

Distinguished Alumna Francoise Jacobsohn, LC'79, Is an Advocate for Women and Workers

Francoise Jacobsohn (LC'79) has been an advocate for women and workers since the 1970s.



In 2009, the Livingston Alumni Association (LAA) honored her as a Livingston College Distinguished Alumna.

As of 2023, Jacobsohn is the Court Compliance Officer with Sheet Metal Workers' International Association Local Union No. 28 in New York City. In this role, she is responsible for ensuring that Local 28, and contractors employing its members, comply with a court order mandating workplaces free from discrimination.

She also has served as a member of the New York City Mayor's Commission on Construction Opportunity, established in March 2005, to ensure that women and minorities gain access to work in the construction trades.

Jacobsohn previously served as the Project Manager at two organizations – Equal Rights Advocates and Equality Works – seeking to expand opportunities for women. Equality Works is Legal Momentum's Economic Justice Program focusing on expanding women's participation in high-paying non-traditional employment.



Jacobsohn is a former president of the National Organization for Women-New York City (NOW-NYC). She also has worked on an institutional and community-building project for public education in Upper Manhattan.

At France's Political Science Institute, Jacobsohn taught a class on "Women, the Law and Public Opinion." She also worked for a European nonprofit focused on violence against women at the workplace, and helped set up one of the early battered women's shelters in New Jersey in the late 1970s.

"My everyday life is talking to women on the ground, finding out what needs to be done and figuring out how to get it done, and that is completely Livingston," Jacobsohn said in a 2009 interview. "You need to know who the people are, what people are doing on the ground, what are they thinking, what are their needs, what do they want. And if you don't ask there, then the policy you get is not going to really look like what you want it to look like."

She earned a bachelor's degree in social work from Rutgers' Livingston College in 1979, and a master of public administration degree in 2003 from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

Watch the LAA's interview and video tribute to Jacobsohn (2 minutes, 9 seconds), embedded on this page, or open in a new window.

Photos of Francoise Jacobsohn: (top) Courtesy of Jacobsohn; (bottom) From the 1980 Livingston College yearbook, The Rock, Volume IV. (This yearbook included photos of graduates from both 1979 and 1980.)

Musician Mark Helias, LC'74, Is an Innovative Bassist and Composer; Honored as a Distinguished Alumnus in 2006

Mark Helias, a renowned bassist and composer, has been making innovative music since the mid-1970s.



He graduated from Rutgers University's Livingston College in 1974, and in 1976 earned a master's degree from the Yale School of Music.

In 2006, the Livingston Alumni Association honored Helias as a Livingston College Distinguished Alumnus.

Helias has recorded multiple albums as a lead musician since 1985 and dozens more with cooperative bands and other artists. His 2015 album *The Signal Maker*, with Helias on double bass, Tom Rainey on drums and Tony Malaby on saxophone, is the seventh he recorded as part of the trio Open Loose.

He continues performing and recording with BassDrumBone, a three-decade collaboration with Gerry Hemingway and Ray Anderson. Helias performs solo bass concerts and can also be heard in the duo The Marks Brothers with fellow bassist Mark Dresser.

Helias has also composed music for short film and two feature films by director Jay Anania. In addition to his many performances on records and CDs, Helias has produced recordings for other artists. He has taught at Sarah Lawrence College, The New School, and The School for Improvised Music.


Helias epitomizes Livingston's early reputation as a jazz music hotbed. Reflecting on his undergraduate education, Helias said: "I came away with a broader idea of how music worked, and I think it really informed my whole career in a sense, because that's the way I've approached being a composer and being an improviser and being a teacher."

Helias, a native of New Brunswick, New Jersey, lives in Manhattan.

Watch a short (1 minute, 39 seconds) video saluting Mark Helias in 2006 (embedded on this page), or open the video in a new window.


Pictured: Mark Helias at the 2006 Livingston College Distinguished Alumni Awards.

Distinguished Alumnus Avery Brooks, LC'73, 'Star Trek' and 'Spenser' Actor, Is Dedicated to African-American Issues

Actor, director and singer **Avery Brooks**, a tenured professor of Theater Arts at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts (MGSA), is best known to TV audiences for his roles as Commodore/Captain Benjamin Lafayette Sisko on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and Hawk on *Spenser: For Hire* and its spinoff, *A Man Called Hawk*. 

In 2006, the Livingston Alumni Association of Rutgers University honored Brooks as a Livingston College Distinguished Alumnus. Brooks graduated from Livingston College in 1973, and in 1976 earned a master of fine arts (MFA) degree from MGSA, the first African-American to earn a Rutgers MFA in acting and directing. Brooks appeared in plays presented at Livingston College, including *Short Eyes* and *Streamers*. He also served as the script coordinator for Livingston Theatre's *Dark Symphony*.

In 1993, Rutgers University named Brooks to its Hall of Distinguished Alumni.

Known for his dedication to African-American issues, Brooks has served as artistic director for the National Black Arts Festival. 

At various times since 1988 he has portrayed Paul Robeson (Rutgers College, 1919), the famous singer, actor and civil rights activist, in the plays *Paul Robeson* and *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?*, both on and off-Broadway.

In a 1997 interview at Oberlin College, Brooks, paraphrasing Frederick Douglass, said: "I will keep telling this story as long as I have breath. ... [Robeson was] a man who had a great heart, great courage, enormous intellect, and deep caring for humankind."

Brooks has worked extensively with the Smithsonian Institution's program in African-American culture. He was nominated for an American Cable Entertainment

Award for his performance in Showtime's TV production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He has performed with the Shakespeare Theatre Company, and he sang the title role in the American Musical Theater Festival production of the Anthony Davis opera *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*.

His movies include the 1998 Academy Award-nominated *American History X*, and the 2001 action film *15 Minutes*, which co-starred Robert De Niro.

Brooks has hosted several documentaries and served as narrator in such features as the IMAX film *Africa's Elephant Kingdom*.

In 2009 Brooks released the album *Here*, featuring jazz and blues covers, as well as spoken word tracks.


Brooks was born October 2, 1948, in Evansville, Indiana.

He is married to Vicki Lenora Brooks, who has served as an assistant dean at Rutgers. They live in Princeton, New Jersey, and have three adult children.

Watch the LAA's video tribute to Avery Brooks (1 minute, 28 seconds), embedded on this page, or open in a new window.

Photos: (Top) Avery Brooks at the 2006 Livingston College Distinguished Alumni Awards; (Bottom) Speaking at the 1992 Livingston College commencement, from the yearbook, A Style of Our Own.

[Distinguished Alumna Liza Kirschenbaum, LC'87, Gives Children a Voice in the Courts](#)

Liza Kirschenbaum, a 1987 graduate of Livingston College at Rutgers University, has touched the lives of thousands of children as the founding state director of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of New Jersey. CASA supports the many abused and neglected children working their way through the state's foster care system. 

In 2006, the Livingston Alumni Association honored Kirschenbaum as a Distinguished Alumna. As of June 2017, Kirschenbaum serves as CASA of New Jersey's associate director.

She earned her Juris Doctorate from New York University School of Law after

graduating summa cum laude from Livingston.

Kirschenbaum additionally has served on the Advisory Board of Foster and Adoptive Family Services of New Jersey, the New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect and the Task Force Protection Sub-Committee.

As a student, Kirschenbaum received the Livingston College Academic Achievement Award and the Lynne M. Kellermann Memorial (Honors Program) Award.



Watch the LAA's video tribute to Liza Kirschenbaum (1 minute, 39 seconds), embedded on this page, or open in a new window.

Follow Liza Kirschenbaum on Twitter.

Photos: (Top) Liza Kirschenbaum at the 2006 Livingston College Distinguished Alumni Awards; (Bottom) From the 1987 Livingston College yearbook, In Quest of Excellence.

[With His Brother, Distinguished Alumnus Gregg Spiridellis, LC'93, Has Made the Internet Laugh Out Loud Since 2000](#)


"Recovering" from four years in investment banking, **Gregg Spiridellis**, and his brother Evan in 1999 set out to create what they called a "brave new world of entertainment" with the founding of their production company JibJab Media Inc.



In 2006 the Livingston Alumni Association honored Gregg Spiridellis, a 1993 graduate of Livingston College and Rutgers Business School at Rutgers University, with the Seth Dvorin Distinguished Young Alumni Award.

Gregg and Evan Spiridellis started their company in 1999 from a garage in Brooklyn, New York. In February 2000 they created their first viral video hit with an interactive video of the Founding Fathers rapping about the Declaration of Independence.

After the dot-com crash, the brothers expanded their business by creating gag gifts, worked on animation projects for clients, and a children's book with rap superstar LL Cool J.

They quickly followed it with an even bigger hit featuring George Bush and Al Gore in a rap battle for the 2000 presidential election. The video was one of the web's first broad-based hits and landed on Fox's MadTV, ABC News, CNN, and a host of other national media outlets. 

After the Spiridellis brothers moved to Los Angeles to do additional work for clients, they kept pouring their resources into original short programming for .

In 2004 their investment paid off when JibJab exploded in popularity with the release of an election parody video, *This Land*. The video starred animated versions of George W. Bush and John Kerry battling and belittling each other.

The video, animated by Evan and written by Gregg, rocketed around the world from inbox to inbox after the brothers emailed a link to the 130,000 people on their fan newsletter. By the end of the 2004 election, JibJab's election videos (including the follow-up *Good To Be in DC!*) were viewed more than 80 million times online on every continent, including Antarctica, and even on the International Space Station.

The media frenzy that followed put the brothers in front of millions of people watching The Tonight Show, CNN, FOX, CNBC and the Today show.

ABC World News Tonight even named the brothers "People of the Year" in 2004.

As of 2015, according to an article from *Response* magazine, JibJab had more than 1.5 million paid subscribers, 100 million site visitors per year, and an expanding staff of 85. The company is based in Marina del Rey, California.

Gregg Spiridellis, chief executive officer of JibJab, is a native of Marlboro, New Jersey, and is married with three children, according to the same *Response* profile.

Follow Gregg Spiridellis on Twitter.

Watch the LAA's video tribute to Gregg Spiridellis (1 minute, 42 seconds), embedded on this page, or open in a new window.

Photos: (Top) Gregg Spiridellis at the 2006 Livingston College Distinguished Alumni Awards; (Bottom) From the 1993 Livingston College yearbook, Diversity: A Higher Form of Education.

Distinguished Alumna Karen Rogers, LC'92, Is a Television Meteorologist and Journalist in Philadelphia


Karen Rogers Lee, known professionally as **Karen Rogers**, is the weekday traffic and weather anchor for *Action News Mornings* on Philadelphia's WPVI-TV (6ABC).



Rogers, a 1992 honors graduate of Livingston College at Rutgers University, was honored by the Livingston Alumni Association in 2004 as the first recipient of the Seth Dvorin Distinguished Young Alumni Award.

In addition to being valedictorian of her communication class, she was the class speaker at her commencement convocation and is listed in "Who's Who Among American Colleges and Universities." Rogers spoke again at Livingston College's Commencement, as the invited speaker in 2005.

Rogers is a meteorologist who earned her seal of approval from the American Meteorological Society. She holds a certificate in Broadcast Meteorology from Mississippi State University following three years of studies in atmospheric sciences and geosciences. Rogers was a 1992-93 Rotary International Scholar and studied at the Graduate Centre for Journalism Studies at the University of Wales.

 Rogers joined 6ABC in 1996 as a reporter and producer for *AM/Philadelphia*. Rogers quickly joined the AccuWeather team and found her true passion in weather forecasting.

She had previously worked at WHSP-TV in Vineland, New Jersey, where she was a host and producer of a weekly public affairs program and the monthly show Congressional Reports. Rogers also anchored daily news cut-ins and filed feature reports for WHSP-TV. Prior to WHSP-TV, she was a features reporter for several cable stations in southern New Jersey.


Rogers co-hosts *FYI Philly*, a weekly entertainment show on 6ABC. She also has co-hosted many special events broadcasts for the station, including Philly on Wheels, the Philadelphia Home Show and the Miss America Preview Special. Rogers also has reported for the 6ABC/Boscov's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the 4th of July Parade, the Philadelphia Flower Show and the First Union Bike Race.

In addition to her work at 6ABC, Rogers is active in supporting young people. A first runner-up to Miss New Jersey in 1994, she often hosts or judges local pageants. Rogers has also been active in the fight against child abuse, and has taught elementary school students empowerment skills for reporting and preventing abuse.

Follow Karen Rogers on Twitter.

Photos: (Top) Courtesy of 6ABC; (Bottom) Rogers speaks to her fellow graduates at the Livingston College 1992 Commencement, as pictured in the yearbook, Diversity: A Style of Our Own.

Distinguished Alumna Gina Collins Cummings, LC'84, Is a Human Rights Activist and Organizer

Gina Collins Cummings, a 1984 graduate of Livingston College at Rutgers University, has been a political activist since elementary school, when she wrote a letter to her own teacher, questioning that teacher's insistence that people came only in black and white, not the many subtle shades and colors that Gina innocently recognized in her friends. 

The Livingston Alumni Association honored Cummings as a Distinguished Alumna in 2004.

Cummings organized Livingston College students to form a chapter of the New Jersey Public Interest Group (NJPIRG), and she went on to become the NJPIRG Student Chapters Organizing Director and Summer Canvass Regional Director.

She also founded an organization called Green Corps, which trained aspiring young activists to become grassroots environmental organizers, where she worked for 10 years. While organizing Green Corps, she was also the USPIRG Field Director and ran environmental campaigns in all 50 states.

Cummings later served as Director of Constituency Outreach, then Director of Operations, for Physicians for Human Rights (PHR). In that capacity, she has developed and implemented the strategic plans for a number of PHR campaigns, including Health Action AIDS, the U.S. Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Campaign to Eliminate Conflict Diamonds. and the Campaign for Women's Health in Afghanistan. At PHR she has also focused on an international effort to fight AIDS and an effort to abolish the death penalty for juveniles in the United States.

Cummings, a native of Long Island, New York, is married to Tom Cummings. They have two children.

Distinguished Alumnus Edward E. Johnson, Jr., LC'79, Has Excelled on Wall Street

Edward E. Johnson, Jr., a 1979 graduate of Livingston College at Rutgers University, took an unusual route to success on Wall Street.



In 2004, the Livingston Alumni Association honored Johnson as a Distinguished Alumnus.

After earning his bachelor of arts degree in psychology from Livingston College, Johnson attended New York University Graduate School of Business Administration in 1983.

He began his career in retail, serving as one of the youngest managers at Saks Fifth Avenue.

During a summer internship at Salomon Brothers, he was captivated by sales and trading. His skills landed him a full-time job at Salomon and, in 1989, at Merrill Lynch & Co. He was a first vice president of Merrill Lynch's Managed Solutions Group.

As of 2016 he is a partner at Aperio Capital Management, LLC. He previously was the Chief Operating Officer of Advent Capital Management, LLC.

Black Enterprise magazine has named Johnson to its lists of the "Most Powerful Blacks on Wall Street" in 2002 and subsequent years. He also served on the Livingston College Dean's Advisory Council.

Distinguished Alumnus Michael Laracy, LC'74, Leads Reform in Human Services, Aiding Low-Income Children and Families

Michael C. Laracy, a 1974 graduate of Livingston College at Rutgers University, successfully transferred his bachelor's degree in urban



planning and policy analysis into a career of leadership in human services reform in state government and in national philanthropy. Laracy's work focuses on income security for low-income children and families.

In 2004, the Livingston Alumni Association honored Laracy as a Distinguished Alumnus.

As of October 2017, Laracy is the Director of Policy Reform and Advocacy at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, Maryland.

Laracy has led multi-foundation efforts and has a record of successfully overseeing and directing complex system and policy innovations. For example, his efforts resulted in the crafting of new income security and support systems for low-income working families. One result of this work has been income tax reform, most notably the \$80 billion expansion of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit in 2001.

Prior to joining the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1994, Laracy was Assistant Commissioner for Policy, Planning and Program Evaluation in the New Jersey Department of Human Services, where he served for 17 years.

Distinguished Alumnus Harry V. Swayne III, LC'90, Oversees Player Engagement for Baltimore Ravens; Played Pro Football for 15 Years

Harry V. Swayne III (LC'90) enjoyed a brilliant career as a defensive tackle for Rutgers' Scarlet Knights football team from 1983 to 1986.



In 1990, four years after the end of his Rutgers football career, Swayne earned a bachelor of science degree in sports management from Livingston College at Rutgers University.

In 2004, the Livingston Alumni Association honored Swayne as a Distinguished Alumnus.

Swayne's best football season at Rutgers came as a senior in 1986, when he registered 51 tackles, five sacks, nine tackles for loss and three fumble recoveries. He distinguished himself as a defensive lineman and received the Bender Award in 1986, and was named to the ECAC All-East first team as a defensive lineman.

In his 15-year career as a player in the National Football League (NFL), Swayne captured three Super Bowl rings (two with the Denver Broncos, one with the Baltimore Ravens) and also won an AFC Championship with the San Diego Chargers.


Swayne began his professional career when the Tampa Bay Buccaneers picked him in the seventh round of the NFL draft in 1987.



In 1991, Swayne signed with the San Diego Chargers, with whom he started as left tackle in Super Bowl XXIX. Swayne then signed with the Denver Broncos in 1997, where he won two Super Bowls.

Swayne played for the Baltimore Ravens in 1999 to 2000 and won another Super Bowl. He retired from the playing field after one year with the Miami Dolphins (2001).

Swayne later served as the Team Chaplain for the Chicago Bears.

 Since 2008, Swayne has overseen the day-to-day responsibilities of the player engagement department for the Ravens, including assisting players with career transition into, during and after their time in the NFL.

He rejoined the Ravens in 2008 as the Assistant Director of Player Programs, then was promoted to Director of Player Engagement in 2009. He is also a missionary for Athletics in Action, which is affiliated with Campus Crusades for Christ.

In 2003 Swayne was inducted into the Rutgers Football Hall of Fame.

The LAA also presented a special Alumni Achievement Award to Swayne on November 2, 2002, at Rutgers Stadium, during halftime of the Rutgers vs. Miami football game.

Swayne and his wife, Dawn, have three daughters and two sons.

Photos: (Top right) Courtesy of the Baltimore Ravens; (Center right) An official photo from Swayne's Rutgers career; (Left) Swayne (#74) with the Denver Broncos.