

ABOUT AURELIA WILLIAMS-PHILPOTTS

Favorite Broadway show/musical? “Annie” was my first, but it’s difficult to say which is my favorite because there are so many. “Avenue Q” was great. It’s vital and brilliant.

Favorite movie? “The Color Purple” and “Harlem Nights”

Favorite song? Anything by Stevie Wonder

Acting or singing? Both – they are intertwined

Favorite hobby? Reading. I’m always reading.

Favorite book? “A Wrinkle in Time” by Madeline L’Engle



What does it feel like to be part of the Tony Award-winning cast for “Once on this Island?”

Winning a Tony was one of my most exciting and unbelievable moments. It was a collective effort and particularly meaningful for me. I was what’s known in the industry as a swing/standby which is an understudy for both principal and ensemble roles. This means I had to memorize a variety of roles and be ready at a moment’s notice to perform them. I had to learn so much, and because this show was staged to be on an island, this included dancing in sand – for 90 minutes! It’s really hard, especially if you think about the effort it takes to walk on the beach, much less dance on it. The fact that we won still blows my mind.

What do you like most about performing live?

I love connecting with people and providing a vehicle for people to connect with each other. I see it as a gift. As performers, we are telling stories about people you may fall in love with or not be able to stand; but for those moments, we are connected, and the arts provide an avenue to do so. But I find the entire creative journey to be the thrill ride.

Do you still get nervous before a show?

There is a misconception that most performers live for the applause, when many are shockingly shy and introverted as I was, growing up. I still get nervous and excited but at the end of the day, the arts are a place where people really see each other’s humanity – especially in times like now when things are so divisive.

You do a lot of volunteer projects that combine your love of education with your love of the arts. Tell me more about that.

Arts education is one of the most important experiences for students, and it’s important to bring art to those who may not be able to afford or experience it. We all need creative outlets and

someone to foster them, so I try to support these programs whenever I can. I am also regularly involved in an organization called Dream Wakers, which hosts classroom video chats offering students the opportunity to talk to people with non-traditional careers. It’s another way to connect with people who otherwise may not cross your path, and enables me to keep one foot in the educational arena. The connective tissue here is education. Even though I didn’t end up being a teacher, I will always be an educator.

How did your experience at Rutgers contribute to the person you are today?

I’m still very close to the friends I hung out with when I was in school. They are largely African American, so we naturally came together and stay connected to various issues and what happens on campus. I’m also part of a Facebook group of mostly male, African American Rutgers graduates. There are some alarming statistics on young African American men not succeeding in college, so these men made it their goal to help them succeed. On a completely separate note, I was also a resident advisor when I was at Rutgers, which prepared me well for things like public speaking and conflict management – both invaluable skills.

What advice do you have for others who may be looking at a new career path, or a non-traditional one?

A lot of people ask me how you get started in theater, as a singer. My answer is to just do it. There is no magical doorway to pass through. Find out what you need to do to reach your goal – whether it’s finding where the auditions are or who you need to connect with – and do it. If it doesn’t work out, tally up what you learned along the way and do something else. You can apply this to any opportunity.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY AT THE

EPICENTER NYC

How a weekly newsletter, founded by a Rutgers alumna, has been breaking down barriers through journalism in the wake of COVID-19 and social justice movements

By Kristin Baresich SAS’14

IF it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community to get through a pandemic. One need only look to Epicenter-NYC, a weekly newsletter co-founded and published by veteran journalist S. Mitra Kalita RC’98 SCILS’98, to see this concept in action.

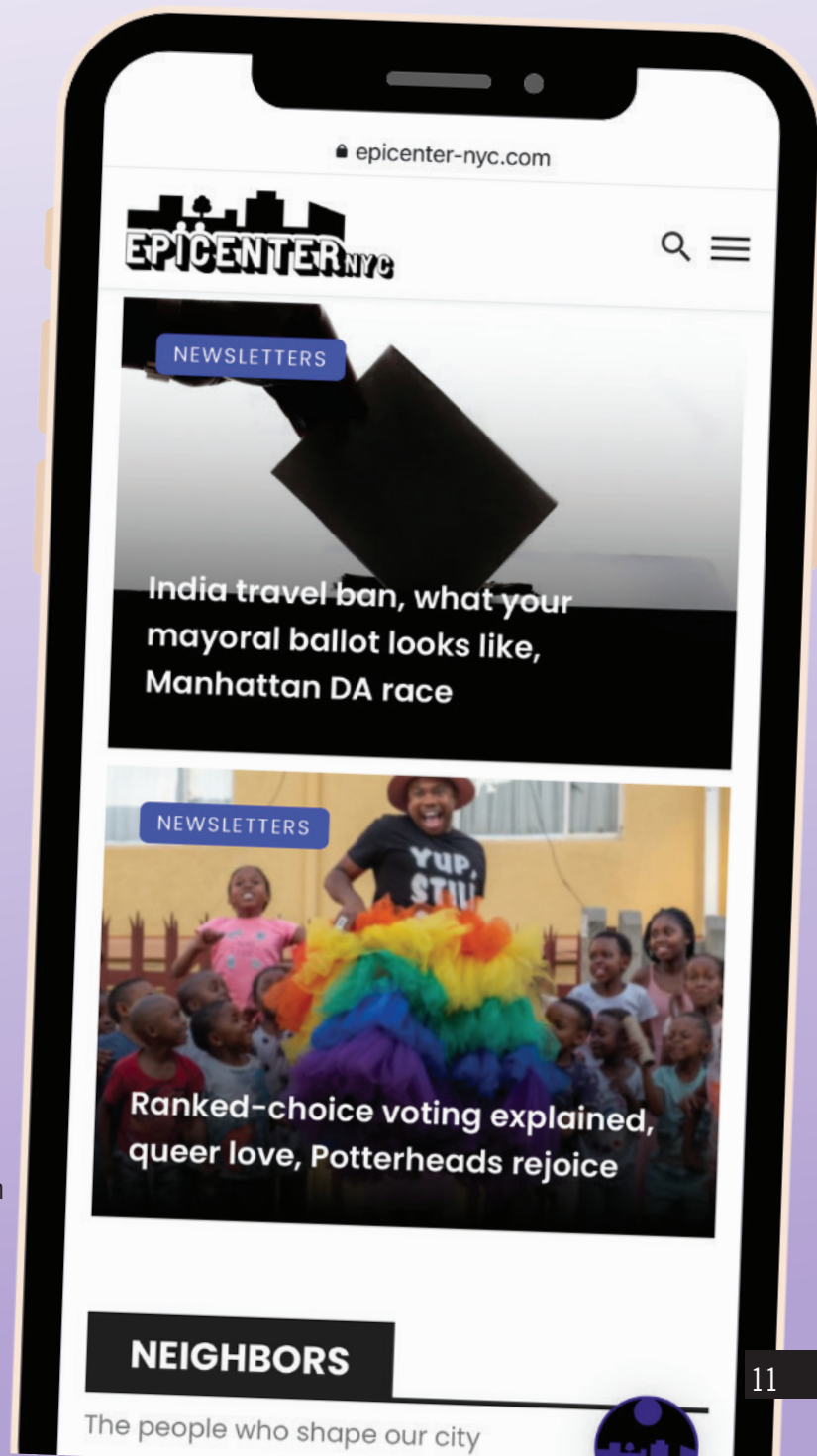
Since its launch in July 2020, Epicenter-NYC has been focused on uplifting New Yorkers and serving as a touchpoint to give and get help in a variety of ways – from addressing food insecurity and PPE supplies to supporting local artists and businesses.

The name “Epicenter” reflects its roots in Kalita’s neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens, and the surrounding area – one of the hardest-hit regions in the early days of the pandemic. While Epicenter-NYC was created to serve this immediate neighborhood, its vision and reach go beyond city limits.

“I think about serving people through news and information as these concentric circles that expand outward,” said Kalita. “When we talk about local news, I don’t think of borders of a neighborhood as much as an individual and the many overlapping identities they embrace, and what they might want to know about. So while at our core, I do think our community is the epicenter, it also emanates outwards as an epicenter does.”

She cited some of her own identities as examples – a resident of not only Jackson Heights, but also Queens and New York City; a former resident of Puerto Rico; a daughter of Indian parents; a woman; a mother of two girls.

“Black and brown communities are a really important part of a mindset like this one because people come from all around the world to carve out a home here. It doesn’t mean they have given up on where home used to be,” said Kalita. “You can’t care about Epicenter without having some global view of the rest of the world.”





From left: S. Mitra Kalita RC'98 SCILS'98, Epicenter-NYC publisher, interns Chloe Tai and Jade Stepenev, both SAS'21 SCILS'21, and Robin Cabana DC'98.

Jersey roots underpin a diverse community

The broader Rutgers community has played a significant role in Epicenter-NYC as well. As the newsletter has grown, three more Rutgers graduates have joined its ranks: Robin Cabana DC'98; Jade Stepenev SAS'21 SCILS'21; and Chloe Tai SAS'21 SCILS'21. Cabana and Kalita met during

journalism and media studies. "But then the next article I did was on anti-Asian attacks and what was happening in the city with that, and . . . I had so much more emotion behind that." Spurred by the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, Tai summarized some of the incidents in New York and shared resources and ideas for Asians to help keep themselves safe in her piece "What Asians want you to know." It ran on

"I reached out to a bunch of senior citizen centers in the area, and I ended up talking to seven or eight seniors who got the vaccine," said Stepenev, who shared her findings in the piece "What older New Yorkers think as they get vaccinated." "They all had similar stories — without the help of a son, daughter, in-law of some kind, they wouldn't have been able to get vaccinated."

Others, like many in the restaurant industry or individuals working multiple jobs, couldn't afford to spend hours refreshing scheduling websites or didn't have the luxury of taking time off for a vaccine appointment, thus limiting their options amid the competition for receiving a dose. "It's one thing for state law to say you have to give workers time off," said Kalita. "It's another for people who might feel like they are not powerful to actually be able to ask for that."

Practicing "Journalism of Utility" to help New Yorkers get vaccinated

But not only did Epicenter-NYC staff write about issues of equity and access to the vaccine, they also jumped into the fray and sought to help as many individuals as possible get vaccinated — publishing downloadable resources on their website, live-streaming videos on how to schedule a vaccine appointment, and booking appointments directly for eligible individuals.

"The instinct of a journalist is to say, 'That

person can't get documentation — let's do a story on it, saying this immigrant worker is sad and frustrated.' What we decided to do was say, 'Here's a public folder of letters you can download. Here's Andrew Cuomo's statement on how immigration status or insurance status should not be a deterrent to getting vaccinated,'" said Kalita. "We started to create what I call a journalism of utility. A worker would be able to tell us his problem and would also be able to turn to us for the solution."

The result? As of May 2021, Epicenter-NYC staff and volunteers had secured more than 5,000 appointments for New Yorkers and helped break down barriers for countless others.

The initiative was inspired by listening to the community and the specific needs they shared with Epicenter-NYC. One touchpoint came as a result of Epicenter-NYC's small business ambassador program, in which they partnered with New York University students to feature a series of local small businesses, each business nominating the next to be featured.

"Our intention was to create a bit of a daisy chain of interesting stories of New Yorkers, and what customers need to know right now to best support them," said Kalita. "In January, one of those restaurants — Jackson Diner — approached us and said, 'Could you help us try to figure out how to get our restaurant workers vaccinated?' At the same time, some of our other readers



[said], 'I'm trying to get my elderly parents vaccinated, do you have any ideas?' This became pretty organic in the approach we already had, but it allowed us to play this role of service to our community that ended up being kind of tangential to journalism but then boomeranged back around and made our journalism so much better."

A new perspective on reporting

Tai said being part of Epicenter-NYC has shown her what it means to go beyond simply providing information and practice active journalism.

"Epicenter showed me that I can do this — I can show my passion and be a journalist at the same time," said Tai.

Stepenev is grateful for the opportunity to report on critical community issues with empathy and compassion.

"I hope it inspires other people to lend a hand or figure out how they can help in their communities too," said Stepenev.

Epicenter-NYC collaborated with other communities around the country to overcome obstacles in getting people vaccinated and sponsored a VaxFest2021 event at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Jackson Heights, Queens.

PHOTO BY NITIN MUKUL

"Epicenter showed me that I can do this — I can show my passion and be a journalist at the same time."

CHLOE TAI, SAS'21 SCILS'21, EPICENTER-NYC INTERN

the same minority journalism workshop as high schoolers and later went on to serve as managing editor and editor-in-chief, respectively, of *The Daily Targum*. Cabana began working on social media and design for Epicenter-NYC soon after its launch, while Stepenev and Tai joined as interns and became involved with writing and social media.

"When I joined Epicenter, the first assignment they gave me was on the community boards, which are these local governing bodies in NYC, and covering that story was fascinating," said Tai, who double-majored in political science and

March 16, 2021 — the day of the Atlanta shootings in which six Asian women were killed.

Each edition of Epicenter-NYC opens with, "Dear Neighbor," an apt lead-in for a newsletter that focuses on supporting the community and uplifting marginalized groups. With the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination effort, Epicenter-NYC staff readily investigated their neighbors' challenges associated with the rollout and access to coveted vaccine appointments in the city.

Many elderly individuals had difficulty navigating the online scheduling systems.