Bringing History to Life

When Columbia University historian Kenneth Jackson spoke at a 2013 New York Historical Society exhibition about Teachers College, he described how several leading New York City families created TC and other institutions that still drive the city’s cultural and civic life. Then, the latter-day representatives of five of those families — Vanderbilt, Macy, Milbank, Rockefeller and Dodge — came on stage.

Both Jackson’s presence and the exhibition were engineered in part by TC’s Center on History and Education (CHE), created in 2012 with funding from TC Trustee Sue Ann Weinberg (Ed.D. ’97). Like Jackson, the Center seeks to underscore history’s continuing relevance.

“The Center is encouraging development of a new historical scholarship that sees the community as the starting point for improved history education,” says Thomas James, TC’s Provost and Dean, an education historian who serves as the Center’s Director.

“Local history is how you grab kids’ attention,” says CHE Associate Director, Bette Weneck. “It’s also the path toward effective citizenship.”

Those are urgent aims. Studies show that only 45 percent of U.S. students demonstrate a basic understanding of American history, and many states no longer require civics education.

The Center isn’t working alone. Columbia’s Department of History helped CHE secure a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Jackson serves as a senior adviser. The University’s Center for International History is helping to deepen knowledge of U.S. immigrant communities, and the Centers for Digital Research & Scholarship, and New Media, Teaching & Learning are creating online archives for teachers. Citywide, partnerships have been established with the New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. CHE also is collaborating with TC’s Institute for Urban and Minority Education and faculty in the History & Education and Social Studies programs, including Ansley Erickson, Cally Waite and Christine Baron.

Meanwhile, Weneck is teaching a course, “The History of Education in New York City,” in which students absorb the late TC president and historian Lawrence Cremin’s vision of education as often occurring through non-school venues. Students also explore past teaching and learning in the city’s neighborhoods.

“When you connect history to people’s lives, it comes alive,” Weneck says. —JOE LEVINE