Ron Mendola, the director of the Georgia Tech Symphony Orchestra and the Jazz Band, has lived a varied and star-filled life, the details of which most of his students are unaware; he began as a classical trumpet player.

Born in the Bronx, Mendola began playing trumpet at the age of eight, enrolling in music class at his elementary school. “I started in a class of nine or ten kids who wanted to play trumpet, and by the third week it was just me,” he said, laughing. “Actually, it was my dad who made me stick with it a little longer, and I would have liked to,” he added, “but then I just got captivated by it, because I started to hear things; I started to pick things off the radio and play them, and suddenly it was a lot of fun.”

Mendola picked up the instrument quickly, playing in bands at the age of 12 or 13 and starting to work professionally at 14. “My dad would take me to the job and get me in, and then he’d leave and come back and pick me up later,” he said. Neither of his parents had any musical background—his father was a dockworker in Buffalo, and his mother was a housewife. His older brother, however, played the French horn, which was an early influence on him. “I wanted to be a classical trumpet player because my brother was listening to that music, [but] at the same time I was listening to stuff on the radio, and then I started listening to jazz as well,” said Mendola. “So was always a little confused about that.”

In the end, however, he got to do both. After high school, Mendola enrolled at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, a prestigious music school. He would leave Oberlin after a year, but would later return to school at the University of Buffalo to get his master’s in trumpet performance.

In between all that, Mendola said, “I was a road musician, off and on.” He played with Charlotte Church, Big Bad Voodoo Daddies and Artoo Sandoval. “It’s a lot of fun,” he said, and left it at that, and made us start rehearsing.

“People who really know what it’s like to be in a college setting know that authority doesn’t come from name dropping or telling people all the things you’ve done,” he said. “Rehearsal time is precious, and the last thing the students need me to do is tell them a lot of stories about myself.”

No, I guess not. That’s my job.

It seems ridiculous when we consider that college hunting is a more rigorous process to most people than hunting for a religious ideology.

How important is religion, though? Even if one decides not to participate in something, it is nonetheless a good idea to know about it. Religion is a perfect example of this.

Some of the longest, bloodiest wars in history have been fought on behalf of religion, and in the name of religion. Whether this religious motive is right or not, it does warrant some sort of investigation into ideologies. Religion can perhaps be considered one of the most potent elements of society; the Worldview Forum, held a week ago Thursday, attempted to increase student awareness of various religious beliefs.

The Worldview Forum was sponsored by the Campus Crusade for Christ and held in the student Saturn building. Over 100 people were in attendance.

The program was split into several different portions.

The Basics with Vanek
The Technique’s Vereen Vanek gets up close and personal with John Vanek to talk about his new movie, Brass, which came out last Friday.

Braves Stunner
The Braves’ opening day earlier this week was a heart-wrencher for John Parsons. Find out why it was so bad in Beyond the White and Gold.

Student Mothers Face Unique Challenges

Student mothers are one of the smallest minorities on campus, even though prominent figures such as Elizabeth Hendon, one of the first women to enroll at Tech, and Sally Lam Woo, the first Asian female at Tech, had their first child during their senior year.

Tech has made few strides to provide for student mothers—or even for student fathers—throughout its history, in part because the number of such students on campus traditionally has been almost negligible.

Support groups have occasionally sprung up through the Counseling Center, but have never had the resources or commitment on Tech’s part to last.

In January, Tech made its first concession to student parents when it became affiliated with the Home Park day care center near the campus, the result of twenty years of work from select members of the Student Parents Council for a special scholarship that cuts the daycare costs in half.

Tech, being a male-dominated school, is a bit more hesitant to offer resources and flexibility that many other universities have.

Some women have faced a unique challenge since they’ve been at Tech—being mothers. This additional role outside the classroom adds more responsibilities, stresses and monetary concerns to these women’s lives.

“IT went in and actually spoke to a professor this semester about a grade I got last semester, and he asked me what was going on in my life...and when I told him that I was a wife and a mother, working and a full-time Tech student, he said that words told me I didn’t need to be here, that Tech is not made for people like me, which is true,” said Amanda Kaslau, an IE junior with a two-year-old daughter, Miranda.

“Tech is geared toward the traditional college student, meaning right out of high school, able to live on-campus in dorms, doesn’t have a family of their own, doesn’t have to have a job, likes that thing. And I am none of those things.”

“There’s no slack cut,” agreed Becky Upchurch, a graduate student in Mathematics and the mom...
The first portion consisted of panelist speeches delivered by representatives from the Hindu, Jewish, Bahá’í, Christian, Muslim, and Atheist organizations.

Each representative had been sent a letter prior to the event asking that each speech give an educational explanation between eight and ten minutes long, to explain the religion’s central beliefs and tenets, and what distinguishes it from other faiths.

In addition, the speakers were asked to explain what tangible difference involvement in the particular religion made in the student’s life, and how each person’s beliefs were relevant to his or her life.

All of the speeches were delivered with passion, and each had subtle spiritual links. All were also quite objective in nature, and served the purpose of effectively laying out the main points of the religion and clearing up common misconceptions associated with each.

Following these panelist speeches, audience members handed in questions for the panelists.

The Atheist representative was asked about the origins of evil, since he had said that the origins of good did not come from some higher power. It was answered that both good and evil could basically be attributed to human nature.

The Muslim representative was asked why Muslim societies oppressed women. The representative answered that it was a common misconception of Arabic cultures; he argued that just because the women wear a veil, it does not mean that they are oppressed.

One question posed to every representative except the Bahá’í representative was about what the other representatives thought of the Bahá’í faith.

All of the representatives responded positively and favorably. As the Bahá’í representative had explained the Bahá’í idea of Progressive Revelation, which basically means that all religions share a common spiritual belief, but social laws are updated as society progresses socially, the representative was asked if the Bahá’ís believed there would be another prophet after Baha’u’llah, their prophet-founder. It was answered “yes,” that society will eventually progress to another point when social laws will need to be updated.

Following the panel discussions, people broke into smaller groups to further discuss respective religions. The individual discussion groups were characterized by many inquiries, a good exchange of information, and an overall vibe of fellowship.
ider of three children (Casey, 16, Christopher, 13 and Meggie, 8). “The expectation is [that] my responsibilities here are what everybody else’s are.”

Prior to the opening of Home Park, parents had to make individual arrangements for their children, in some cases turning to family members for support.

“I could not have done any of this without my father,” said Kasilus. “He was my main means of [financial] support before I was married. Now David and I are on our own, but [when] I’m confused or frustrated, I call my dad.” Her marriage last December has provided additional support for her daughter. Some students like Upchurch hire assistance, in her case a nunservant that supervises her children in the afternoons, although this is less common due to the financial limitations of most Tech students.

“Something I always have to keep track of... is what’s the minimum that my kids need from me, and I have to make sure they get it,” said Upchurch. “I don’t watch any TV. There are a lot of things I just don’t have time for, and I just make the time with them count... I have my separate time with each of them every day when I tuck them into bed.”

Furthermore, as a parent long before she entered graduate school, Upchurch has acquired skills that have aided her in her academic responsibilities.

“You learn how to do two things at once and you learn how to balance... and my concentration is really intense. When I’m studying, I know that I don’t have the luxury of wasting time, so I’m really studying.”

Kasilus, having had her child while in school, also understands the hardships of parenting while at Tech. After giving birth, she failed the following two semesters, changed majors, and had to re-enroll. “In [children’s] eyes, their needs come first, so that’s the way you have to make your life, whether you like it or not,” she said. “When she was an infant, it was easier... now it’s Mommy this, Mommy that, Money, what’s this, Money, what’s that. Mommy, I want to watch Monsters, Inc. and Elmo.”

Parenting, she said, means that students like Kasilus and Upchurch don’t get to lead the normal social lives of other Tech students.

“My social life has changed drastically several different times,” said Kasilus. “At this point, I have no social life. It’s work, school, Miranda, and my husband... Going out for us involves no homework, tests, quizzes, [or] projects, [we’re] not nearly exhausted, and [we can] find a babysitter.” Still, she said, they have fun. “We rent movies [or] have a night of cooking what you want to, [and] we take Miranda places.”

Upchurch, being a mother before she returned to college, said that having children hasn’t affected her social life as much, yet “there are lots of things that I would like to do that I can’t, just because it’s harder for me to make things [like] parties... I realize that I’m not putting enough time probably into my social life, but, I mean, something has to go, because I’m not going to take that time away from my kids, and I’m not going to take that time away from Tech. It kind of gets put on the back burner.”

Nevertheless, “My kids are as welcome to any party I go to, for the most part, as I am, and sometimes I take them.”

Yet she still manages to lead a social life at Tech, she said, by maintaining good camaraderie with her classmates and making time to connect with people.

So do Kasilus and Upchurch regret having children? Not in the least, they said. “By no means do I want anyone to think that being a parent is like a ball and chain, because it’s not,” said Kasilus.

“Watching her grow and being a part of that, being a part of someone else’s development, I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

Dr. Carole Moore assisted with the research for this article.

The new day care center in Home Park, which Tech is affiliated with, is used by faculty and students, and scholarships are available for student mothers to help them finance sending their children to the center.

Amanda Kasilus
ISYE junior
Mendola

The brass section took their horns; Ron Mendola got his start in music with the trumpet, which he started playing when he was eight years old, and continued playing because of his dad’s encouragement.

As a student at Georgia Tech, Mendola said, “I wanted to be known as a conductor.”

Mendola took a tape of the band around to different studio owners and the rest of the music community.

Soon he was conducting around the area, and through those jobs, he got to know the studio singers he worked with. Some of them also toured, and so Mendola began touring with them. “We started doing Vegas, Jersey casinos; we would do the first 30-45 minutes of the [main floor] show.”

“And out of that,” Mendola said, simply, “I got a phone call, and I was suddenly the music director for IBM.”

Yes, IBM. As music director, he is mainly responsible for helping produce IBM’s Global and National Recognition Events, which are celebrations for outstanding employees that involve music and entertainment.

His job with IBM took him to Bermuda, Miami, San Diego, San Francisco and several of the Hawaiian islands. “I did those for about five years,” he said, “and [I would] be on the road for almost 20 weeks a year for them. Luckily, a lot of those occurred during the summer, or else I couldn’t have done it and still done Georgia Tech,” he said.

Mendola began teaching at Georgia Tech in 1979, directing the jazz ensemble. “It was very part-time; I was doing one night a week back then. [It wasn’t] my sole support,” he said, “because I couldn’t have lived off it back then.”

However, his role at Tech has become increasingly more important over the years. “I started seeing that there were a lot of possibilities here. Especially once Buckey Johnson [Tech’s previous music director] came here: the two of us…were able to add courses and build up a curriculum.”

Now, in addition to directing both the orchestra, which was created in 1993, and the jazz ensemble, Mendola teaches music history, instructs individual students in the music minor program, and is the head of the Oxford Study Abroad Program.

In addition, he still works for IBM, which is the reason for his current Hawaii trip. “I like doing one of those every once in a while,” he said, “It’s very personally rewarding to keep my hand in, because when you work for a Fortune 500 company, you’re working with the best lighting director, the best technical people, the best video director. You learn something every time you go and do something like that.”

And finally, on top of everything else, he still plays the trumpet one or two nights a week. “I’m working at Sambuca [one of Atlanta’s premier jazz cafés] on Saturday night. And I mean, I don’t need to go and play for money. I need to play because I need to still be a musician.”

When asked if there were any particular events or people that influenced him, Mendola replied that there were plenty. “The first time I heard Miles Davis live,” he listed, “—that’s what really got me into jazz. Working with Tony Bennett live when I was 20 years old. And most recently working with Arturo Sandoval.”

But maybe because he was speaking to me more as a conductor to an orchestra member, Mendola kept coming back to his job at Georgia Tech.

“This is my favorite thing, now. Though I do love all the other things I do, working with the students has become my favorite thing, both in the jazz program and the orchestra. That’s just an amazing kick,” he said, knowing that I would understand where he was coming from, “when I’m up there and I hear you guys sound good. It makes me feel good about myself; it’s the only reason I’m still doing it.”

He added, “I think President Coughlin once said to our former choral director, talking about the music department faculty, ‘You guys have the best jobs here at Georgia Tech.’ And in a lot of ways we do, because we get to see students who are only here because they really want to be here. That’s something you may not be able to say about every single one of your core curriculum classes.”
Despite lower four-year graduation rates nationally, the study found that many students take an extra year or two to complete their degrees, with 58.8 percent of students finishing in six years.

Judith Smith, newly appointed interim executive dean of the College of Letters & Science, explains that if students stay more than four years, they prevent admittance of freshmen. “We care deeply that we provide access to students who want to come to UCLA ... so we make sure students graduate (on time),” Smith said.

The study also focused on various factors contributing to retention rates. “Differences continue to persist by institution type, by gender and by ethnic group,” Oseguera said. Private schools exhibited four-year graduation rates that were more than 40 percent higher than public schools—69.1 percent and 24.3 percent, respectively.

Four-year retention rates among men were slightly lower than women’s rates, at 32.6 percent of men versus 39.7 percent of women. The study also found that Asian-American and white students’ four-year completion rates were higher than those of African-American and Mexican-American students, ranging from a high of 38.8 percent for Asian-American students to a low of 21.3 percent for Mexican-Americans.

Another factor—“academic preparedness”—had a large impact on graduation rates. Of students who maintained A or A-minus averages in high school, 58.2 percent graduated in four years while only 8 percent of C-average students finished in that time frame.

Four-year graduation rates for students who scored a 1300 or above on their SATs averaged 68.9 percent. Only 7.8 percent of students who scored below 800 finished in four years.

Oseguera, who coordinated the study with Institute director Alexander Astin, explained that comparing graduation rates at different institutions can be misleading without knowing how academically prepared incoming students are.

For example, two institutions with 60 percent graduation rates may appear equally successful with student retention. Based on students’ academic preparedness, however, the expected rates for the two institutions are 50 percent and 70 percent, respectively.

Thus the school with a 50 percent expected rate is doing a much better job retaining students since more students are graduating in four years than expected.

“The bottom line is that we really have to be looking at the types of students these institutions enroll,” Oseguera said.

Based on this information, researchers discerned that public schools had four-year graduation rates that were 11 to 15 percent below the expected rates while private schools had retention rates 2 to 6 percent higher than expected.

Web reports from Jamie Hsiung, Daily Bruin Staff.
Winner of the Tech Up Close contest receives a *Technique* T-shirt and a coupon for a free student combo at Li’l Dino’s.

Last week’s Tech Up Close:
A cell phone

Last week’s winner:
No one.