



CCNY GREAT GRADS²⁰¹⁹

The City College
of New York





Meet some of the remarkable women and men in The City College of New York Class of 2019. The students chosen for this year's Great Grads excel in the classroom, have personal stories that inspire us, and illustrate the transformative power of the City Experience. They were nominated by their CCNY mentors and represent all schools and divisions of the college.

Among them are graduates poised to make great contributions in fields as varied as mechanical engineering, Bilingual Childhood Education, architecture and medicine. They've faced and prevailed against challenges including poverty, homelessness and institutionalized racism on the path to becoming public servants, policy makers, and artists for change.

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Suzanne Borderies

BArch, Architecture
Bernard and Anne Spitzer School
of Architecture

"I would have to say that the studio culture in the architecture school and the close relationships I developed with most of my professors due to the small size of the program are some of the highlights of my CCNY experience."

Suzanne Borderies moved with her family from France to the U.S. when she was three years old and has been travelling between the two countries ever since. This transatlantic existence "made her agile as a student, intellect and designer," said Sean Weiss, architectural history professor at CCNY's Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture.

Majoring in the visual arts as a student of Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, Suzanne took an architecture course that inspired her to apply to the Spitzer School.

"I chose CCNY for the hands-on and artistic approach to architecture, as well as the location. Studying architecture in New York allows one to be immersed in the environment of the city," she said.

Through her participation in City College's chapter of the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), Borderies was awarded the prestigious AIA Queens Merit Scholarship and the Spitzer School of Architecture's 2016

award for the best hand-drawings in the school's History of Architecture courses.

During free time, she enjoys taking on freelance work in graphic design and art. Since 2010, Borderies has volunteered with her mother at the Chiaroscuro Theater bringing shadow puppetry to numerous schools. As an intern at interior design firm Studio Sofield, she is learning more about the various scales of architectural design and the materials used.

After graduation this May, Borderies wants to find a job at an architectural firm or interior design firm and pursue a master's degree in urban design at Columbia University in the future.

"I would have to say that the studio culture in the architecture school and the close relationships I developed with most of my professors due to the small size of the program are some of the highlights of my CCNY experience."



David Dam

BA & MA, Economics
Colin Powell School for Civic and
Global Leadership

"From the moment I landed here, I knew I was close to the opportunities for me to develop, not only academically but also professionally, cultivating and combining my passions and ambitions."

David Dam was first drawn to the world of economics in high school speech and debate activities. What began as data culled from reputable newspapers and the occasional think-tank has grown into Dam finding the economic indicators himself on the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, with what he describes as "a never quenching thirst for research."

Dam came to City College from Austin, Texas, eager to find a more diverse community and to "get out of my bubble." CCNY's New York City location assured he would be exposed to the work prospects and internships he was motivated to seek out. "From the moment I landed here, I knew I was close to the opportunities for me to develop, not only academically but also professionally, cultivating and combining my passions and ambitions."

"I started taking graduate courses during my junior year. Within the first few months of taking the introductory graduate-level courses, I was able to talk about the theories and skills learned in my classes during internship interviews with the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, where I interned for the summer of 2018."

His desire to continue improving also helped Dam land an internship with The Brookings Institution India Center in Delhi, where he co-authored a report on the regulatory structure of India's pharmaceutical industry. As a Colin Powell School fellow, he researched pharmaceutical drug pricing patterns in New York City, with a special emphasis on underserved neighborhoods and communities of color. "My time at CCNY has reiterated my passions to contribute to the literature regarding economic inequality in the United States and abroad, and to study programs designed to narrow the wealth gap."

On campus, Dam has served as a member and, this year, as president of The Roosevelt Institute, writing policies and working with other student groups on campus to discuss policy issues and advocacy.

Dam has been invited to return to Brookings India to work on another project in June before starting a full-time position at the Federal Reserve.



Wendy Fernandez

BS, Electrical Engineering
The Grove School of Engineering

"They wanted me do something more suitable for women, like accounting, business administration or psychology."



Yaritza Holguin

MA, Public Administration
Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership

"I was motivated to do this work because I had seen the changes within my community slowly developing throughout the years, changes that were intended to bring higher-income residents into the neighborhood instead of improving our quality of life."

Wendy Fernandez' BS degree in electrical engineering with a 4.00 GPA is the culmination of her intense passion for the field, and her perseverance against cultural norms in her native Dominican Republic. She easily recalls what sparked her interest in engineering and other STEM subjects. She was five and an avid fan of the Discovery Channel series "MythBusters" that aired on TV in the DR. Watching the show's skeptical hosts blow up things to debunk myths got her hooked. In high school, Fernandez competed in both math Olympiads and science fairs, once designing a small functioning Tesla coil with her physics teacher to power a tiny light bulb. She was often the only female participant and therein lay the biggest challenge to her interest. Male relatives were reproachful of her passion for engineering and STEM subjects. "They wanted me do something more suitable for women, like accounting, business administration or psychology," said Fernandez.

She resisted, graduated from high school, and became the first member of her family to attend college when she came to the US. She enrolled at Hostos Community College, brushed up on her English with ESL courses, and also also conducted research in computational biology. Fernandez was Hostos' Valedictorian when she transferred to CCNY to embark on two years of outstanding research. She interned at CUNY, Columbia University, MIT and at Intel in California. Fernandez's stellar work has come to fruition. She's the recipient of a prestigious GEM Fellowship which provides funding for qualified students from underrepresented communities to pursue graduate education in applied science and engineering. Among the schools that have admitted her to graduate programs are Stanford, Columbia and Boston University.

"Wendy has remarkable intelligence and persistence," sums up Jennifer Lutton, National Scholarships Coordinator at CCNY.

Bilingual, and born and raised in New York City, Yaritza Holguin spent three years as a community health worker in the Bronx, promoting health equity and access in underrepresented neighborhoods. After graduating from John Jay College, she wanted to serve her community by making change on a broader scale – by changing the unjust policies underlying unequal health care access, which was intertwined with other social injustices, such as gentrification.

This grassroots experience and her passion for change brought Holguin to the Master's in Public Administration program (MPA) at CCNY, a program that prepares students to be leaders and managers in government, nonprofit organizations, and social enterprises.

With support from the MPA Changemaker Scholarship management grant, Holguin worked as an intern in Congressman Adriano Espaillat's district office in Harlem, which led to a summer position in the congressman's Washington, DC, office.

While succeeding in her internships and maintaining a solid 3.72 GPA, Holguin has also remained engaged in her community, playing an active role in the campaign to educate her community about the 2018 Inwood Rezoning Plan. She canvassed the Washington Heights, Inwood, and Dyckman areas, talking to people on the street and in small businesses about the impact of the rezoning and encouraging them to attend meetings and hearings.

"I was motivated to do this work because I had seen the changes within my community slowly developing throughout the years, changes that were intended to bring higher-income residents into the neighborhood instead of improving our quality of life," she said.

As graduation draws near, Holguin is completing an internship at the New York City Deputy Mayor's Office for Health and Human Services. She plans to continue building her career as a social impact professional.



Pavel Javornik

BS, Mathematics
Division of Science

“CCNY definitely gave me a second chance. I feel that over here, you’re more likely to find people that believe in you and can take a chance on you.”

In his first semester at CCNY, Pavel Javornik was homeless but would still attend class. That crisis typifies the immense challenges he’s endured in his life en route to academic success at CCNY. The story begins when Javornik, aged two, and his family left Serbia in 1996 following the collapse of the Yugoslav Federation. He grappled with personal issues as an adolescent and dropped out of high school. “I wasn’t sure if I should be in school and mostly worked,” he recalled. He went back to school three years later, graduated and kept working odd jobs that ranged from office intern at an HIV/AIDS nonprofit to construction.

Javornik later enrolled at BMCC before an inspiring talk with CCNY math professors on their research lured him uptown. Adversity followed him to City even as he excelled in class and helped revive the CCNY Math Club. He was plagued by homelessness and severe financial difficulties. But

CCNY came to the rescue. The math department offered him work as a grader, and his mentor, associate professor Bianca Santoro, introduced him to another professor who was looking for paid student research aides.

“Over time, Pavel’s abilities in math were made evident by the research he’s done with various professors, his grades in upper level graduate courses, and overall love for the subject,” said Santoro. “I believe Pavel is a great example of the kind of student whose hard work pays off when given a second chance at CUNY.”

Javornik, who will stay at CCNY to do his master’s and then pursue a PhD in mathematics, is indebted to his alma mater. “CCNY and the CUNY system in general definitely gave me a second chance. I feel that over here, you’re more likely to find people that believe in you and can take a chance on you. If I didn’t have the help I had, I’d probably have dropped out.”



Naomie Jean-Pierre

MA, English Literature
Division of Humanities and the Arts

“CCNY has been home, a fertile soil for my dreams: dreams of being published; dreams of being intentional about my writing in a way that challenges dominant narratives of oppression; and dreams of extending myself beyond my previous social and academic boundaries.”

Haitian native Naomie Jean-Pierre left Haiti with her parents in the wake of political unrest when she was 11 months old. She was raised in Atlanta, Georgia, where she was introduced to literature at an early age.

“My mother, being a natural storyteller, filled our home with books and with reverence for education,” said Jean-Pierre, who received her bachelor’s degree in English from Howard University graduating magna cum laude.

As a graduate student at The City College of New York, her interest in non-dominant language varieties such as Haitian Creole has shaped her focus and thesis on the black body in poetry. “I thought it was important to investigate what kinds of narratives emerge concerning Haiti from other parts of the world, thinking about how I can write from the margins to investigate meaning,” she said.

Jean-Pierre had the opportunity to spend a semester at the University of Paris where she gathered a corpus made from

photos of black bodies from European and Native English speakers around the world. She then toured Europe and collected images of black bodies, which will be used as a critical-creative project with the black body and terrain, as well as to further her creative writing in poetry, fiction, nonfiction and children’s books.

During her time at City College, she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and won The Graduate Children’s Book Award, The David Dortort Prize in Creative Writing (Non-Fiction), and The Jerome Lowell DeJur Prize in Poetry. Over the summer she will attend Oxford University’s Creative Writing Summer Residency for Poetry and Fiction while preparing for a doctoral degree in cultural studies.

“CCNY has been home, a fertile soil for my dreams: dreams of being published; dreams of being intentional about my writing in a way that challenges dominant narratives of oppression; and dreams of extending myself beyond my previous social and academic boundaries,” said Jean-Pierre.



Kevin Jiang

Class of 2019 Salutatorian
BS, Mechanical Engineering
The Grove School of Engineering

"My parents made sacrifices by leaving China, so that I would have the opportunity to pursue my American dream. And if I want to honor my family and fellow Americans, I will find a way to positively contribute to a country that has given me hope."

In seven remarkable years, Kevin Zijian Jiang went from a 15-year-old recent immigrant from the Chinese port city of Guangzhou, who barely spoke English to CCNY Class of 2019 Salutatorian with a 3.96 GPA. He'll receive a BS in mechanical engineering from the Grove School of Engineering and is mulling pursuing a PhD in microfluidics or attending medical school.

Jiang's accomplishment is made more impressive by the adversity he endured after arriving New York. While learning how to navigate a high school curriculum taught in a language he had limited grasp of, his father was diagnosed with stage 3 esophageal cancer. Jiang and his mother offered long-term care. Jiang would work on papers and projects, and study while keeping vigil at his father's hospital bedside until the end came on Dec. 16, 2016.

Through it all, Jiang worked on advanced projects that ranged from microcapillary device development (redesigned

droplet-based microfluidics device for emulsions formation, which benefits in medical diagnoses and targeted drug delivery) to reverse engineering a wireless mouse. Patent application has been filed for the microcapillary device. He received the Gerard and Doris Lowen Mechanical Engineering Scholarship in spring 2018. Jiang explains the source of his motivation: "My parents made sacrifices by leaving China, so that I would have the opportunity to pursue my American dream. And if I want to honor my family and fellow Americans, I will find a way to positively contribute to a country that has given me hope."

And CCNY, with its famously diverse campus, has been the perfect setting to fulfill his dreams. In his community, Jiang has served as a media equipment technician in Jesus Baptist New York Church in Queens. He also aspires to get more socially involved in helping Chinese immigrant families, especially those that include cancer patients.



Flavio Perez

BA, Political Science
Colin Powell School for Civic and
Global Leadership
SEEK Program

"My family has come to the United States from Mexico in search of a better life. My mother wants us to get the best education since she was not able to get one when she was young."

First-generation college student, Flavio Perez is the first of three siblings to receive his bachelor's degree; however, his college journey has been far from straightforward.

"My family has come to the United States from Mexico in search of a better life for themselves and their children. My mother wants us to get the best education since she was not able to get one when she was young," said the 23-year-old about his mother who inspires him to achieve more.

As a freshman, he struggled to maintain passing grades, but with the help of faculty and staff decided to major in political science, which changed his trajectory garnering a higher GPA as well as a focus. His involvement in the SEEK Program gave him an added boost as an inductee of Chi Alpha Epsilon, a national honor society for students admitted to colleges and universities through non-traditional criteria.

Throughout his college journey, Perez has shared his successes with those around him as a mentor for the Urban Mentoring and Achievement Network, a CUNY Black Male Initiative program on City College's campus. He recently shared his college experience with a group of 14-year-old, male high school students from the Urban Assembly School for the Performing Arts.

"One of the students found out I was Mexican like him and got excited," he said. "Now, he wants to pursue his degree at City College."

Perez has volunteered for the 63rd Session of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women at the United Nations as well as served as treasurer for City College's Chess Club. He is currently enjoying photography as a hobby and has plans to pursue his master's degree in public administration or the study of the Americas.



Yinelly Rodriguez

BSEd, Bilingual Childhood Education
School of Education

"My goal is to inspire many other young women with children. It is never too late to go back to school because, if I did it, others can do it, too."

Yinelly Rodriguez came to the US from the Dominican Republic at age 8, unable to speak English. Early years at school were difficult. "There weren't many Spanish speakers so I was put in a mainstream classroom." Bilingual programs were eventually introduced in middle and high school, and she was getting good grades. But in tenth grade, Rodriguez had to drop out in order to help her struggling parents support her five siblings.

Then, at 19, Rodriguez became pregnant. "After my son was born, I had twin girls and then another daughter, all in six years." Raising four kids and working in low paying jobs, Rodriguez knew that the only way to make it out of poverty was going back to school. The decision meant making sacrifices including leaving her kids at a babysitter's in order to take GED classes.

"I passed the GED exam on my first try and that made me realize that I'm smart and I have it in me." She enrolled in Borough of Manhattan Community College and began studying Bilingual Childhood Education.

Emboldened by her success as the first of her siblings to attend and graduate from a college program, she applied to CCNY and worked to earn her bachelor's in Bilingual Childhood Education, supported by essential scholarships and awards from the School of Education and the SEEK department.

"My goal is to inspire many other young women with children. It is never too late to go back to school because, if I did it, others can do it, too." She is graduating with a 3.96 grade point average.

Since September, Rodriguez has been working with first grade students through CCNY's Bilingual Pupil Services, partnering with teachers in a dual language setting.

Rodriguez credits her husband and kids with giving her the strength to continue through all the challenges. "That kept me going. The degree is not only mine, it's theirs."



Alaudin Ullah

BA, Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences
Division for Interdisciplinary Studies
at the Center for Worker Education

"Going back to school at CWE made me feel like I was being born again. It has given me the confidence as a writer but, more importantly, as a human being."

For the past decade, Alaudin Ullah has worked as a paraprofessional at Vanguard High School in Manhattan, helping at-risk students understand that college is within reach. His success in breaking through to teens is rooted in his candid approach — revealing his own aimless high school career and experiences growing up in public housing without guidance or mentorship.

While early attempts at college were not fruitful for Ullah, he discovered he had a passion for stand-up comedy in his late teens. He found success as a comic on the road until his mother's failing health brought him back to New York, where he started working with the Department of Education. When his students got accepted to college, they were surprised to learn that their advisor Alaudin was a college dropout. "Why don't you return to college and practice what you preach?" they challenged him.

After his mom passed in 2016, he felt he owed it to her to pursue that college dream. She'd told him how she left

Bangladesh so that her children could get the education that had eluded her.

"In 2017, I made a commitment not just to myself but to honor my mom as well as take up my students' challenge." Alaudin enrolled at CCNY's Center for Worker Education (CWE), whose mission it is to provide an excellent education to working adults. He took classes while working full-time and developing an off-Broadway show, *Dishwasher Dreams*. He consistently made the Dean's List.

"Going back to school at CWE made me feel like I was being born again," Alaudin said. "It has given me the confidence as a writer but, more importantly, as a human being."

Alaudin will spend the summer editing a documentary on the South Asian immigrant community in 20th century Harlem. This fall, he starts his graduate work at Columbia University's MFA in Playwriting program.



Elizabeth Yim

Class of 2019 Valedictorian
BS, Biomedical Science
CUNY School of Medicine at CCNY

"I have met so many amazing mentors and have been given incredible opportunities here at CCNY to learn not only about medicine, but also about social determinants of health. I plan on incorporating patient advocacy and public health work into my future practice."



Neda Zahraie

MA, Literature
Division of Humanities and the Arts

"CCNY faculty were open, encouraging — and taught me how to be a good literary scholar."

Bayside, Queens, native Elizabeth Yim, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, is the first CUNY School of Medicine at City College student named CCNY Valedictorian. Yim is a member of the medical school's third cohort. She completed the three-year accelerated BS degree portion of CCNY's seven-year medical program with flying colors and a 3.98 GPA. Along the way, Yim received the Dean's Medal for Academic Achievement, the Rudin Research Fellowship and the Mack Lipkin Broader Horizon's Fellowship. Her undergraduate experience largely mirrors CUNY School of Medicine's mission to prepare medical professionals from underrepresented minorities to serve in historically underserved communities.

The Mack Lipkin Fellowship in 2018 led her to the Ocean Road Cancer Institute in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, that nation's only cancer treatment facility. There she designed and led an independent research project to investigate barriers to receiving confirmatory screening and treatment among women with cervical lesions or suspected cervical cancer.

Earlier, Yim had won the 2016 Top Presenter Award at the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students in Tampa. Her research was aimed at improving disproportionately high lung cancer mortality rates among Chinese American and African American smokers in New York City. "I want to help underserved populations, especially immigrant populations in New York," she said of her post-medical school plans inspired by her City College experience. "I have met so many amazing mentors and have been given incredible opportunities here at CCNY to learn not only about medicine, but also about social determinants of health. I plan on incorporating patient advocacy and public health work into my future practice."

Her mentor Holly G. Atkinson, MD, describes Yim as "possessing a stellar blend of academic achievement, leadership skills, integrity and a passion for service." Yim, who'll receive her medical degree in 2022, is considering practicing family medicine or emergency medicine.

Neda Zahraie was born in New York City and spent her formative years growing up in Iran. In the war-torn Iran of the 1980s, Neda and her brother were raised by their mother, a political activist and feminist leader, while their father, an independent socialist, languished behind bars for his beliefs. Witnessing the horrors of war and incarceration, Neda considered at first becoming a medical doctor, but the arts and literature were early passions that eventually took center stage in her life.

Moving to Virginia, Zahraie studied Persian literature at the Iranian Community School and became a Farsi language instructor at the age of 17. Her proficiency in both English and Farsi would eventually lead to a decade-long career in simultaneous translation as a court-approved interpreter offering her services to Farsi-speaking immigrants in various U.S. courtrooms.

She earned a BA in English Literature from the University of Maryland University College, and later obtained a Certificate of French Language & Civilization from University of Sorbonne, Paris.

Returning to New York, Zahraie discovered that City College's quality and affordability would enable her to fulfill the dream of attending graduate school. While pursuing her master's in Literature, she says, "the CCNY faculty were open, encouraging — and taught me how to be a good literary scholar."

English professor Laura Hinton encouraged Zahraie to attend the American Literature Association 2018 Conference in San Francisco. "It was very rewarding to hear scholars from all over the world speak on diverse literary topics. I realized the scope of possibilities within my chosen field and I was also able to meet many inspiring individuals doing both research and creative work."

Zahraie's master's thesis compares the poetry of Emily Dickinson to that of the 20th-century Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and plans to pursue a PhD in comparative literature.



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