

# ALUMNI NOTES

Spring 2008



PHOTO BY VERNON DOUCETTE

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"I love everything about Fitchburg — the people, the history, the buildings — and I feel that I can be a part of a big transformation here."  
**LISA WONG (CAS'00, GRS'00), NEWLY ELECTED MAYOR OF FITCHBURG, MASSACHUSETTS**

# A MILL TOWN'S NEW HOPE

## AT TWENTY-EIGHT, LISA WONG IS THE MAYOR OF FITCHBURG, MASSACHUSETTS

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**ON A SNOWY** day in January, newly inducted mayor Lisa Wong walks the streets of downtown Fitchburg, Massachusetts, waving to drivers, who honk good-naturedly in return. In this city of 40,000 residents, nearly everyone recognizes Wong, who has an ambitious agenda to reverse the fortunes of her adopted hometown.

The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Wong (CAS'00, GRS'00) grew up in North Andover, Massachusetts, and has lived in Boston and in Sydney, Australia. But she feels most at home among Fitchburg's bricked-up warehouses and quaint storefronts.

Like other once-prosperous New England mill cities, Fitchburg fell hard when traditional industries — paper, textiles, and other manufacturing — relocated or vanished. But where others might see a decaying city whose best days are over, Wong sees endless potential. "I love everything about Fitchburg — the

people, the history, the buildings," she says. "And I feel that I can be a part of a big transformation here."

Wong graduated from BU with a dual bachelor's degree in international relations and economics and a master's in economics. She joined the Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority in 2001, three years after the General Electric plant closed, eliminating an estimated 600 jobs and about \$30 million in annual payroll. Over the next six years, Wong helped to bring about a number of urban renewal projects, including a \$1.5 million riverfront park and an eight-acre complex with manufacturing, research and development, and office space at the former GE facility.

But Wong believed that more needed to be done. "I decided to run for mayor because I wasn't hearing much discussion among other candidates on ways to get the city on a path to financial stability and economic growth," she says. Her grassroots campaign targeted "registered voters who don't typically vote in local elections," she says. "And it worked. I had nineteen- and fifty-nine-year-olds tell me that they voted for the first time ever because they wanted to be proud of their community."

Just months into her two-year term, Wong is tackling the city's economic problems with a plan to encourage the kind of vibrant, youthful social life that has helped resuscitate larger cities, such as Portland, Maine, and Providence, Rhode Island.

Fifty miles west of Boston, the city sits on the banks of the North Nashua River at the base of Wachusett Mountain, a popular skiing and hiking destination. Wong, an avid hiker and kayaker, dreams of offering white-water rafting courses and building bike and walking paths along the river. "Outdoorsy, artsy cities are huge draws," she says, citing Asheville, North Carolina, as an example.

That kind of a transformation won't be easy, partly because of a public perception that Wong argues is outdated. "One of the biggest challenges I'm facing right now is helping Fitchburg overcome its reputation as this dilapidated, crime-ridden town," she says. "While it's true that we have enormous financial challenges, we've overcome a lot in the past few years. We have a solid bone structure — our buildings and our hills. We just need a bit of sprucing up."

Wong plans to stick around to see that happen. In fact, she intends to seek reelection in 2009. "This is where I want to be," she says. "This is home." **VICKY WALTZ**

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### 1929

**Helen Vaile Parker** (SRE'29) of Lakeland, Fla., celebrated her 100th birthday a few days early with a family luncheon at the Terrace Hotel in Lakeland on September 8, 2007. All of her children and three of her four grandchildren joined her. A second party was held on her actual birthday, September 13, at the Florida Presbyterian Homes.

### 1949

**Virginia "Ginny" White** (SAR'49, SED'52) of Stoughton, Mass., received the second annual Heights Award from the Massachusetts State Lottery and Boston College Athletics. The award, which recognizes Massachusetts residents who have made significant contributions to women's athletics, was presented at a Boston College vs. Wright State University basketball game in November. In the 1950s and 1960s, Ginny worked to achieve equality for girls sports programs in the Boston public schools. Now retired, she is on the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association's Girls and Women in Sports Committee.