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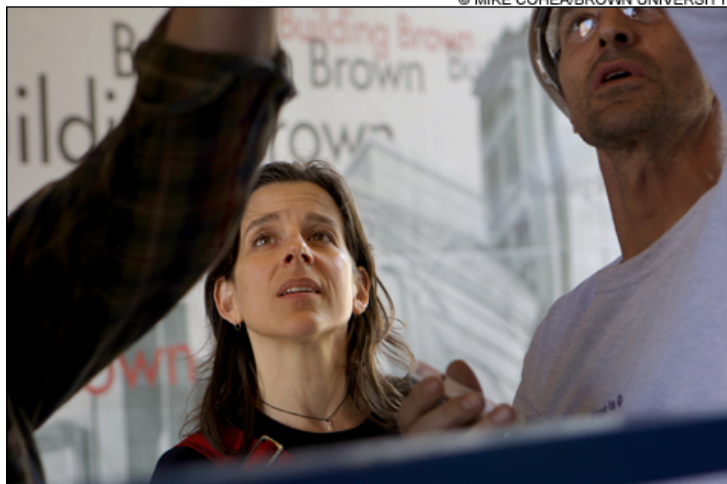
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Audio Dept.
By ELIZABETH RAU | November 5, 2010

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'A LITTLE ORACLE IN THE WALL' Katchadourian at the student center.

Advice from former students

Don't put sharp knives in the dishwasher. If you're in a lousy marriage, get out. Pack light. Wise words from a doting aunt? Guess again.

Those recorded messages and more are streaming from speakers in a wall at Brown University's Faunce House as part of a public art project created by a former student who believes everyone could use a bit of friendly advice now and then.

"I think of it, in some ways, as a little oracle in the wall that, over your years there, you can get to know," says Nina Katchadourian, a nationally recognized conceptual and multimedia artist who graduated from Brown in 1989. "Maybe it's a helpful place to visit."

Katchadourian says she often felt bewildered and overwhelmed as a student and would have appreciated any guidance or encouraging words from people who had experienced the same feelings.

Facebook also played a role in her creation. A year ago, on a whim, Katchadourian asked her Facebook friends to post the best advice they'd received over the years. The 80-plus

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responses were so compelling she decided to turn the idea into art.

With help from the Brown alumni office, Katchadourian and four other people tracked down Brown graduates throughout the country. Most of the interviews, however, were conducted on campus during the college's graduation this year.

The installation, titled "Advice from a Former Student," offers 800 recordings from 120 alumni. The oldest participant graduated in 1939, the youngest in 2010. No one is identified, although it's easy to guess age ranges based on voices.

"The piece is very intimate," says Katchadourian. "You have to put your ear right to the wall. It's sort of a one-person-at-a-time listening experience. It's very physically slight. It's just this little thing in the wall. But I hope people realize that there's tons and tons of material back there."

The advice is funny, irreverent, and provocative. Some people are long-winded; others make their point in a brief sentence. Surprisingly, Katchadourian says older people were not, for the most part, more reflective.

"When they were reflective," she says, "they just had a broader set of experiences to speak from."

The project, commissioned by Brown's Public Art Committee, was installed about a month ago on the first floor of the newly-renovated student center on Waterman Street. The volume is set low to encourage listeners to get close.

Love, of course, is a hot topic.

"Love is not the relationship where you're always worried about it," says one woman. Translation: If a coupling requires too much work, it's time to bolt.

A man happily married 61 years says he hopes students find bliss too. "I've enjoyed my marriage." But he is also a realist: "If it's going nowhere, if there's no commitment, it's time to go away."

Sex is an equally popular subject.

Sex is fun, says one man, but don't let it kill you. Use a condom, he says, to protect against HIV, AIDS, hepatitis and other sexually-transmitted diseases. One woman suggests using an IUD — "a great method of birth control" — while another urges women to "try and feel as sexy as you can."

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There are also tips on how to get through rough patches. "If you don't succeed at first, try the next 10 or 15 times," says one man. Optimism helped another man: "If you're going through hell, keep going . . . It will get better."

One woman talks about her modest upbringing and urges others from similar circumstances not to feel insecure among Brown's privileged students. "Just because somebody has a pedigree, it doesn't mean they are better than you."

Life lessons are bountiful: "Stop thinking, start doing." "Let your unconscious be part of every decision you make." "You can't really figure out who you are if you're trying."

Finally, there's useful advice: eat your veggies; go bird watching in Warren; never put sensitive information in an e-mail; take a class outside your major; learn how to write one-page papers; get a crazy haircut; appreciate Brown's student meals; don't skip class; don't share a bedroom with your boyfriend or girlfriend; don't worry about clothes; work in a bank; weather unrequited love, and learn one skill "very, very well."

"Go deep on that one thing," a man says. "You will never regret it."

Kathchadourian even put herself into the mix: "No one is ever as OK as they seem," she says. "Lots of people seem to have perfect lives, perfect marriages, perfect relationships, perfect jobs. But underneath every one of these perfect things could be someone who is incredibly depressed, incredibly upset, incredibly not OK. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the ones who seem the most OK are the ones you need to worry about the most."

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