



On the Road with President Kermit Hall

By Thomas A. Bass
Photos by Mark Schmidt

Gov. George Pataki looked surprised. He was shaking hands with UAlbany President Kermit Hall at the foot of the “million-dollar staircase” in the New York State Capitol, where the two men had bumped into each other by accident. Assemblyman John “Jack” McEneny was explaining to the governor that the 20 people standing behind President Hall were “Roads Scholars.” That’s roads, as in “two roads diverged in a yellow wood.” But the governor must have thought we were headed to Oxford, the happy recipients of Cecil B. Rhodes’s largesse. Like any natural politician, Pataki resolved this momentary confusion by wishing us

hearty “Congratulations!” and shaking our hands.

It was Kermit Hall’s idea to take a play on words, a joking reference to the benefits of scholarly travel, and turn it into a whirlwind tour of the Capital District. Last May 16, he put 20 new faculty members, along with a leavening of students and staff members, on a bus and led us on a 10-hour trip from the Albany Pine Bush to Beverwyck and on from there to the Collar City (see details below).

The University’s new president is a Type A personality, a

member of “the impatient part of the population,” he says. Before lunch he writes a book and edits another, and then, after lunch, he runs a major university, chairs a few governmental panels, and leads the basketball team in a Big Purple Growl. We academic pups would be sprinting behind him for a day, while Roads Scholar Hall engaged in community outreach and architectural tourism before moving on to art, politics and city planning. So it wasn’t that surprising after all to find George Pataki shaking President Hall’s hand and saying, “Congratulations!”

At 7:30 a.m., we shuffled onto a bus headed for Schenectady High School. President Hall promptly seized the microphone and began talking about UAlbany as “an urban institution” in need of defining its urban mission. We would begin by getting out of our ivory towers — actually, our pre-stressed concrete towers — and reconnecting with the community. A reporter from the Albany Times Union was scratching notes. The rest of us were scratching our eyes.

“I haven’t been on a bus going to high school since ... high school!” groaned my seatmate.

Someone else suggested we were getting off easy. We were following the president for a day. New faculty members at Utah State, Hall’s former haunt, had toured their big western neighborhood for three days.

What were we supposed to do when we got to Schenectady? In between writing a book and running the University, President Hall must have said to himself, “Let’s go teach high school!” So that’s what we did. We hit the corridors of Schenectady High and fanned out to teach tenth-grade classes in everything from Constitutional law (Hall) to epidemiology and biostatistics. One of President Hall’s key missions is to improve the academic profile of the University: make it more attractive to bright students and pitch it at their level. Our visit to Schenectady was a signpost. “This is what the great university down the street has to offer. If it turns you on, we’d love to see you.” As the Schenectady schools superintendent explained to the reporter from the Times Union, our visit was “a little motivational.”

Then it was off to the state capitol, where Assemblyman McEneny, who has written about Albany, took up the task of touring us around the premises, aided by Sen. Neil Breslin. Next, Professor John Pipkin of the

University’s Department of Geography and Planning walked us through town, explaining how Albany’s personality was split between competing architectural styles, ranging from Colonial brick to neoclassical stone. We lunched at Nicole’s, in the city’s oldest building, off Quackenbush Square, and met with the president of the Albany County Convention & Visitors Bureau. Then we were back on the bus, headed to the Collar City, a.k.a. Troy, for informational meetings with the director of the Arts Center of the Capital Region and Kathleen Jimino, the Rensselaer County executive. She took over the microphone to lead us down River Street to the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall. There, Albin Zak, the new head of the University’s music department, finding the urge irresistible, bounded on stage to sit at the grand piano, where he played a few jazzy riffs before we were herded back on the bus for our last stop of the day: an editorial board meeting at the Times Union. Editor Rex Smith walked us through the details of choosing the following day’s headlines. I was pleased to see the next morning, when I picked up a copy on the newsstand, that the TU, along with stories on arson, breast cancer, obesity, and trash collection, was also running a nice article titled “UAlbany Newcomers Meet the Community.” ■

From left: President Hall, left, with Governor Pataki and Assemblyman John McEneny

President Hall with students from Schenectady High School

In the state Assembly Chamber with Assemblyman McEneny

Modeling Dutch hats

Albin Zak playing tunes at Troy Savings Bank Music Hall

Walking through the Times Union building

Professor Thomas Bass, who teaches courses in English and journalism, is the author of a feature story in the May 23, 2005, issue of The New Yorker magazine titled “The Spy Who Loved Us.” In it, Bass unearths the story of Vietnamese journalist Pham Xuan An, a “brilliant political analyst” who turned out to be a double agent for the communists throughout the Vietnam War.

