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# The McNair Eagle...soaring beyond expectations

Volume 6 Issue 1

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## CONGRATULATIONS TO THE NEWLY MINTED PENN MCNAIR PHDS!

Four Penn McNair alums have finished their doctoral studies—three in the last several months. In addition to these four students who have already completed their PhDs, there are 27 Penn McNair Scholars currently in various stages of their doctoral training, meaning nearly **one-third of Penn McNair alumni/ae have gone on to enroll in PhD programs**. Two Penn McNair alumnae have received MDs and one a JD, while 28 McNair alums have received master's degrees. Eight students are currently pursuing master's degrees and one an MD. This makes two-thirds of program alumni/ae who have either finished or are currently pursuing graduate degrees—a high rate of postbaccalaureate achievement that speaks well of the program. Congratulations! Your hard work, excellent scholarship, and perseverance are an inspiration to all.

**Jessica Welburn** successfully defended her dissertation this summer and will receive her PhD from Harvard University's Department of Sociology this fall. Her dissertation is entitled "Managing Instability: Conceptions of Opportunity and Success among African Americans from Middle-Income Households." Starting this September, Jessica will begin a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Michigan's National Center for Institutional Diversity.



**Jason Lewis** received his PhD in paleoanthropology from Stanford University in June. His dissertation is entitled "Taphonomy and Zooarchaeology of the Middle Pleistocene Site of Orgnac 3 (Ardèche Valley, Southeastern France)." Jason writes: I was a McNair Scholar at Penn from 2002 - 2004, and during that time had the opportunity to present my original research on human skulls from the Penn Museum at a McNair student conference, which was valuable experience. The preparation and guidance I received while a McNair Scholar definitely helped make my transition to graduate school seamless, and the experience writing applications came in handy when it was time to apply for grants and jobs. Earlier this year I also published a scientific article on research I had done while a McNair Scholar at Penn, which received a good bit of media attention [as in this [New York Times](#) article]. I am currently starting a new faculty position at Rutgers University. My advice to McNair scholars is to remember that their status as underrepresented/first-generation students gives them an advantage: they can see past the received wisdom and misconceived notions about how the higher education process works, and should take advantage of the resources that exist to help students, especially them; McNair scholars are taught to ask and to seek. These traits will be the most important in their continuing academic paths.



**Chidinma Ibe** sends word that she received her PhD from Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health in the Health, Behavior and Society program. Last May Chidinma defended her dissertation, entitled "Dose-Effect Relationships: Predictors and Outcomes of the Intensity of Exposure to a Community Health Worker Intervention."

### *PENN MCNAIR PHDS CONTINUED:*

The very first graduate of Penn's McNair Scholars Program to receive her PhD was **Mickea Rose**. Mickea writes: After graduating from Penn, I pursued a graduate degree in organic chemistry at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. After my second year, I advanced into the labs of Dr. Albert Padwa and received the National Institutes of Health Ruth L. Kirchstein National Research Service Award - Predoctoral Fellowship for the next three years. Upon completion of my thesis, "Preparation of N-Substituted Tetrahydroindolinones and their Applications in Alkaloid Synthesis," I received my PhD in Organic Synthesis in 2007 with a specialization in Heterocyclic Chemistry. I then wanted to branch out into the realm of Environmental Natural Products and accepted a post-doctoral fellowship at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego, CA with Dr. William Fenical. There I was able to study marine-derived bacteria and a number of newly discovered chemical structures.

After a year and a half of study, I moved to Jamaica to take a volunteer investigative position at the Institute of Natural Products at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica. At that time, I performed extraction of essential oils from native plants as well as pest control and herbicidal studies. It was at this time that I had to leave the program due to my health, but I believe that my scientific exposure at Penn in the labs of Dr. Joullie and with the McNair program has served me well in the continued pursuit of my desired career path. I continue to believe that I can compete in this progress-driven scientific environment based upon my background and my determination to succeed.

### **Recruitment for the 2012 McNair Cohort Begins Now!**

McNair Scholars are academically talented students with an expressed commitment to pursuing a PhD who are low-income, first-generation college students and/or students who are members of ethnic or racial groups currently underrepresented in doctoral programs: African American/black, Hispanic/Latino/a, Native American/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, and Native American Pacific Islander.

If you know any students who would be a good match for the program, please send us their names and encourage them to apply. Applicants should have a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or above, be a Penn sophomore or junior, and be a citizen or permanent resident of the United States. Students from all majors and schools are welcome to apply. Applications will be accepted online at [www.vpul.upenn.edu/aap/mcnair/index.php](http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/aap/mcnair/index.php) December 1, 2011 through February 15, 2012.



**Applications accepted December 1, 2011, through February 15, 2012.**

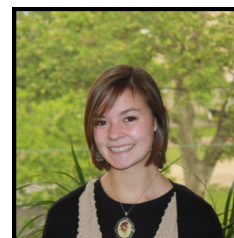
## Introducing the 2011 Cohort of Penn McNair Scholars



**Elizabeth Beattie, Mechanical Engineering**

“Comparison of Animals Used in Disc Research to the Micro-structural Architecture of the Human Annulus Fibrosus”

*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Dawn Elliott*



**Kendra Birdsall, Psychology**

“Posttraumatic Growth and Action in Sexual Violence Victims”

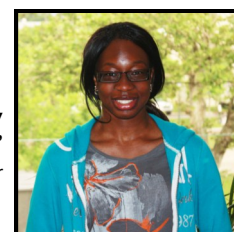
Mentor: TBD



**Bailey Brown, Sociology**

“Mapping School Choice: A Geo-Spatial Analysis of Educational Markets in the Greater Philadelphia Region”

*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Kathleen Hall*



**Bintou Fisiru, Chemistry**

“New Chiral Chemistry Building Blocks”

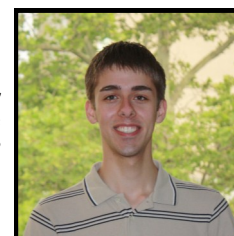
*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Gary Molander*



**Paul Mitchell, Biological Anthropology**

“Variation and Evolution in Human Dental Development”

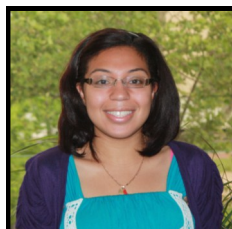
*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Janet Monge*



**Daniel Ramos, Biological Basis of Behavior**

“Reevaluating the Mediation of the Itch Sensation in the Central Nervous System”

*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Wenqin Luo*



**Emilce Santana, Sociology**

“Mexicans in New Destination Areas: The Interactions between Mexican Immigrant Parents and Their Adolescent Children”

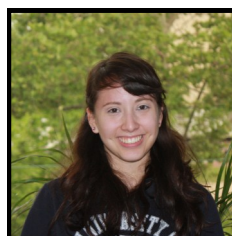
*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Chenoa Flippen*



**Spencer Stubbs, Nursing**

“The T-Care Study: Elucidating Clinical and Economic Disparities in the Seriously Mentally Ill Population Using a Transitional Care Model”

*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Nancy Hanrahan*



**Rebecka Zavaleta, International Relations**

“Efforts in Mexico Towards Democratization”

*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Richard Warren, St. Joseph's University*

## Speaking with 2011 Penn McNair Graduate, Petal Samuel

*McNair:* How would you describe your intellectual development over your years at Penn?

PS: I wasn't as aware that I could focus exclusively on Caribbean Studies the way it became clear to me when I came to Penn. When I was in high school, I always enjoyed any sort of African-American literature or cultural studies work that we did, although those courses were few and far between, but when I came to Penn the possibilities just blossomed. I met Salamishah Tillet, who is one of my major role models on campus, and Herman Beavers, and they were really combining what some of my interests were at the time in ways that I didn't even know were possible. So I think what has vastly changed is what I saw to be my life trajectory.

[*On mentors:*] I met Dr. Beavers first through the summer institute for Africana Studies—I took a class with him that summer, and it was very formative. At the end of the institute, he teared up a bit and expressed how much it meant to him that we, as students of color, were coming to a place like Penn and participating in something like the Africana Summer Institute. From that point on, I knew that Dr. Beavers' investment, not only in teaching, but particularly in the lives and successes of students of color, was a formidable one—quite frankly, one I'd never witnessed before. During my freshman year, I also took a course with Salamishah Tillet—the first course she offered at Penn: a freshman seminar on African-American literature and film, which introduced me to several foundational texts for my budding interests in Africana studies. In my sophomore year, I met Dr. Tsitsi Jaji. I took a poetry and poetics class with her, during which she dedicated the entire second half of the semester to Caribbean poetry—a genre that I'd never been able to study in any formal academic contexts. We worked with the *Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse*, as well as the longer works of Caribbean poets such as Derek Walcott (*Omeros*), Kamau Brathwaite (*The Arrivants*), and Marlene NourbeSe Philip (*Zong!*). Finally, during my junior and senior years, I had the pleasure of getting to know Dr. Tanji Gilliam, who served as an academic advisor and coordinator for Mellon. Her cutting edge work with visual and aural media opened me to new possibilities for interdisciplinary work. She was also hugely encouraging during the graduate application process, and served (and continues to serve) as an intellectual and emotional rock during some of my most difficult times at Penn. Ultimately, I would say that my intellectual development has been encouraged, pushed, and inspired by mentors who not only have become my intellectual role models, but are excellent examples of the kind of person I would like to become one day.



*McNair:* As you mentioned, you've been involved in several research societies on campus; can you talk about their impact?

PS: McNair taught me how to do research and really gave my work its first push in the context of a formal research society. The academy can be a daunting place and it's often hard not to be on edge about or self-conscious about your own intellectual capacities and involvements. McNair really made it a point to begin our training with the basics of research, without assuming any prior experience. Since the McNair Summer Research Institute, that kind of egalitarian sensibility has persisted, and it's always been a relaxed and very encouraging environment. It was a safe space to work through my doubts and uncertainties, while still being pushed to confront those uncertainties with careful planning and deeply invested administrative support. The first conference I went to was a McNair conference at the University of Maryland, so the program has really walked me through my professionalization to an extent and my development as a scholar. Mellon was a very helpful space in other ways as well. As a smaller program, it was the space where my work really experienced the deepest and most significant evolution. The close faculty and administrative mentoring permitted me to build long-lasting relationships with professors with similar intellectual interests, and helped me to be more confident in my intellectual abilities and interests than I've ever been. Also, the faculty, administration, and fellow members of my cohort had a remarkable and sincere investment in my personal development, and remain some of my closest friends. Finally, the 2010-11 Penn Humanities Forum on Virtuality also provided me with an excellent forum to expand my thought into different fields, and engage in conversations across disciplines that were highly enriching and exciting.

*McNair:* How would you describe your research on the senior thesis project you've pursued this year?

PS: For my senior thesis I looked at *Texaco*, a novel by Patrick Chamoiseau, a Martinican writer and philosopher. The original novel is written in French, including some Martinican Creole. I arrived at the project through my budding interest in Caribbean creoles and patois. My mom and dad are native speakers of a variety of French patois that's spoken in St. Lucia—so I became interested in questions of language, citizenship, and nationhood and how they are tied together. For my thesis, I looked at the usage of Martinican Creole in the novel, and the ways in which issues of translation and transcription spoke to larger questions of collective memory and national belonging. I was largely interested in the implications of transcribing an oral tradition such as Martinican Creole, for whom this sort of novel would be written, and what sort of work it does for native French Creole speakers on the global stage.

*McNair:* Would you share some of your feelings about starting graduate school next year, where you'll be going and what you'll be studying?

PS: I am entering a PhD program in English at Vanderbilt University, and I'm specializing in Caribbean studies. I am very excited and nervous. It's a very big move for me, because I will be much further from home than I was for undergrad, and it will be more difficult to see my friends and family (who are largely situated in the Northeast). However, I do think that it will do a lot to teach me how to expand my skills of adaptation; I will be there for five years, so it will be for quite a long time. But I do think that, as much as I love my research community and intend to nourish the ties we've formed, there are some specific ways in which I will be able to push myself when I'm outside of my comfort zone that would not be possible otherwise. So, I am excited to see the fruits of my labor, and am excited to start treating my close friends from undergrad as professional colleagues as well!

## Speaking with 2011 Penn McNair Graduate, Ryan Jobson

*McNair: Thinking about your intellectual development at Penn, what's changed and what's stayed constant?*



RJ: I think that more things have stayed constant than have changed. I know a lot of people start out at Penn being pre-med, and they find their way into this academic track in the humanities. For me that was definitely the track that I saw myself on from the beginning. I didn't particularly know what academia was or what getting a PhD meant, but I knew that I wanted to be an Africana studies major. I knew that I was interested in the topics I ended up researching. What really set me on this particular trajectory was taking a seminar my freshman year with Deborah Thomas, which was called Anthropology of the African Diaspora. That's when I first learned about the discipline of anthropology, the research methods, and some of the questions I'd be able to engage in that field. So by the end of my freshman year I was committed to being a double major in Africana studies and anthropology. It did take me a while to come to the project I'm conducting now. That's gone through some

changes, but it's still the same fundamental questions that I'm asking in my research regardless of where I'm conducting it and who I'm researching—questions related to how we define diaspora, particularly the African diaspora—not simply in terms of identity but as a site of political engagement.

*McNair: Could you talk a little bit about the ethnographic work you did last summer?*

RJ: As far as the research goes, this past summer, I conducted a project on Emancipation Day, primarily around the way in which it serves as a medium for diasporic political exchange between continental African nation states and Trinidad and Tobago. The organization I worked with—I immediately got to start working alongside them instead of awkwardly being on the side and conducting research. I would get up around 8:00, and take a route taxi up to the headquarters of the Emancipation Support Committee where I was working, and then I would hang out around the office. I ended up being responsible for coordinating a small exhibit on Haiti and Haitian history and the contemporary context following the earthquake. So I would be working on that a lot, communicating with other people in the office, getting a perspective on the holiday and how they became involved themselves. I also took other days to explore the general area also. Some days I would go to the national library, which is in downtown Port of Spain, to do some archival research. So it depended on the day, but I was either at the headquarters or at the library or exploring the general area, and then once the holiday actually arrived, I would be down at the national stadium each day for the duration of the program.

*McNair: What kind of research are you interested in pursuing in graduate school?*

RJ: In some ways, it's from [this project] that I arrived at the research that I want to conduct in graduate school, because through the holiday, at least in recent years, there have been a number of political agreements in the energy sector being made between Trinidad and Ghana primarily. In the past couple of months that I was writing my thesis, this relationship was being advanced where Trinidad energy officials and government officials are essentially going to be serving as advisors to Ghana and supporting their growing petroleum industry. It's interesting to me, the way in which the rhetoric of diaspora or diasporic similarities is always used in developing these relationships, so you know, they bring in Ghana's energy minister for Emancipation Day (they don't just bring him in on any day of the year) to announce these agreements and negotiate these agreements. So in a lot of ways I'm interested in the way questions of diaspora intersect with national development and also the way in which notions of cultural belonging are used by petroleum companies and state officials in order to further their economic interests.

RJ: Next year, I'll be starting my PhD—it's a combined degree in anthropology and African-American studies at Yale. I guess the reason I chose that program was, as I mentioned before, I'm a double major in anthro and Africana studies, but I've never seen myself necessarily as being in anthropology to the exclusion of Africana—they've always been very much intertwined in the work I've done. My faculty mentors have been in Africana and anthropology, so that was really the one program where I felt I'd have the freedom to conduct the same kind of research that I have done so far. So it was really an ideal environment—that I would continue to be a part of the dialogue that was going on in African-American studies or Africana studies at the graduate level.

*McNair: Having just won two very competitive national fellowships (the NSF and the Ford), what advice do you have for future applicants?*

RJ: Well one thing I've learned is that what's most important is to have an advanced research project, a very rigorous, well thought out research project. My first draft statement was broad. It talked about my general interests and pointed in a lot of different directions with respect to studying the question of studying the question of diaspora in Trinidad. My final draft focused more on a particular project, on petroleum development and its diasporic implications in Trinidad, which is a very different project from other work in the area. We've seen a lot of work on migration, historical work on the slave trade, but we haven't seen much that engages industrial development alongside diasporic politics and identity. The other thing that [the reviewers] did mention is that I had research experience in the context I wanted to study. I think that made a big difference. It also came up in one of my phone interviews with a professor at Yale—the idea that an undergrad had already conducted ethnographic fieldwork was a pretty big deal, because there are a lot of master's students that are going on to PhDs in anthropology who have not conducted fieldwork in that way. I think those are the two major facets. There's no shortcut to having a rigorous, well thought-out project. It takes a lot of research, a lot of thought, and self-reflection too, because this is a project that is really important to me personally, and that's what it takes to have that drive. It doesn't work to think of a fit or be attractive to programs. You need to find out what's important to you and convey why it should be important to them.



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## ∞ In Memoriam ∞

Dear McNair Scholars, Alumni and Friends,

It is with profound sorrow and deep regret that I write to inform you of two recent deaths in the Penn McNair family.

Robert "Bobby" Mozia, SEAS '09, died suddenly on Saturday, October 22nd of natural causes. Bobby was pursuing a PhD in biomedical engineering at Cornell. He was truly a remarkable human being—warm, friendly and generous. He embodied all of the qualities one would want in a scientist and McNair Scholar. He had a very bright future ahead of him, and he will be sorely missed.

In addition, we recently learned of the passing of Rashaan Edwards-White in late August. Rashaan was a music major and a talented musician who graduated from the College in 2005. Rashaan participated in the Penn McNair Scholars Program from 2004-2005.

This is indeed very sad news, but I wanted to share it with you. Please join us in remembering these two young men and extending heartfelt condolences to their families, partners, and friends.

Sincerely,

Bob Lane, Ph.D.  
 Director, Penn McNair Scholars Program

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