

Alumni

Close Friendship with the Alma Mater

A university is more than just a combination of lecture hall, library and cafeteria. It opens doors to its graduates' future. And they often express their gratitude – like the Friends of Freie Universität Berlin

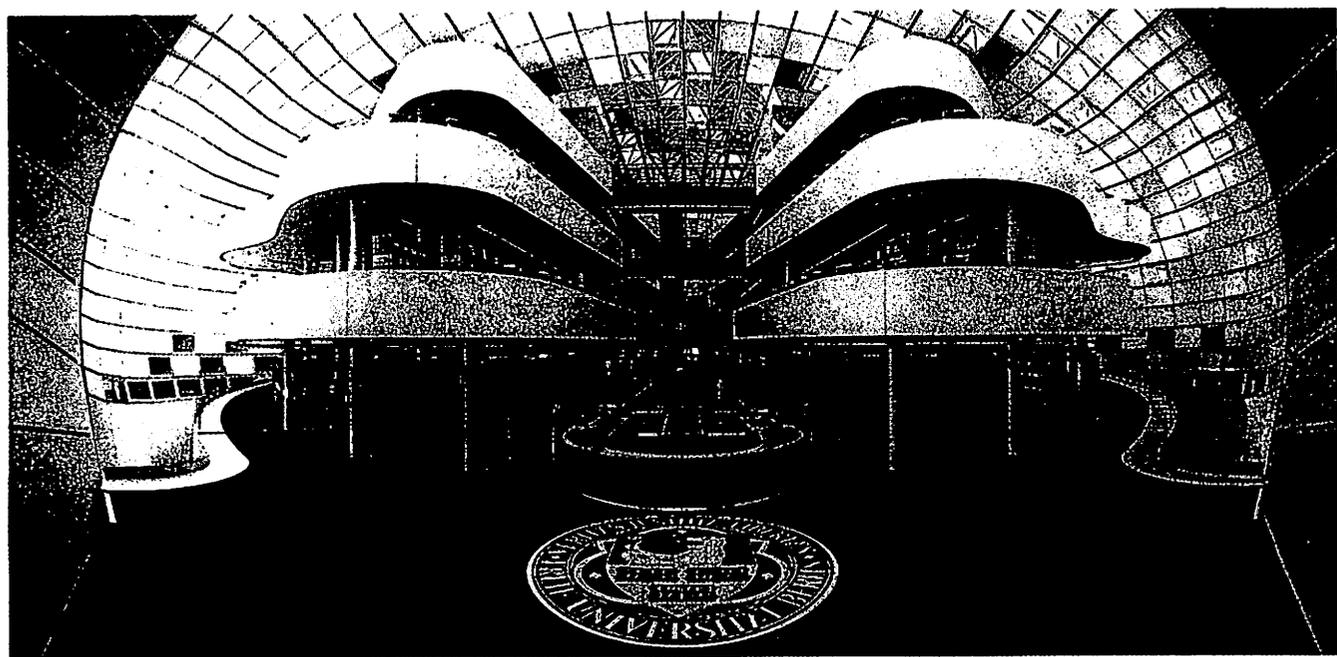
Every week H el ene Sostarich-Barsamian receives telephone calls from strangers. They are people from Arizona, Arkansas and Alabama who have heard by chance about the woman from New York City. They are engineers, lecturers, self-employed people of all ages, whose memories of a good time in their lives inspire them to pick up the phone. The callers have nothing in common – except for the fact that they once studied at Berlin's Freie Universit at (Free University). Over the past four years Ms. Sostarich-Barsamian has managed to find almost 700 former students of the Freie Universit at in North America. That's a lot. But it could

be a lot more. According to estimates in Berlin, some 3,000 alumni now live somewhere in the United States and Canada. H el ene Sostarich-Barsamian's job is to find them and win them over to her organization, Friends of Freie Universit at Berlin (FFUB). It all revolves around relations between Germany and America – and of course solidarity and financial support.

In 1998 the Freie Universit at celebrated its 50th anniversary, and the idea was born to build on the traditionally strong ties with the United States. Such honorable establishments as Oxford and Cambridge acted as role models for the project. These two top British

universities have been cultivating alumni clubs in the United States for almost 20 years and benefit from the venture in every possible respect. The situation at German universities is different. Here it is by no means the most natural thing in the world for former students to express their gratitude and generosity toward their alma mater. Although admittedly, in times of declining funds, this would definitely be a welcome gesture. So the university has now imported this idea to Germany for the first time in the shape of the FFUB.

"But we wanted to avoid generating a restricted in-group mentality," says Wedigo de Vivanco, who is the Freie Uni-





Zachary Stone

tions. Sometimes the program includes a whiskey-tasting event – all for the advancement of scholarship. After all, every donation mobilized by the non-profit organization flows directly into individual projects at the university. Donations to the FFUB helped finance the renovation of the Henry Ford Building in Berlin.

versität's Dean of International Affairs. It was decided to set up an office at the United Nations Plaza in New York City, where Germany's Permanent Mission to the UN also resides. And in 2002 the advertisement for an Executive Director was answered by: Hélène Sostarich-Barsamian. It didn't matter that this energetic lady had studied in Belgium rather than Germany. "What the FFUB has managed to do in such a short time is amazing. All I can say is: hats off!" says de Vivanco in admiration.

Drumming up support for a German university in North America is not the easiest thing to do. Sostarich-Barsamian refers to it as the "ultimate challenge". The Executive Director assumed this challenge together with her seven colleagues on the Board of Directors, which actually includes four alumni, and they came out on top. Last year alone the FFUB organized a series of events about Jewish history and German-Jewish relations that lasted for several weeks. The alumni organization celebrated the Freie Universität's newly founded Confucius Institute with a German-Chinese-North American dinner attended by Germany's Ambassador to the United Nations and the Chinese Consul General. And at the end of 2006 the FFUB invited guests to a VIP concert at the German UN Mission.

The FFUB organizes anything that will bring people together: films, literary readings, discussions and auc-

Funds also poured into the Kofi Annan Fellowship Program and the internationally renowned Dahlem Conferences. According to the university's "foreign representative", Wedigo de Vivanco, the team in New York City has already collected more than one million dollars: "That's awesome." But some of the support is impossible to calculate in terms of dollars and cents: recently access was created for students of the Freie Universität to the Shoa Foundation Institute. The world's largest historical video archive, initiated by film director Steven Spielberg in 1994 during the filming of *Schindler's List*, is now administered by the University of Southern California. The fact that Berlin students have direct access to the 52,000 video interviews with contemporary witnesses can also be credited to the commitment of enterprising alumni. "It's unique," enthuses de Vivanco, who has long since been convinced that "the move in the direction of the United States has been worthwhile."

Yet the financing of the overseas office is still by no means secured. "We can't use the FFUB donations to finance that," explains de Vivanco, "because these monies are earmarked for specific purposes." So for some years now the strategy has been to organize fundraising galas with prominent personalities. They have included the internationally renowned architect Sir Norman Foster,

who designed the Freie Universität's Philosophy and Humanities Library, and Klaus Schwab, Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum. In 2006 Bill Clinton was scheduled to attend as guest of honor. But he had to cancel six weeks beforehand. "That caused some chaos in our financial planning," says de Vivanco. He reckons it will take one to three years before the project is in the clear.

Nevertheless, the man in charge of external relations is confident that the university is on the right track with its professional alumni organization. And Hélène Sostarich-Barsamian also believes: "This is the way forward for German universities." At the moment the Freie Universität is the only German uni-



Bismarckstraße

Support: former students promote the studies of the current generation at the Freie Universität Berlin

versity to have taken such a resolute step abroad. At the very most, other universities have liaison offices in the United States, through which they advertise their summer programs and postgraduate courses. However, de Vivanco's telephone is beginning to signal changes in this respect: "Inquiries from colleagues are on the increase." And although there may not be regular questions every week yet, it probably won't be long before that begins to change.

Jörg Schindler