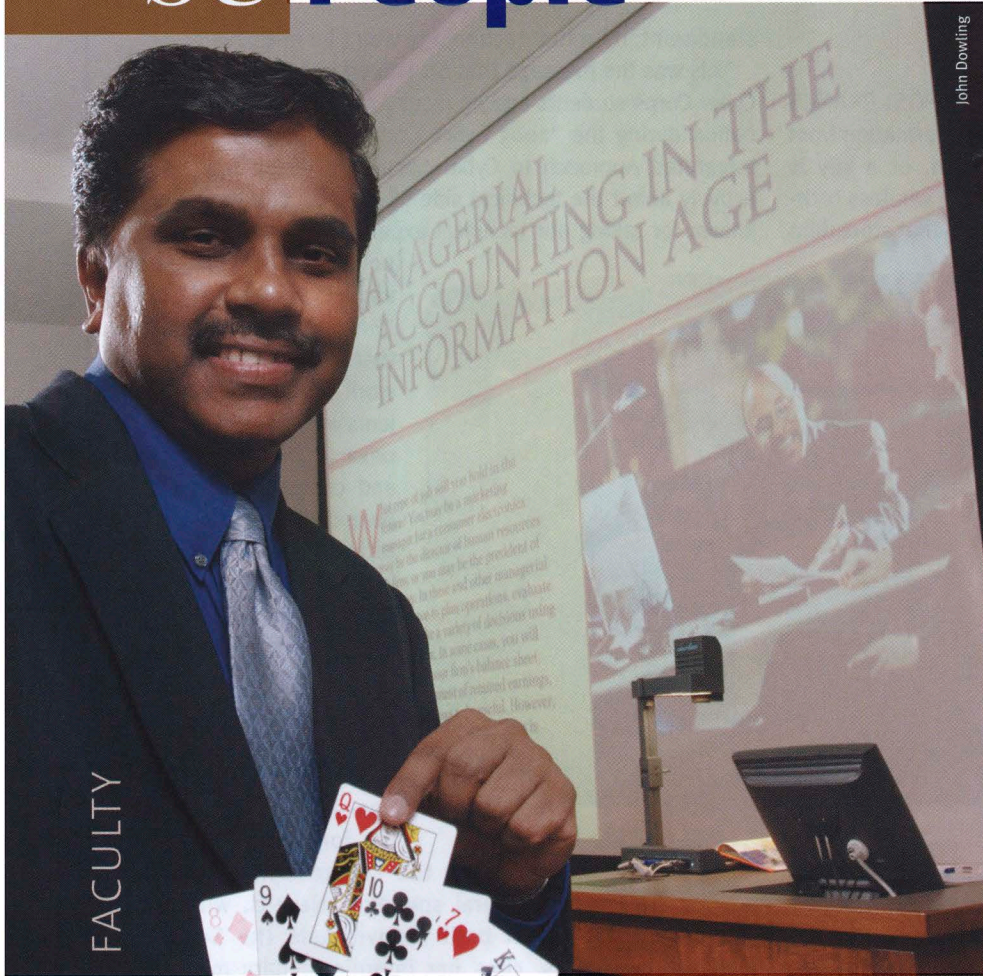


# SU People



FACULTY

Alex Thevaranjan

## Believing Beyond Borders

**ACCOUNTING PROFESSOR ALEX** Thevaranjan is guided in life by a sense of personal purpose: helping young people discover themselves. “I believe in contributing to the development of young people—academically, socially, and spiritually,” says Thevaranjan, a native of Sri Lanka who has taught at the Martin J. Whitman School of Management since earning a Ph.D. in accounting at the University of Minnesota in 1993. He believes peace and happiness are natural byproducts of a life filled with purpose, and that such a life blesses others in the process. “I want to help students find the precious diamond within,” he says. “I am passionate about helping them find a sense of direction in life and discover

their mission in this world.”

Beyond working with students in the classroom as a teacher, a profession he cherishes, Thevaranjan regularly opens his heart and home to children and students from many nations. “My wife and I have a multinational family,” he says. They have two sons, ages 15 and 14, and an 11-year-old daughter, adopted last year from Sri Lanka. She has a mixed parentage of Tamils and Sinhalese, two ethnic groups that have been in conflict for decades. “Adopting Asha—which means ‘hope’ in Sanskrit—was something very close to our hearts,” he says, “a way of making a statement about the possibility of peace between warring parties.” The couple also sponsor the studies of nearly 30 students in Sri Lanka, and are host parents for two exchange students at Syracuse’s Nottingham High School—one from Ecuador and one from South Korea. Two SU graduate students, including

one from China, complete their international household.

Thevaranjan’s love for the global community is also reflected in the extensive traveling he did last summer, when he visited 13 countries on five continents. In Singapore, he led the management summer internship program sponsored by the Division of International Programs Abroad, which he has directed for five years. “As part of my desire to help students discover their dreams and pursue them, I think it is valuable to expose them to different learning environments,” he says. His journey also took him to Sri Lanka, doing relief work for tsunami-affected families through Syracuse for Sri Lanka, the nonprofit organization he founded. The group set a goal to raise funds to build 100 permanent brick houses in Batticaloa and sponsor living and education expenses for 100 children a year. “To date, more than 60 families have moved into their new homes, and 30 houses are under construction,” says Thevaranjan, who holds a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. He believes Syracuse for Sri Lanka is unique and highly successful in that there are no overhead costs; every dollar donated goes directly to relief efforts. “We responded to the need, and God gave us the grace,” he says. “When people work together, demonstrating compassion for another’s needs, miracles can happen.”

In his research, Thevaranjan focuses on incorporating ethics into existing economic models. In the classroom, he emphasizes fundamentals, active learning, and practical applications. “I share with students on the first day of class that I am their coach, not an adversary,” he says. “I tell them: ‘Accounting is the opponent you are playing against, and I want you to do well. But I am a tough coach, because I want you to win.’” He believes motivation is a key factor in educating students, and often performs magic and card tricks for students to gain their interest. “I don’t do tricks for the sake of doing tricks, but to teach a concept,” he says. “This is a way of bringing my teaching skills and my hobby together for a higher purpose.”

—Amy Shires



## Mary O'Brien | Piecing Together the University

DURING THE PAST 32 YEARS, MARY O'BRIEN HAS LITERALLY worked her way up in Bird Library. In 1973, after studying English and history at Syracuse, she began typing card catalog entries in the Library Processing Unit in the basement of the new six-story building. From there she moved into Media Services, ran copy services, and then went on to cataloging. In December 1981, she reached the sixth floor when she became assistant University archivist. "I wanted a window," she jokes. Window or not, her time with Archives and Records Management has provided her with a unique view of the SU campus and its growth and progress. "I feel like we're shaping history here," O'Brien says. "We're taking historical materials, making sure they're accessible, and sharing these resources with people on campus and in the broader community. People often just see the surface—the here and now. They don't know all the work that has gone into making this University what it is today. We're helping protect our sources and show off our history."

Every morning, O'Brien clips out new chapters of SU history from newspapers, files away important documents, and fields requests for information from campus members, alumni and their relatives, and other information seekers. Requests range from finding 19th-century floor plans of Syracuse city homes designed by SU architecture professors, to locating a copy of a 1969 *Daily Orange* article or a photograph of someone's deceased grandfather who was captain of the SU football team. Then there are the more predictable annual requests for assistance with reunion displays, anniversary exhibitions, and SU special events.

Once tapped for information, O'Brien spouts endless facts about the University, its buildings, formative moments, and evolution from being the educator of Methodist clergymen's children to an international research and learning institution. Some of the material she can recall in her sleep—things like why SU chose orange for its color or Otto for its mascot, or how the Hall of Languages got its name. (To find out, visit [archives.syr.edu](http://archives.syr.edu).) She relishes learning about new acquisitions, especially such recent ones as the 85-year-old scrapbook of a 1918 alumna and the original pencil manuscript of the alma mater donated by descendents of its author Junius W. Stevens 1895 (see related story, page 48). Her familiarity with the University collections allows her to curate insightful exhibitions, including *Co-Ed From the Start: Women Students at Syracuse University in the 19th Century* and the upcoming

*Mind, Heart, and Hand: A Tribute to Nursing at Syracuse University*. In addition to spotlighting various moments in SU history, these exhibitions place events in historical context and build new knowledge through the lens of time. "People ask me, 'Don't you get bored?'" she says. "No, I don't. Even if it's a question I've answered hundreds of times, I remind myself that this information is new to the person asking. I never know what question will be waiting for me in the morning or what new fact I'll encounter. It's a hoot sharing all these goodies with other people."

O'Brien contributes to campus life by participating as an entrant or judge in *On My Own Time*, a University-wide art competition and exhibition. One look at her license plate reveals her passion for quilting, which she fuels with an annual fall "shop-hop" to purchase fabric at stores across Western and Central New York. A picture on her desk reveals to the discerning eye that she is made from the same pattern as her twin sister, Peggy. She and Peggy, natives of Syracuse,



John Dowling

STAFF

have raised and shown Irish wolfhounds on and off for decades. They have escorted their current dogs, Duibheasa and Eibhleann, in the Dogs of Ireland group in the Syracuse St. Patrick's Day Parade. "Being a native Syracusan has helped me on the job," she says. "It gives me an extra window from which to view things." —Margaret Costello





Christopher Weiss |

## Peak Performances

SINCE JOINING SU'S OFFICE OF SUPPORTIVE SERVICES (OSS) as an academic counselor in 1997, Christopher Weiss '84, G'93 has guided scores of first-generation college students from pre-freshman cluelessness to the personal confidence necessary for success in college and beyond. And Weiss doesn't leave his belief in the transformative power of learning at the office. A passionate skier who has been teaching the sport since he was 16, Weiss has brought the joys of downhill skiing to an eclectic variety of students, including

people facing such challenges as quadriplegia, Down syndrome, and blindness.

"I'm a classical SU faculty brat," says Weiss, whose father, Volker Weiss, is a professor emeritus of mechanical and aerospace engineering. "My family participated in a program that bused kids to Martin Luther King Elementary School, where I was a minority white student. I learned so much—it was one of the best parts of my life." A cultural anthropology major, he earned B.A. and M.A. degrees at SU, and a master's degree in educational psychology at the University of Washington.

As an OSS counselor, Weiss works with students from traditionally underserved groups who come to SU aided by federal and state programs. "These are some of the best students at Syracuse," he says. "They're determined and motivated, with a real appreciation of the value of an education." His students arrive on campus as "pre-freshmen" for SummerStart, a program that eases them into the social environment of the campus as they take their first credit courses and learn the academic and bureaucratic ropes of college life. Weiss says he sometimes has to convince SummerStart students they are not there as "remedial cases," but rather to make sure they are prepared to take advantage of all the University's resources and opportunities.

Weiss, whose other duties for OSS at the Division of Student Support and Retention include supervising and training counselors and maintaining the office's web page, also teaches education courses and facilitates SU race dialogue groups. In his "spare" time, he skis and teaches the sport at the Toggenburg Ski Center in Fabius, New York. Weiss outlined his techniques for special instruction situations in adaptive skiing in an article he wrote last year for *Professional Skier* magazine.

As a Syracuse native, Weiss is particularly enthusiastic about the University's stepped-up efforts to recruit more students from the city's low-income families. "In the new GEAR UP program, our advisees are paired with local high school students in mentoring relationships," Weiss says. "They offer living proof to these kids that people not so different from them can be successful college students." Weiss advises mentors to do as he does. "Try to avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' strategy," he says. "Successful advising has a lot to do with the bond you create with each student."

—David Marc



Mina Markham

## Design for the Future

**MINA MARKHAM'S NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE. AND FOR** this adventurous and diligent junior with an impressive resume of scholarly achievements and a well-defined plan to see the world, that's a good thing—even if her family back in Wichita might not think so. "I'm going to London in the spring," says Markham, who majors in graphic arts at the Newhouse School and women's studies at the College of Arts and Sciences. "And I really want to see Italy. I love New York City and hope to work and live there someday. So I've been telling my mom and dad for years that I won't be moving back home when I graduate. I think they're getting used to the idea."

Markham believes her openness to new experiences is related to being diagnosed with arthritis at age 9. "I had to quit school for a year and abandon everything I was used to," she says. Far from being slowed down by what she calls "a condition, not a disability," Markham says having arthritis taught her to take care of herself and be honest about her needs and capabilities. "It makes me mindful of every situation," says the Gates Millennium Scholar. "No one is going to know I am in pain if I don't tell them. No one is going to know that a situation may cause me injury if I don't say something. It really helped me to speak up and find a voice."

That voice has served her well in a series of leadership positions at SU: president of Women in Communications, art director for *Equal Time* magazine, lab manager in the Newhouse computer labs, promotions coordinator for Students Advancing Sexual Safety and Empowerment, WellsLink Scholar, and 2005 orientation leader. She has also worked as a design intern at the Milton J. Rubenstein Museum of Science and Technology in Syracuse, a graphic designer for the Dean of Students office, a web site designer for the Association of Black Journalists, and a graphic designer for *360 Degrees* magazine.

Markham recently received national recognition for her graphic design. She was awarded \$2,000 from the National Fair Housing Alliance for a poster she originally designed as a class assignment. This past summer, she worked for a publishing company in Wichita as assistant editor and art director for a news magazine for people in their twenties. "I really enjoyed it, and would love to do something similar in the future," Markham says. "It was fun to get to do both editing and designing, something that probably doesn't happen very often in the industry."

As a women's studies major, Markham enjoys learning to interpret worldwide news and current events from a

feminist perspective. "Women's studies classes are about how your context and your situation affect the way you see things—even when, as a journalist, you have made the conscious decision to be objective," she says. "That's why I love this major. I love learning to see things in different ways. Women's studies applies to everything, because it is about philosophies, theories, and principles as opposed to learning a specific skill. It is a way of thinking that gives me a different perspective on the world and how things operate."

Markham works each day to combine that perspective with her personal "pay it forward" philosophy, a way of life that was inspired by the generosity and kindness shown to her by mentors, teachers, and family members throughout her life.



"I know my family is looking at me with pride, as someone who will be something special and do something amazing," she says. "There are many people at home and at Syracuse who have invested a lot in me, and that drives me to do my best, and to want to help someone else someday in a way they don't expect to be helped."  
—Amy Shires