



Conquering Kool

Orane Barrett '98 has a message for teenagers: embrace your inner nerd.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

ORANE BARRETT '98 IS PROUD TO TELL YOU that he's a nerd. He likes being around other nerds, too. Not just in the dual worlds he's inhabited of engineering and finance, but across fields.

"This is Kwame," he calls out over speakerphone, introducing his business partner Kwame Delfish, who is seated across the room. "He's an art nerd."

As a cultural icon, the nerd is experiencing a heyday. In a world in which rewards

increasingly flow to people with highly specialized skills and expertise, that's not surprising.

But if adults know just how powerful nerds can be, it's a message that doesn't always get through to kids. For that to happen, Barrett says, the nerd's signature qualities—qualities he boils down to "hard work, intelligence, and passion"—have to be recast as cool.

In December, Barrett left his job as a project manager at Credit Suisse to devote himself full time to his apparel start-up, Kool

Nerd Clothing. Rest assured, that as a bona fide nerd, Barrett can spell; kool, he says, is an acronym for "knowledge out of learning." The aim of the business is to manufacture and sell clothing that will function as "a billboard and a conversation piece" he says, for the idea that intelligence and hard work are cool.

Barrett is a social entrepreneur. Kool Nerds aims to donate a portion of proceeds and in-kind support to programs that support "STEAM"—science, technology, engineering, arts, and math—education.



His target market—kids in urban public schools—will be tough to penetrate. But he knows their world well.

Barrett was 10 when he moved with his family from Jamaica to the United States. Settling into the Brooklyn neighborhood of Flatbush, the language was familiar, but the culture wasn't.

"In the Caribbean, education is number

▲ **KOOL KIDS:** Channeling their inner nerds, Barrett and children from a Mount Vernon, N.Y., charter school model Barrett's line of Kool ("knowledge out of learning") clothing. The former engineer and investment banker started the company as a way to inspire academic excellence among urban children.

Barrett launched Kool Nerd Clothing with his own money, and has started on a small scale. He's initiated partnerships with institutions such as the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry's Black Creativity program, and the Amani Public Charter School in Mt. Vernon, N.Y.

one, and it's pushed very hard by the parents," he says. At his school in Brooklyn, "if a child was known as intelligent, it wasn't looked upon in a positive way." Kids who wore their intellect on their sleeves could be beaten up, or worse, "jumped—that's when more than one person attacks you at the same time," Barrett says.

In high school in Jamaica, Queens, Barrett's grades began to drop—a drop that nearly 20 years later, he recalls with nerdish precision.

"I started off with a 90 average, and by my junior year, it was 75." It wasn't that the work became difficult. "I neglected school in order to fit in," he says.

He wasn't even sure he was going to bother with college. But he recalls a life-changing incident at his after-school job at a local supermarket.

"The manager was belittling one of the workers, scolding him right in the aisle, and everybody was watching," Barrett recalls. "The guy, a huge guy, turns to me afterwards and says, 'A guy like that I would have broken in two. But now, I can't do it, because I know I can't get a job anywhere else.'" The man told Barrett he was a former inmate who'd had to struggle to be hired. "He said, 'Young man, go to school and forget these streets.'"

With strong encouragement from his parents, Barrett turned his academic record around. He was accepted to Rochester, where he let his inner nerd shine, majoring in chemical engineering and becoming a Ronald E. McNair Scholar. Shortly after his graduation, he was hired by Intel and sent to Ireland for training. "I was promoted into management, where I managed a small staff. I was doing very well," he says.

At the prospect of getting transferred far from his East Coast home, however, Barrett changed course, toward a career in finance. After earning an MBA at MIT's Sloan School of Management, Barrett entered investment banking.

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At the Amani School, which serves grades five through eight, Kool Nerd Clothing sponsored an essay contest, in which Barrett provided winners Kool Nerd T-shirts and gift cards to Barnes & Noble Booksellers. "What we do closely aligns with Kool Nerds," says Ann-Marie Ditta, director of development and community engagement for the school. When Barrett met with the students, "It was just amazing how they were totally engaged," she says.

Since Barrett left investment banking to devote himself full time to Kool Nerds, the business has entered a new phase. Everything up until then—the initial batch of T-shirts, the company website and Facebook page—had been part of what's called in the business world a proof-of-concept launch.

"I did not expect the response to be as positive as it was," Barrett says. With the help of Delfish and Melanie Isaac, who is in charge of marketing, Barrett is working to attract investors. This year, he'll be taking Kool Nerds Clothing to trade shows, and seeking investors and manufacturing contracts in Los Angeles, New York, and Toronto. The company is also preparing to relaunch its website and social media presence.

Meanwhile, Barrett continues to visit schools. In February, he took his message to high school students in Rochester, as well as to first-generation University undergraduates, speaking to them at an event sponsored by the David T. Kearns Center for Leadership and Diversity in Arts, Sciences & Engineering.

"Just to have that kind of impact is something I really enjoy and hope this brand can start to do," Barrett says.

"But we know we have to be cool first." ®

Beyond the Taj Mahal

Malini Roy '97, visual arts curator at the British Library, oversees one of the world's largest collections of Mughal art.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

THE MUGHAL EMPIRE WOULD EASILY MAKE anyone's short list of the world's most powerful dynasties. At their peak, the Mughals, who ruled from the early 16th to the mid-19th century, presided over a quarter of the planet's population, spanning the present-day Indian subcontinent, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

Yet, like many of the grand dynasties from centuries past, the Mughals don't quite as easily make it on anyone's short list of hot scholarly topics. This is even more the case in art history than in general history, says **Malini Roy '97**, the Chicago native who is an expert in late Mughal art and curator of one of the world's largest Mughal art collections.

The Mughals were noted patrons of the arts. But among scholars of Indian art, "the trend is to explore regional courts or kingdoms, or to focus on contemporary art," she says.

Yet there's still a great deal to explore in Mughal art. Britons were shown that in 2012, when Roy curated the British Library exhibition *Mughal India: Art, Culture, and Empire*. It was unusual in that it explored artistic life under all 15 Mughal emperors—not just the early, powerful ones, as is usually the case, Roy says.

"What might surprise the public," she notes, "is that during the gradual collapse of the empire, the artistic and literary traditions actually experienced a revival, rather than a downturn."

How did you come to your role at the British Library?

I came to London to do my master's degree, and then my doctorate, at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. As a student, I had the opportunity to work at the British Library on short-term projects, and to really begin to learn



about the collections and to enjoy working with them. While I was finishing up my PhD, the position opened up. I applied, and I was offered the role. And I've been here since 2008.

What's the scope of the library's visual arts collections?

Our collections date back to 1801, when the British East India Company established a library in London. It's mostly Indian art or British art on the subject of India. It's quite an enormous collection. There are more than 300,000 Indian paintings, British drawings, and photographs. Those are the main areas. But we also have sculpture and furniture.

When did you develop your interest in art

history, and in Mughal art in particular?

I'd always been interested in history. At Rochester, I majored in both history and religion, and I focused on Asia and the Middle East. But growing up, and for my first couple of years at Rochester, I didn't have much exposure to art history. Then in my junior year, I studied abroad in Italy. Part of my program was looking at Italian art history, and it was from then that I decided it would be interesting to learn about art and museums in general. When I got back to Rochester, I was offered an internship at

▲ **MUGHAL MOMENT:** Once one of the world's most powerful dynasties, the Mughal empire—and its 300-year literary and artistic tradition—often are overlooked by scholars of Indian art, Roy says.



the Strong Museum. I just started looking at different pockets of art. Then, during a trip to India, I spent some time at the Indian Museum in Kolkata and the National Museum in New Delhi, and those were my first real experiences looking at Indian art. It was quite colorful, and radically different from European art. And it was much less explored, which is why an art historian at the Strong Museum suggested to me that Indian art might be more rewarding to study than Western art. And from then I just started looking much more into the subject.

Your main interest is in the late Mughal period. Why?

When I started studying Mughal art, I was really looking at the 18th century onward.

Early Mughal art has been exhaustively studied, and I really wanted to see what was happening when the empire was declining. British East India Company officers began to commission new works of art. Ultimately, this initiated a new style of art, or “Company” painting. This transitional period is what really piqued my interest.

What was your goal, from the outset, for the 2012–13 exhibition *Mughal India: Art, Culture, and Empire*?

When most people think about the Indian subcontinent, they think about the Taj Mahal, and many don’t realize it was commissioned by the Mughals. But we wanted to show people there was a Mughal culture beyond the Taj Mahal. We actually only included one picture of the Taj Mahal in the

entire exhibition. And it was tucked away in a corner. That said, one of the things we found at the very end when we did our evaluation is that a lot of people were quite knowledgeable about the subject. And then there was a smaller percentage of people who were unfamiliar with the topic.

What did you learn as you were putting the exhibition together?

It was a pretty sharp learning curve. The exhibition was an opportunity to really explore the collection in detail. Because we have thousands of pieces in the collection, we went box by box, looking through pieces, and selecting things that were visually interesting, but then researching each item to see what historical connections could be drawn between them. It was amazing to discover unpublished material, including a manuscript of pigeon keeping and breeding. Of course, in the lead up to an exhibition, there’s never enough time to research all the manuscripts and paintings in great detail.

How did the exhibition help you set an agenda going forward?

Reviewing more than 300 years of painting, I was curious to explore why the tradition of Mughal art went into decline during the rule of the “puritanical” emperor, Aurangzeb, the last “Great” Mughal ruler. That’s something that hasn’t really been explored before. But there were other things we were looking at, such as natural history drawings. Both Mughal and European patrons were interested in learning about science and the natural world. There’s quite a treasure trove of natural history drawings at the library from the 18th and 19th centuries. So it gave me a chance to pull together smaller displays of this type of material.

In 2010, Britain and India agreed formally to build stronger artistic ties. Was this exhibition part of that effort?

The library itself has a memorandum of understanding with the Indian Ministry of Culture. And after the exhibition ended, we sent a facsimile version of the show, which was hosted at the Indira Gandhi Center for the Arts in New Delhi. It was really to share the British Library’s collections with the Indian public, and particularly artifacts related to the Mughal empire. It was inaugurated by the vice president of India. Unfortunately I had pneumonia, so I couldn’t go. But the head of our department was there to launch the show. **R**

Prevailing at Pelham Bay

Attorney Mitchel Ashley '87 helps families in a landmark lawsuit over a New York City toxic waste site.

By Husna Haq

THE CASE BEGAN AS ALMOST ALL LEGAL BATTLES over toxic environments do, in the hospital, with parents of sick children talking with parents of other sick children.

While her daughter, Kerri, received chemotherapy, Bronx resident Patricia Nonnon commiserated with other parents whose children were also being treated for cancer. In the course of their conversations, they uncovered commonalities that at first were curious coincidences but that later became disconcerting.

They each had a youngster being treated for a childhood cancer. They all lived near Eastchester Bay, an inlet of the Long Island Sound, north of Manhattan. And they all were aware that on the shore of the bay was the Pelham Bay landfill, a New York City–operated dump that had been closed in the late 1970s and that the city admitted had been an illegal dumping ground for toxic chemicals and waste.

“That’s how our case started,” says New York City attorney **Mitchel Ashley** '87, about a lawsuit that he first began working on as a law student at Hofstra University more than 20 years earlier.

Last August, after nearly a quarter century of litigation, the city agreed to settle the case without admitting that a connection could be proven between the illegal dumping and the health of nearby residents. Ashley, an attorney in private practice, and fellow lawyer Jeff Korek represented nearly a dozen families in the landmark \$12 million agreement.

Nonnon, whose daughter, Kerri, died from her cancer at age 10 in 1989, was on the forefront of the legal battle.

“Thinking that my daughter died in vain and that the landfill caused her death—I think Mitchel saw the determination in all of us to prove something was wrong with the landfill, and that kept him going.”

Between 1963 and 1978 when the landfill was in operation, roughly a million gallons of toxic waste, including suspected carcinogens like benzene, were dumped at the 81-acre site. Investigations forced the city to admit in 1985 that some sanitation workers had taken bribes to allow companies to dump chemical waste into the landfill.

Tests later showed that the hazardous materials had seeped into nearby waterways.



As Nonnon and other families compared notes about what their families had been through, figures from a hotline turned up a large number of children from the area who had been diagnosed with acute lymphatic leukemia. The cancer incidence rate for kids living 1.5 miles from the dump was four times greater than those living farther away, a report later found.

In 1991, 12 plaintiffs filed the first of eight

▲ **IDEALISTIC ENDEAVOR:** Helping families take on New York City in a legal fight over a toxic waste dump resonated with the idealism that inspired him to go to law school 20 years ago, says Ashley.

lawsuits against the City of New York. Three children from the area, including Kerri Nonnon, would ultimately die of cancer; another nine who were diagnosed with leukemia survived.

After studying political science at Rochester, Ashley began his career in the casino industry in Atlantic City, N.J., before deciding to pursue a joint JD/MBA degree. He planned to return to the casino industry, but after completing his second year of law school, he got a summer internship working on the Pelham Bay case. “I fell in love with it. I just felt we were doing the right thing for the people affected.”

He abandoned his MBA and established his career in personal injury law, throwing himself into the Pelham Bay litigation.

The settlement was a testament to Ashley’s determination, says client Nonnon. “He stuck with us and did not waver,” she says. “He was such a strong person to stick it out with us for this long. I think he was as determined as we were,” she says, adding that through the ups and downs, “Mitchel has become a lifelong friend and absolutely more than a lawyer to us. I owe him so much for believing in us.”

Ashley says the notion that he had a chance to protect people who faced overwhelming odds was part of his motivation through the long, challenging case.

“I got involved in the case as a very young idealistic law student,” he says. “To some degree, I never lost that. These people are exactly the type of people that you want to get involved in this type of profession to protect—they were the little guy against the City of New York saying, ‘City, you did something wrong to me.’”

“Ultimately, I believed we were right, that things were dumped in a residential community that shouldn’t have been, and that this destroyed the lives of three children, and nine children’s lives were affected for rest of their lives. I don’t know how anyone could turn a blind eye to that.”

Husna Haq is a New York City–based freelance writer.

In the News



OPERA & FOOTBALL: Soprano Renée Fleming '83E (MM) sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the National Football League's Super Bowl XLVIII in East Rutherford, N.J., in February. Fleming, known as "the people's diva," was the first opera singer ever invited to sing the national anthem before the start of the annual football contest. This year marks the national anthem's 200th birthday.

Grammy Round-Up

Jazz composer, pianist, and bandleader **Maria Schneider** '85E (MM) has won her third Grammy Award, and her first in the classical category. Her crossover album *Winter Morning Walks* (ArtistShare), featuring soprano Dawn Upshaw performing a song cycle Schneider wrote to poems by Ted Kooser, was named Best Contemporary Classical Composition.

Schneider won her first Grammy in 2004 for her album *Concert in the Garden* (ArtistShare). Named Best Large Jazz Ensemble Recording, the album was the first recording sold exclusively on the Internet to win a Grammy.

Schneider won another Grammy in 2007 for Best Instrumental Composition for "Cerulean Skies," from her album *Sky Blue* (ArtistShare).

Mastering engineer **Bob Ludwig** '66E, '01E (MM) picked up multiple Grammys for his work on the French electronic music duo Daft Punk's album *Random Access Memories* (Columbia



GRAMMY FIRSTS: Schneider (left) won for her first classical crossover album; Knappenberger won the first music educator Grammy.

Records). The recording was named Best Engineered Album, Non-Classical, as well as Album of the Year. Ludwig also won a Grammy for his work on the Rolling Stones' *Charlie Is My Darling—Ireland 1965* (ABKCO Films), which was named Best Historical Album.

Ludwig, who has worked for well-known artists from Jimi Hendrix to Barbra Streisand, has won four previous Grammys, including



one Latin Grammy. **Martha Cluver** '03E and **Eric Dudley** '01E won Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance as members of the a cappella octet Roomful of Teeth. The album *Roomful of Teeth* (New Amsterdam Records) is the group's debut. Based in New York City, the octet came together in 2009.

Kent Knappenberger '89E (MM), a music teacher and choir director at Westfield Academy

and Central School in Westfield, N.Y., won the inaugural Music Educator Award. The Recording Academy and Grammy Foundation established the award to recognize music educators teaching kindergarten through college who have made lasting contributions to the profession and to the continuation of music education in the schools.

Knappenberger, who has taught in Westfield for 25 years and also teaches music in Rio de Janeiro as a volunteer, was among 30,000 people to be nominated and 10 to become finalists.

Also nominated for Grammys this year were **David Slonaker** '80E (MM) and **Tom Peters** '86E. Slonaker was nominated for Best Large Jazz Ensemble Album for the David Slonaker Big Band's recording *Intrada* (Origin Records). Peters, a double bassist, was nominated for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance for his work on composer John Cage's *The Ten Thousand Things* (MicroFest Records).