



## Requiem for a Civic Monument

Chicago's demolished public housing projects are 'mythic spaces' that continue to shape the city, says Ben Austen '93, in a new book.

Interview by Maya Dukmasova '12

Chicago public housing and its troubles have been a journalistic focal point for decades, generating a slew of news coverage, books, and magazine articles about all that's wrong with "the projects." In 2000, then Chicago Mayor Richard Daley launched a \$1.6 billion project to rehabilitate or redevelop 25,000 units of public housing. Nearly two decades later, despite some rebuilding, there's been a vast reduction of permanently affordable rental homes, and an increase in vouchers that subsidize rent in the private housing market. The changes, moreover, have largely reinforced racial and economic segregation rather than paving the way for greater housing opportunities in well-to-do neighborhoods in the city and its suburbs.

In February, writer and Chicago native **Ben Austen '93**

**SHAPING CHICAGO:** Austen, a Windy City native and a former editor at *Harper's*, argues that the city's infamous housing projects continue to shape the environment, even after their demise.

published *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of American Public Housing* (HarperCollins), the first general-audience book about the history and residents of Cabrini-Green. Told through the eyes of four long-time residents who called the development home, it's a requiem to a civic monument that may be erased from the city's skyline, but has continued to shape Chicago nonetheless.

"I think my book chronicles our thinking about the inner city, and our always uneasy relationship to poverty and race," says Austen. "Cabrini-Green is not a place just to be razed and forgotten, like we've done with this thing. We're not. We're literally not done with it."

**You're a Chicago native—a "South Sider"—but, growing up in the South Shore and Hyde Park neighborhoods, lived a life quite distant from those of the people you write about. How does that affect your view of Cabrini-Green, and public housing in general?**

In 2010, when the last tower was coming down, for someone who grew up here, it was like: what does that mean? Not just 23 towers



in Cabrini-Green, but across the entire city. Because they loomed so large in the public imagination, these mythic spaces. They're as much a part of the city as the lake, Michael Jordan, Oprah. Being a South Sider even increased the mythic aspect of Cabrini-Green. People on the South Side, white and black, talked about Cabrini-Green [on the near North Side] as way worse and more nightmarish than the Robert Taylor Homes, which were on the South Side, because that made the Taylor homes more familiar.


#### How did you settle on the four people who became the main characters in this story?

When we think of this development of 20,000 people, we mostly think of the crime and drug use that came to define it, but the range of experiences that went on there—it was an entire town on 70 acres of land. The people I write about are ordinary people, but also extraordinary in their perseverance and their willingness to take action. These are the people who gave me their time, but their stories drew me to them. They were engaged in a kind of fight, not only to stay in public housing but to make life better there. None of those lives are free of the ill effects of public housing but they're full of taking action and attempts to define their own lives despite it all. That's powerful.

I don't think the people whose lives get told in this book are representative, that they embody every life, but they do have a fullness of experience and have a lot of agency, and I think in a

novelistic way they come to life in a way that defies a lot of simplistic notions of public housing, of poverty, of inner-city Chicago.

**Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here*, the last mass-market book about Chicago public housing by a journalist, was cited extensively in the 1990s as an example of why public housing should be done away with. Have you thought about the possible reverberations *High-Risers* could have in policy and politics?**

Empathy and less irrational fear lead to better policies. But a dramatic telling of someone's life doesn't necessarily offer an easy prescription for those solutions. Alex's book reminds me of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*: it was a revelation to readers that this is going on in our country. His book is very much an *I Accuse...*, a "Can you believe this?" He's embedded with an individual family as things are happening. But the towers were torn down and the concentrated poverty and isolation of public housing didn't go away—they were moved elsewhere. In my book, I'm both wrestling with those changes and interviewing people about the past events of their lives. Cabrini-Green becomes the magnet for all the fears our society has about the inner city. I'm writing in that context. If we start thinking about how unfair and unearned most of those fears are, then hopefully we can make better policy. 

*Dukmasova writes about housing and criminal justice for the Reader, Chicago's alternative weekly.*



**NEXT STEPS:** Kudlow, former host of CNBC's *The Kudlow Report*, is President Trump's top economic advisor.

## Larry Kudlow '69 Named White House Economic Advisor

**Lawrence (Larry) Kudlow** '69, once described by the *Washington Post* as the "reigning optimist on Wall Street," was tapped by President Donald Trump in March to be the next director of the National Economic Council.

The council, which President Bill Clinton founded by executive order in 1993, is situated within the White House and advises the president on US and global economic policy. As director, Kudlow becomes one of Trump's top advisors.

A history major at Rochester, Kudlow began his career as a junior economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, followed by stints at Paine Webber and Bear Stearns, before joining the Reagan administration as associate director for economics and planning in the Office of Management and Budget. An informal advisor to Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, he's best known to the public as the former host of CNBC's *The Kudlow Report*.

"Kudlow is a guy who does not mince words and is not afraid to take on the lion in his own den," says Peter Regenstreif, a professor emeritus of political science, who taught Kudlow at Rochester.

David Primo, Ani and Mark Gabrellian Professor and Associate Professor of Political Science and Business Administration, says that Kudlow's economic philosophy is generally aligned with Trump's, with some key exceptions.

"Kudlow is much more of a free trader than Trump," he says, "so the big question is whether Trump will come around to Kudlow's views on this issue, or vice versa."

The University awarded Kudlow an honorary degree in 2013. In presenting the award, the University recognized Kudlow for "candid analysis and savvy understanding of investment markets, the financial industry, and fiscal and monetary strategy." <sup>®</sup>

—PETER IGLINSKI

# A Problem Solver, and a Bridge, at Microsoft

Sophie Zhang '17 is nine months into her first post-college job. Here's what she's learned so far.

Interview by Kristine Thompson

## What does your job involve?

I serve as a bridge between a few different groups, including our front-line customer support staff and our engineering group. Engineering might know how to develop a product, but not know about customer experience. Our customer support staff understand customer issues. I help engineers understand the customer, and I help the support organization identify issues in support processes and policies.

## How did your education prepare you?

My engineering degree taught me problem-solving skills. I learned to tackle a lot of problems on my own. When I'm troubleshooting for customers, it's different every time. I have to use whatever resources I have to solve them and I can draw on what I learned in college.

Soft skills help, too. I really honed these as a Meridian and an RA for Hoeing 2 during my senior year. At that time, my "clients" were students and families, and first-year students in the residence. Those jobs helped me be more empathic and more patient, which is very useful when dealing with customers.

## How did you find the job?

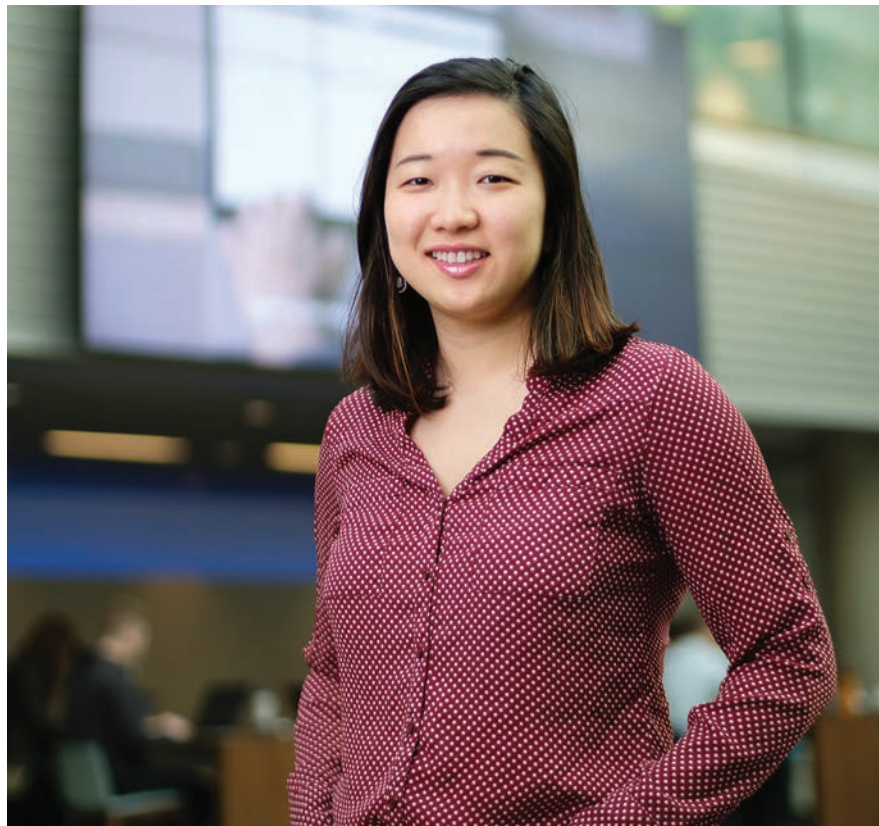
I literally applied online. Two months later, I was invited for a phone interview. Then I was flown to an on-site interview in Dallas. I mock-interviewed with David Cota-Buckhout [at the Gwen M. Greene Career for Career Education and Connections]. We practiced together and he provided advice on how to improve. Altogether, I had four in-person interviews. I was offered the job before I graduated and was hired into the MACH program, which stands for Microsoft Academy for College Hires.

## What were your first days like?

The first two months on the job were like going to college again. There were 200 of us in MACH's services area. We trained together and we really bonded.

## What do you like most about your job?

I love the mobility of the job. I get to hop around a bunch of projects and practice different strengths. I love talking to customers. I knew I didn't want to code every day so this is a perfect fit for me. Also, I learn so much being a part of MACH, and I've made a lot of



**NEW JOB, NEW CITY:** Less than a year into her first post-college job, Zhang, who came to Rochester from Chongqing, China, has found her footing at Microsoft, and in her new hometown of Seattle.

## FIRST JOBS

Alumni share stories about their first post-Rochester jobs.

### Sophie Zhang '17

**Major:** Electrical and computer engineering

**First job:** Support engineer, Microsoft Corp.


Started in July 2017 in Issaquah, Washington


friends in the program. That made it easier to move to a new city.

## What's most challenging?

Dealing with a lot of ambiguities is really the hardest part of my job. There's no GPA here. You have to deliver what you promise when sometimes what you are working on isn't very well defined. Also, where my career is heading is entirely in my hands. That's hard to practice at college. The path is much clearer there. You're moving toward your degree.

## What do you do when you aren't at work?

Seattle is a lot of fun. It's an outdoorsy city, so I go hiking a lot. Skiing, too. I keep meeting different people, including a few from the University who now work at Amazon, some actuarial firms, and other places around the city. I met them at a self-organized happy hour event in downtown Seattle. Being an alum gives me a built-in community wherever I go. 

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*What was your first job after earning your Rochester degree? We'd like to hear from you, whether you are in that first job now, or would like to share recollections in hindsight. How did your education prepare you, whether directly or in the most unexpected ways? Write to us at [rochrev@rochester.edu](mailto:rochrev@rochester.edu) with "First Jobs" in the subject line. Please include your title at your first post-Rochester job, your employer, and a brief synopsis of what you do—or did—there.*

# Making Physics Less Alpha

Barbara Whitten '77 (PhD) has devoted her career to the study of physics—and how to attract and retain women in the discipline.

By Lindsey Valich

As a physics student in the 1970s, **Barbara Whitten** '77 (PhD) often found herself one of the only women—if not *the* only woman—in her science classes.

“Most of the time growing up and when I was in graduate school, I thought I was absolutely unique in the world,” Whitten says. “It sounds egotistical, but I really did, because I didn’t know any other women who were like me and so badly wanted to study physics.”

Whitten earned her PhD in algebraic statistical mechanics at Rochester, landed a research job at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and taught physics at both Miami University and Colorado College, from which she retired last year.



**CRITICAL MASS:** As a discipline, physics still lags behind other natural sciences in working toward gender parity. But it has improved with the help of programs inspired by Whitten’s research.

Although she spent many years researching algebraic statistical mechanics and atomic and molecular physics, the project for which she is perhaps best known concerns the field of physics more broadly.

Whitten was a physics professor at Colorado College—the first female member of the physics faculty—when she won a National Science Foundation grant to develop a site-visit program to help improve the climate for female physicists. As part of the project, Whitten led a team that visited 15 colleges across the United States, interviewing faculty, staff, and students to find out what might make departments better able to attract and retain women. They compiled their findings and recommendations in a report published in *Physics Today* in 2003.

That report—“What Works for Women in Undergraduate Physics?”—has been so influential in the field that the American Association of Physics

Teachers honored Whitten with its 2018 Hans Christian Oersted Medal. The medal, whose previous winners include Carl Sagan and Richard Feynman, was awarded to Whitten in recognition of her “outstanding, widespread, and lasting impact on the teaching of physics through her work on diversity and inclusion in physics.”

Whitten recalls her early transition from natural to social scientific research. As a physicist, she says, “I was looking for a single cause and effect.”

Instead, she found multiple factors leading to a more welcoming environment for women. The most effective strategies included mentoring and a variety of student-centered initiatives that helped make students feel part of a department as soon as they declared themselves physics majors. Notably, she found that approaches that led to better retention of women correlated with better retention of all physics students.

According to Cindy Blaha, a professor of physics and astronomy at Carleton College, who works with Whitten on increasing diversity within the discipline, Whitten’s research marked a turning point.

“For the first time, departments were actually listening to the issues and trying to implement Barbara’s suggestions,” she says.

In her introductory courses, Whitten always made it a point to highlight the work of women such as Vera Rubin, who found some of the best evidence of dark matter; Katherine Johnson, an African-American mathematician at NASA, featured in the movie *Hidden Figures*, whose calculations were critical to the success of the Apollo 11 mission to the moon; or Nobel Prize-winning botanist Barbara McClintock, whose pioneering work in cytogenetics led to her 1983 Nobel Prize. All of these women, she says, “ignored social cues that told them they didn’t belong.”

Now a professor emerita, she continues her work to increase diversity in physics. For example, she’s working with Blaha and other physicists on a National Science Foundation–funded project to develop a mentoring program that connects female physics faculty across the country who feel isolated because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation.

Above all, she can’t imagine giving up her passion for science research.

“I wanted to be a physicist from the time I found out what physics was,” Whitten says. “I just fell madly in love when I was 16, and I have never, ever fallen out of love with physics.”

## Physics Ed: Honors All Around

Whitten is one of a few members of the Rochester community who have been honored by the American Association of Physics Teachers in this and in past years.

Also recognized this year was **Mark Beck** '85, '92 (PhD) who won the Floyd K. Richtmyer Memorial Lecture Award, given to a physics educator who has “made outstanding contributions to physics and their communication to physics educators.” Beck, who is the Benjamin H. Brown Professor of Physics and chair of the physics department at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, is noted for designing and carrying out tests of quantum theory with undergraduate students. He’s the author of the textbook *Quantum Mechanics: Theory and Experiment* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

**Steven Manly**, a professor of physics and the director of undergraduate research at the University, received the association’s honor for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching in 2007.

# Wise Words on Weight Loss

Wendy Scinta '94 (MS), president of the Obesity Medicine Association, offers some pointers.

Interview by Bob Marcotte

Weight loss tips aren't hard to find. But here are a few from the president of the Obesity Medicine Association.

**Wendy Scinta '94 (MS)**, a family-practice physician who is board certified in obesity medicine, sees hundreds of patients a year in her Syracuse, New York, practice. Weight loss is not the only goal. Nearly 200 diseases are associated with obesity. So as her patients lose weight—many lose more than a hundred pounds, she says—her training and certification enable her to work closely with other physicians and specialists to wean her patients off the medications they've been taking for those obesity-related diseases.

As president of the Obesity Medicine Association since October 2017, she represents about 2,000 specialists nationwide. She's the author of a book, *Bounce: A Weight Loss Doctor's Plan for A Happier, Healthier, and Slimmer Child*, and has drawn on her experience in her first career, as an electrical and computer engineer, to cofound One Stone Technology, which produces a web-based texting app that sends automated and personalized messages to encourage and motivate patients to shed pounds, and then maintain their lower weight.

## #1 Don't be afraid to try.

Everyone is capable of reaching their goal, but they have to commit to making changes. Success is ultimately up to the patient, who has to be ready to make the changes that are going to have long-term effects, and to stick with them. There's not a beginning and an end.

## #2 Don't think of it as a diet.

Think of it as getting healthy. Begin with baby steps—little changes at a time. Start out walking 10 minutes a day, or increasing your water, or vowing to log your food. When people try to do too much, too fast, they get frustrated, and may get hurt in the process.

## #3 Consider the behaviors behind your eating.

That's very important for maintaining weight loss, since the real weight-loss component lies in changing habits. Know that exercise helps with maintenance, but exercise alone is not the answer. Any good trainer will tell you six-pack abs come from your kitchen, not your gym.

## #4 Be ready to work at it.

Your body is going to fight to get back to its previous weight. When you lose weight, your metabolism drops, hunger hormones increase, and satiety hormones decrease as they try to force you back to your set point. You are going to need to exercise to maintain



**NEW APPROACHES:** Obesity medicine, a relatively new clinical specialty, recognizes the pervasiveness and complexity of the condition. In her practice, for example, Scinta works closely with other physicians in a variety of specialties to help wean patients off medications they take for obesity-related illnesses.

that weight loss, but you should feel so good by then it becomes part of the process. Certain weight loss medications (anorectics) can be very helpful as well.

## #5 Talk to a health care professional.

Do this before you take any supplement, or make any major dietary changes. There's so much misinformation out there, in a \$300 billion industry that is largely unregulated. As obesity medicine specialists, we often end up seeing patients who've relied on something they found on the internet and then start gaining the weight back. Some end up hospitalized or sick from what they took. Many lose a lot of money on unproven products that do not help and can potentially harm. **R**