

OUTSTANDING SENIORS '07

Each year, the Canisius College Alumni Association presents its Distinguished Senior Award to graduates who exemplify leadership, academic excellence and community service at Canisius. Recipients are selected by a committee comprised of representatives from the college's Alumni Board of Directors, and the offices of Alumni Relations, Student Activities and Student Development.

The Alumni Association is proud to recognize the following Class of 2007 Distinguished Seniors, who leave Canisius with a legacy all their own.

OMER J. BITAR

Omer J. Bitar '07 came to Canisius College to study bio-chemistry. But he also learned there was much he could teach to others.

During his sophomore year, the Syrian native founded the Organization of Arab Students in Sodality (OASIS), a student club that educates the Canisius community about Arab culture and tradition.

"I started OASIS one year into the Iraq war because the only images you saw of Arabs were negative," Bitar recalls. "I wanted to change that impression, at least at Canisius."

Bitar organized guest lectures and an annual Ramadan dinner, to engage the community in conversations about Arab culture. Among the highlights was Syrian Ambassador Imad Moustapha's lecture on U.S.-Syrian relations in 2006.

But OASIS was just the beginning for Bitar. On the advice of **Paula M. McNutt, PhD**, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, Bitar sent an E-mail to undergraduates to gauge interest in an Arabic language course. The campus response resulted in the college's first Arabic language course in fall 2005.

"Students in this country take Spanish and French and we understand those cultures because we can communicate with them," Bitar says. "I think learning Arabic is very beneficial because it is a culture most Americans don't know about or



understand, and better understanding leads to better relations.”

Since then, the first part of the two-section course in Arabic has been full and is particularly popular among students in the International Relations and ROTC programs.

“Omer is a strategic person and nicely determined about what he wants to do,” says Ali Ait Si Mhamed. An adjunct professor of modern languages and visiting professor in the School of Education, Mhamed taught the first Arabic language class at Canisius. “He is committed to changing the perceptions toward Arabs and Muslims, and does so by introducing his own culture and background in very good and friendly ways.”

Indeed, Bitar was a friendly and familiar face on campus.

A recipient of an Urban Leadership Learning Community Scholarship, he worked in the Tutoring Center, volunteered at Open House and International Fest. He also held leadership positions in the Canisius Chapter of the American Chemical Society (ACS).

Along with **Mariusz M. Kozik, PhD**, chair of the Chemistry & Biochemistry Department, Bitar presented research on advances in environmental chemistry at two national ACS conventions in Anaheim and San Diego, CA.

Travel wasn’t something Bitar thought he would be able to do as an undergraduate. But in addition to his trips to California, he spent a semester in London, where he conducted an independent study of migration trends from Syria to the United States and the United Kingdom.

“Extra-curricular activities have taken me to places and events that I never imagined,” says Bitar. “I learned things that I would never learn in a classroom.”

Bitar will leave Buffalo again to visit his Syrian birthplace before starting classes at Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine (LECOM) in Erie, PA this fall.

SARAH E. HARMS

True to the Ignatian pursuit of *Magis*, or doing more for Christ and others, **Sarah Harms '07** not only excelled academically during her four years at Canisius but immersed herself in a variety of activities outside the classroom. In fact, it was this enthusiasm for living and learning that ultimately shaped Harms’ decision to pursue a career as an osteopath.

She notes, “Once I began to seek more, do more, take the extra steps and put myself out there, everything fell into place.”

The Colden resident originally set out to study bioinformatics, an emerging field that uses information technology to analyze biological data. But in her junior year, Harms realized she wanted to work with people rather than computers, and began down the pre-med track.

A self-proclaimed “science geek,” Harms became a general chemistry tutor, a biology teaching assistant and a laboratory research assistant for **Susan M. Aronica, PhD**, associate professor of biology. Harms assisted Aronica with her research on the behavior of breast cancer cells, which is supported by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

“Sarah is the dominant student in the lab,” Aronica says. “She never compromises quality of work in any endeavor.”

Harms believes her work with Aronica was “a blessing.”

“I was interested in the research she was doing on breast cancer because at the same time my mother was in the final stages of her battle with breast cancer.”

Harms says her personal interest in medicine combined with her spiritual involvements on campus “deepened my spirituality and helped me decide where God wants me to be.”

It prompted her to join such small faith sharing groups as Christian Life Communities (CLCs). She was active in CLCs on campus and represented the college at a CLC conference at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Harms later co-wrote a training manual for the CLC program with Associate Campus Minister **Luanne Tunmore**.

“Sarah took a lot of initiative because she believes in CLCs and how they can help students, especially those who are



struggling,” Tunmore says. “I feed off of her enthusiasm.”

Harms also participated in various Campus Ministry retreats and service trips, including Winter Service Week 2007, during which she volunteered in the emergency room of a Bronx, NY hospital.

“At Canisius, I learned the physician I want to be is a woman for others,” says Harms, who will attend Western University of Health Sciences in Pomona, CA this fall. “Osteopathic medicine embodies the Ignatian ideal of *cura personalis* [care for the individual] and that is the approach I always want to take with patients and everyone in my life.”

JOHN T. DYRCZ



On the last Thursday of his senior year, **John T. Dyrz '07** attended his international relations class, worked a four-hour shift at Macy's department store, hosted a party for members of DiGamma Honor Society and then wrote an essay on Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

It was a busy day but then again, Dyrz had a busy four years at Canisius. He graduated in May with degrees in political science, Spanish, European studies and international relations.

Dyrz attributes his 'worldly interests' to his parents who always encouraged him to see outside of his own surroundings. This notion was reinforced by family trips to Poland, Germany, Italy, Austria, Thailand and across the United States. Dyrz says those trips influenced his decision to pursue a degree in international relations.

"I knew what I wanted to do and just picked up other degrees as they became apparent," says Dyrz, whose academic ambitions are rivaled only by his many commitments outside the classroom.

A resident assistant (RA) for two years at Canisius, Dyrz worked with Director of Campus Programming **Connie Pileri '92, MS '93** to create a program manual to train other RAs.

He served as a political science teaching assistant for **John D. Occhipinti, PhD**, professor of political science. And as a research assistant for **Laverne M. Seales-Saley, PhD**, associate professor of modern languages, he examined the politics and history of Panama. Dyrz also served as vice president of the Undergraduate Student Association, and was a member of the International Affairs Society and the college's Model UN team, a program he helped re-establish.

"He's been a dynamo as far as co-curricular activities are concerned," says Occhipinti, who explains that Dyrz helped to organize the EuroSim conference hosted by Canisius in April. The international, intercollegiate event simulates how issues related to the European Union are handled and involves more than 200 students and faculty, from 25 colleges and universities in the United States and Europe.

"Canisius always encourages everyone to do what they want to do and make it happen," notes Dyrz.

But Dyrz adds that being able to actively live what he studied is more rewarding than any trophy.

A Service Scholar at Canisius, Dyrz participated in and led Campus Ministry's Ignatian-based KAIROS retreats. As a volunteer at Journey's End Refugee Center, he helped refugees find work, served as a Spanish translator, participated in refugee orientation and assisted with government relations. And in 2005, Dyrz traveled to Mexico City where he worked with a group of Mexican sisters, known as Dominicas Cristianas, to minister to needy children, women and elderly, as part of Campus Ministry's Project Mexico.

This fall, Dyrz will attend the University of New Mexico, where he plans to pursue a master of art's degree in political science. He will also serve as a teaching and research assistant.

"John is a true representative of where leaders are made," says Pileri. "His willingness to help others makes him a role model for other Canisius students." ■