

city living

# FOWL FRIENDS

SOCIOLOGIST EXPLORES THE LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PIGEONS

by Eileen Reynolds / GSAS '11



ILLUSTRATION © MICHAEL KLEIN

As anyone who's ever shooed a bird from a bench knows, pigeons are an urban dweller's constant companions: They roost on our air-conditioners, scavenge our sidewalks, and leave their feathery waste on our monuments. Mostly, we just watch them and try to steer clear.

Fascinated by this human-avian

dance, sociology and environmental studies professor Colin Jerolmack embarked on four years of research that ultimately took him to the iconic public squares of London and Venice, and even as far away as South Africa, home to the annual Million Dollar Pigeon Race. But some of the most compelling findings reported in his new book, *The Global Pigeon* (University of Chicago Press), grew

out of countless hours spent right here in New York, where Jerolmack gazed up at the skies with members of the Bronx Homing Pigeon Club, hung out with a group of working-class Brooklynites brought together by the pigeons they breed, and watched scrappy Greenwich Village birds beg for pizza crusts in the neighborhood's tiny public parks.

NYU Alumni Magazine caught

up with Jerolmack to talk about the city's much-maligned birds, the people who love and feed them, and why the "rats with wings" moniker—first coined in 1966 by pigeon-hating city parks commissioner Thomas P.F. Hoving—is just unfair.

You observed that pigeons are pretty crafty about getting New Yorkers to toss them scraps. How do they do it?

Pigeons are synanthropes—animals that adapt and actually do better in human-disrupted environments than they did in the natural habitat. They're rewarded when they walk close to people, cock their head, double back—they have strategies to evoke feeding from people who just came to a park to eat a pizza and talk with their friend.

The book looks at unlikely friendships forged over rooftop pigeon coops in Brooklyn. How did that come about?

It's based on a very pragmatic problem. Pigeon flying is a lot of work. Hopefully your son helps you [to] clean the coop, bring

ination with the birds, these men form neighborhood and community ties that transcend racial barriers. It's definitely a New York story.

For a city slicker, what's appealing about racing homing pigeons? When you send your pigeon out for 400 miles, it has to traverse hostile terrain. There are hawks; there are storms they have to go around; not all of them will make it home. When that bird comes back over the horizon, there's this tremendous rush: Here's this treasure that you bred and willfully surrendered, not knowing if you'd ever see it again, coming back to you. In a way, even if you didn't win the race, nurture has triumphed over nature. You've figured out how to manipulate both the bird's genes and behavior to outfox the storms, the weather, the hawks.

Why do pigeons have such a bad reputation? Is it true they can make us sick?

Do pigeons carry disease? Yes. But there's a difference between diseases they can transmit to oth-

"There's no documented case of a person getting sick from a street pigeon," Jerolmack says.

er pigeons and diseases they can transmit to people. West Nile? They're resistant. Bird flu? They mostly don't get it, and if they do get it, they die immediately, which means they aren't a good carrier. There's no documented case of a person getting sick from a street pigeon. That doesn't mean you should be happy about pigeon feces on a bench, but let's put it in perspective. The whole disease thing is a red herring. It's an excuse. It's a frame that allows us to justify getting rid of animals that we don't like anyway. ■

PHOTO © SPENCER TUCKER

parks

# An Urban Johnny Appleseed

ENVIRONMENTALIST SOWS NEW YORK'S MOST AMBITIOUS TREE PLANTING

by Naomi Howell / GAL '14

Morgan Monaco spent a lot of her childhood underneath the wide-hanging oaks and maples of Central Park. It was around this time that she first read Dr. Seuss's environmentally conscious book, *The Lorax*—about a character who acts on behalf of the trees against corporate greed—and felt an inherent kinship with his cause. "My mom would have to drag me away in tears when it was time to go home," she recalls. "The park was where I wanted to be."

She's all grown up now, but for Monaco (WAG '14), that feeling hasn't changed. As director of MillionTreesNYC since 2009, she spends much of her professional life outdoors spearheading an effort with the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation to plant one million trees in the city's five boroughs within a decade. The first phase will put about 700,000 trees mostly in parks over the coming years, when MillionTrees will then shift fo-

MONACO PLANS TO PLANT ONE MILLION NEW TREES IN NYC.

cus to street trees. The work involves coordinating city agencies, civic groups, nonprofits, and residents to prepare sites, ensure hardy species—such as Honeylocust, Ginkgo, and Green Ash—are planted each season, and provide enough "TreeLC" in the early critical years of growth. As the

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most aggressive tree planting in New York City's history, Monaco explains: "We knew that we needed people to care about this."

Many do care because of the case Monaco has made to show how beneficial our vertical friends can be. Absorbing storm water, capturing carbon, providing shade, reducing energy use, and cooling the air are just some of the positives trees provide. It's a lesson that Monaco learned well while interning over several summers for NYC Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe. The experience left her wanting to make a great impact—not just to help the city act "greener," but literally to *be* greener. "I'd love for more people to recognize that if you invest in these few simple steps of watering, making sure the soil is not compacted, and planting flowers to show that dogs ought not go to the bathroom on the tree beds—the trees will give back so much," explains Monaco, who received the 2012 Frederick O'Reilly Hayes Prize for her work with MillionTrees.

Every street tree planted comes with a two-year maintenance guarantee by a MillionTrees contractor, and free education programs allow community members to pitch in during the trees' critical first three to five years. Though Hurricane Sandy took down more than 10,000 trees citywide last fall, Monaco was relieved that it was primarily the oldest and most vulnerable that were lost in the storm, while newly planted trees held their ground. It also emphasized the importance of building bigger soil beds to absorb storm water, a crucial step in largely concrete areas. But Monaco was perhaps most heartened by the many residents who displayed remorse over the loss of beloved neighborhood trees in the wake of Sandy. "We're grateful for people who appreciate their trees," she says, "and we're doing our best to replant them." ■



the insider

# BEST OF NEW YORK

NYU FACULTY, STAFF, AND ALUMNI OFFER UP THEIR FAVORITES  
by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

FORBIDDEN PLANET



MEATBALL OBSESSION



PETE'S CANDY STORE

ENNYC



NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

## GEEK OUT OVER COMICS OR GET OUT INTO NATURE THIS SPRING

### NERDVANA

Enter through a door adorned with Captain America's shield while under the watchful eye of a life-size Terminator endoskeleton, and it becomes obvious that **FORBIDDEN PLANET** is geek heaven. Beyond its vast selection of comics, action figures, gaming, and apparel, the shop also boasts one of the world's largest collections of manga and graphic novels—with more than 50,000 volumes. "New York City is blessed with a bounty of fantastic comic shops, but my default is Forbidden Planet," says Daniel Ketchum (GAL '06), associate editor at Marvel Comics whose current titles include *X-Men: Legacy* and *Uncanny Avengers*. A regular since his NYU days,

Ketchum still gets nostalgic when he strolls through the new, expanded 3,400-square-foot space or talks to the eager staff. There are items for every type of fan—from Batman T-shirts to *Star Wars* statuettes and *Game of Thrones* posters. Plus, it's one of the only places in the country that carries *Doctor Who Magazine* from the United Kingdom.

832 BROADWAY NEAR UNION SQUARE, 212-473-1576; WWW.FPNYC.COM

### BRONX BLOOMERS

"We tend to draw boundaries between nature and the city, [but] realizing that they exist together will bring us closer to developing a sustainable urban environment," says Nikki Mokrzycki

(CAS '13), president of NYU's Community Agriculture Club. So when the environmental studies major needs inspiration, she heads to the **NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN**. Opened in 1891, the 250-acre garden contains more than a million plants—from magnolias and cherry blossoms to over 600 varieties of roses. "The garden offers a biodiverse landscape that can't be found even in larger green spaces like Central Park," Mokrzycki says. "It's sort of like a museum for plants."

Visitors can explore the unspoiled forest with its cascading waterfall or take a guided tour of the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, which each year hosts the largest exhibition of orchids in the United States. As the nation's biggest Victorian glasshouse, the conservatory hosts 11 distinct habitats—from cactus-laden deserts to

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: © JOHN CHANCE COTTI; © EVAN SUNG; © TIMOTHY KRASURE; © IVO M. KERNBELEN

aquatic plant life and tropical rain forests. The garden is also home to the city's only freshwater river. "The Bronx River is very calming," Mokrzycki explains. "It's nice to breathe misty river air instead of exhaust fumes." 2900 SOUTHERN BOULEVARD IN THE BRONX, 718-817-8700; WWW.NYBG.ORG

### MANGIA ON THE RUN

When Italian cuisine meets the fast pace of city life, the result is old-world taste right in a cup. **MEATBALL OBSESSION** forgoes the tablecloths in favor of a walk-up window serving all-natural meatballs that can be enjoyed with a spoon or on a sandwich. "You think of pasta and meatballs as this sit-down family meal, but this could be a delicacy right in the middle of the day," says James Devitt, deputy director for media re-

lations at NYU. "It's a delicious blend of Italian-American cooking and urban convenience."

The secret to Meatball Obsession's authentic taste is the owner's family recipe: Dan Mancini uses his grandmother's Sunday Sauce, slow-cooked in cast-iron pots, just like she taught him as a kid growing up in Bay Ridge. The Parmesan dipping bread is perfect for sopping up sauce, while artisanal toppings like fresh mozzarella pearls, sautéed red peppers, and mini ravioli keep customers wanting seconds. The shop serves Italian ciabatta pockets from Hudson Bread bakery for meatball sandwiches, and cannoli from Artuso Pastry, near Arthur Avenue in the Bronx, for dessert. Meatball Obsession also offers free delivery—further proof that home-style comfort food doesn't have to slow you down.

510 SIXTH AVENUE, 212-260-8646; WWW.MEATBALLOBSESSION.COM

### BARS AND BARDS

"I love how poetry gives us this thing between people that is timeless—literally, this thing we can get from people who are long dead and still speaking to us," poet Matthew Rohrer says. When he's not teaching at NYU's Creative Writing Program, one of his favorite places to catch live poetry is **PETE'S CANDY STORE** in Williamsburg. The bar's intimate backroom is done up like a train car, where poets take the stage while "passengers" sip cocktails. But one of the city's most storied literary sites lies, of course, in the East Village.

St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery has been around since 1799, but it became a sanctuary

for writers when the **POETRY PROJECT** was established there in 1966. With a heritage that includes Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, and Adrienne Rich, Rohrer explains: "Everyone who is anyone has read there." Today, the Poetry Project hosts writing workshops and special events like its annual New Year's Day Marathon Reading, which features more than 140 speakers over 11 hours. Past participants have included Philip Glass, Patti Smith, William S. Burroughs, Yoko Ono, and Rohrer—who describes the epic experience as "intense and exciting to be a part of. And also overwhelming." 709 LORIMER STREET IN BROOKLYN, 718-302-3770; WWW.PETESCANDYSTORE.COM 131 EAST 10TH STREET, 212-674-0910; WWW.POETRYPROJECT.ORG