sustaining this notion that CEN really belongs to the participants and that we're all constantly learning from each other," says Hurtig.

The themes have also been fine-tuned over the past two years from looking at different types of community engagement to examining actual practices that have been effective in developing a community action

program. As an added dimension, SNL alumni have served as impromptu peer leaders.

What CEN has consistently shown is that connections are multifaceted and multidimensional. "Some of the key outcomes have been the extent of individual and organizational connections that have happened between students and students, students and alumni, and alumni and alumni," says Hurtig. "There have also been some important connections that faculty have brought back to their classrooms."

For Marienau, CEN is a reflection of DePaul's world-ready approach to education, which prepares students to go out into the world.

"At SNL, our students are already in the world. They're 30, 40, 50+ years old. They are living and working in the communities that DePaul would like to be serving," she says. "Through CEN we are able to recognize that work and put experienced people together to share their knowledge and their experience, which is really a vital part of the identity of the School for New Learning."

**"We have this SNL community of people who have lifelong-learning skills. ... Through CEN, we are able to provide a forum for them to meet, learn from each other and exchange ideas and resources."**

**—Catherine Marienau**

CEN TACKLES MENTORING AT-RISK YOUTH

On March 21, 2019, an engaged group of community activists from organizations such as Literacy Volunteers of Illinois and Ex-Cons for Community and Social Change gathered together with SNL alumni, faculty and staff for a panel discussion on mentoring youth—particularly at-risk youth. SNL alumna Diane Deaderick-DeMartra (SNL MA '13), founder of Just For You Girlfriend, a nonprofit designed to mentor teen girls and women for postsecondary education and career success, invited the panelists: professional communicator Naurice Roberts, biological anthropologist and Professional Development for Good! founder Sylvia Atsalis, and corporate people manager/consultant Ava Hawkins.

The panelists discussed the importance of helping mentees understand what happens in a mentoring relationship, how to find the inner drive to anchor their lives and how to get and keep a job.

One piece of advice Hawkins shares with the African-American youth she mentors is that "code-switching is OK. It doesn't make you a sellout." She herself had to learn to speak the language of the dominant culture as often the only African American in upper management.

Deborah Smiley, a second-year DePaul law student who thought her life was over when she became a teen mother, shared with the group how mentoring has given her the guidance and encouragement she needed to make a productive life for herself and her son. "I surrounded myself with women who were where I wanted to be," she says. Now a legal intern at the DePaul Misdemeanor Clinic, she hopes to go into public interest law after graduation.



**SNL** was founded nearly half a century ago. As the newly branded School of Continuing and Professional Studies, it continues to offer adult learners innovative programs that meet their needs.

When SNL opened its doors in 1972, the nation was in the midst of what came to be known as the nontraditional student movement.

"This meant the student came before the institution. That sounds basic now, but up to that time, the questions were always 'what did the institution think' not 'what did the student think,'" recalled SNL founding Dean Howard Sulkin in a 1998 documentary SNL produced in honor of the school's 25th anniversary.

With professionally oriented degree programs, recognition of life experiences, emphasis on applied liberal studies and commitment to community, SNL offers working adults a pathway to higher education in a way that meets their needs.

"SNL was built upon educational principles that value students' prior learning from experience, their workplace-based knowledge and skills, and their perspectives as older students that traditional students would learn about in textbooks. This is what makes adult learning such a fascinating and exciting project," says Interim Dean Don Opitz.

For Associate Professor Susan McGury, producer of the anniversary documentary, SNL is like no other place for adult learners. From its inception, SNL has placed students from the working world in command of their learning pathways.



## A LOOK BACK... A LOOK FORWARD

"This method of education puts the student in the driver's seat while surrounding them with lots of supports and resources. Add to this the lifelong-learning element, which is about building skills, and the result is the confidence to know that you can teach yourself anything," she says.

Having graduated its 10,000th student this past summer, SNL continues its commitment to serving a unique learning population, even as it pivots to respond to changes in its market.

According to recent studies, SNL students are older (average age 36), work more hours than other DePaul students (68 percent work 30+ hours per week) and attend part time (87 percent). They also express greater satisfaction with their advising and academic experiences. Also, the proportion of SNL's African-American students is significantly higher than the same demographic for adult learners across DePaul.

SNL continues to reinforce its commitment to the larger community.

**"THIS METHOD OF EDUCATION PUTS THE STUDENT IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT WHILE SURROUNDING THEM WITH LOTS OF SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES."  
-SUSAN MCGURY**

"Students who come to our programs are already very much engaged with their communities. This is something that DePaul values and SNL especially emphasizes," says Opitz.

This summer, SNL will officially become the School of Continuing and Professional Studies. Building upon its strengths in online and flexible degree program options, the school will become even more competitive in an already competitive marketplace by offering more specialized degrees. This includes new undergraduate degree programs in business administration, computing and health care administration in partnership with the College of Science and Health.

"These developments will enable us to reach a wider net of students and be more successful. I'm excited about us being more innovative as we explore new degree programs and engage in the business of certificates and stackable credentials," says Opitz.

Looking ahead to a future under the SCPS banner means both change and consistency.

"One thing is sure: The school is proudly advancing its unique mission of engaging adults in learning that connects their academic studies with endeavors at work and in the community," says Opitz.



# A Shining Light

**“You can’t  
be what you  
can’t see.”**

**—Bevon Joseph**

**W**hen Bevon Joseph signed up for “Social Media for Social Change” at SNL, he had no way of knowing that this course would lead to his calling. “Our end project was to build a social media campaign around a social cause that we were passionate about,” recalls Joseph, who earned his BA in June and will pursue a master’s degree in entrepreneurship at DePaul’s Driehaus College of Business in the fall.

His project was something close to his heart: bringing more diversity to the financial services sector by introducing young minorities to internships.

But after completing the project, Instructor Nicholas Hayes asked whether the project was real or not—and if not, what was stopping him?

“That’s how the Greenwood Project initially got started,” says Joseph, who founded the nonprofit with his wife, Elois, in 2016.

Since 2018, the organization has helped recruit and place 225 minority students in 25 firms—from Nasdaq and UBS and Cboe. More than just giving talented youth jobs and high-performing businesses

access to valuable team members, Joseph’s organization exposes youth from marginalized communities to opportunities they didn’t know existed or didn’t know existed for them.

“I believe there’s no lack of talent. What we have is a lack of opportunity and exposure, because at the end of the day, our students can’t be what they can’t see,” says Joseph.

Through internships, lunch-and-learns and even a summer trip to New York, the Greenwood Project—which initially recruited only from Chicago’s South and West sides but now casts a national net—introduces talented, but often isolated, young people to new opportunities.

Joseph moved to the United States at 18 after growing up in Trinidad and Tobago. He has worked steadily in the financial services industry since his start fixing computers on the trading floor in New York.

Although he received an associate degree as a computer technician and multiple certificates, Joseph has always aimed higher. “It’s always been a dream of mine to be the first in my family to go to college,” he says.

Through a former work colleague he found out about SNL and, at the age of 34, began

his academic journey. Throughout his years at DePaul, Joseph has been a mentor to his fellow students. He has also been recognized as a leader. Joseph was named 2018 Student Entrepreneur of the Year through the Coleman Entrepreneurship Center and represented DePaul in the Final Four Pitch Competition at 1871, a Chicago tech and entrepreneurship center.

At age 41, Joseph says he’s in no rush to leave DePaul.

“We have access to so many resources at DePaul, and the Coleman Entrepreneurship Center has fueled so much of my success,” he says. “I’m grateful that I was able to leverage all my professional years of experience, and all my courses are directly related to my nonprofit work. I also love that the majority of our faculty have jobs outside of teaching so they understand real-world problems and solutions.”

The admiration is mutual. “Not only is Bevon an exceptional student, but he’s just an amazing person individually and in the community,” says mentor and SNL Associate Professor Derise Tolliver Atta. “His light shines so brightly, and it’s a shared light.”



## COMMON KNOWLEDGE

We welcome your story ideas,  
questions and comments.

### Office of Alumni Relations

alumni.depaul.edu  
(800) 437-1898

### School for New Learning

snl.depaul.edu  
snl@depaul.edu

### Editor

Abigail Pickus

### Designer

Courtney Berliant (LAS MA '14)

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**DePaul University**  
Office of Advancement  
1 E. Jackson Blvd.  
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