On Campus

George Van Amson Elected Chair of CAA

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George Van Amsom (Michael Dames)

As a Columbia undergraduate, George Van Amson ’74CC was president of his first- and second-year classes, a varsity football and baseball player, a leader of Alpha Phi Alpha, and an active member of the Black Students Organization.

“It’s possible I was too involved in extracurricular activities, to be honest,” says the fifty-nine-year-old investment banker. “I could have spent a bit more time studying.”

Van Amson was recently named chair of the Columbia Alumni Association (CAA), a volunteer position for which the gregarious Bronx native would seem ideally suited. The CAA is the University's broadest alumni network, connecting nearly 300,000 Columbians from all schools through more than eighty regional clubs and affinity groups, online resources, and hundreds of events each year.

Van Amson, who served as a University Trustee from 1996 to 2008 and is among Columbia's most involved graduates, says that one of his goals as chair of the CAA is to engage more graduates in the life of the University — at whatever pace is comfortable for them.

"Maybe you'll attend your class reunion this spring," he says. "Or maybe you'll go to a basketball game. Alumni who live near campus may even come back to give career advice to students or to guest lecture in a classroom. I hope that everybody will consider taking part in at least one Columbia event this year."

This appeal to alumni — to make at least one new Columbia connection in 2012 — is being called the CAA Challenge. The University is also undertaking a long-term planning effort this year to determine how best to develop its alumni programs and outreach over the next five years. A twenty-member task force appointed by President Lee C. Bollinger, which includes alumni, deans, faculty, administrators, and students, will develop the plan, called CAA 2017. The task force is being co-chaired by A'Lelia Bundles '76JRN, a University Trustee, and Brian Krisberg '81CC, '84LAW, a vice chair of the CAA and chair emeritus of the College's alumni association.

"The goal is to promulgate a strategy for growing the CAA in ways that are responsive to alumni needs," says Van Amson.

Van Amson often jokes about his average academic record at Columbia. But plenty of what he learned at the College as an economics major obviously stuck: he went on to become a successful investment banker on Wall Street, rising through the ranks of Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, where he is currently a managing director of sales equity and trading management. Asked if any Columbia professors had a lasting influence on him, he quickly names the economists Phillip Cagan, C. Lowell Harriss, Seymour Melman, and William Vickrey, as well as the longtime dean of students Henry Coleman, whom Van Amson considered a personal mentor.

"Those guys took a kid from the Throggs Neck housing projects and gave him discipline and maturity," he says. "They also inspired me." Harriss regularly wrote to

Van Amson for years after he graduated, Van Amson remembers, to offer support and guidance.

Van Amson now lives on Manhattan’s Upper West Side with his wife, Wendy Van Amson ’83PH, with whom he has two daughters, Alexandra and Victoria, both students at the College, and a teenage son, Skyler. He’s a familiar face in the stands at Lions football and basketball games. He visits campus often to mentor students, and he serves on the board of Community Impact, a service organization that sends student volunteers from Columbia into New York City neighborhoods.

“Columbia gave me so much,” he says. “It gave me confidence, an intellectual foundation to build my career on, and lifelong friends. I’m very loyal. And I love coming back here. I love being around the people here, participating in life on campus, and making the institution an even better place.”



Guide to school abbreviations

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