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Meet some of the most talented and motivated students from The City College of New York’s Class of 2024, CCNY’s first COVID-19 pandemic-era freshman class.

Nominated by their CCNY mentors, and representative of all schools and divisions of the College, the students chosen as Great Grads excel in the classroom, inspire us with their personal histories, and illustrate the transformative power of the City experience.

Each Great Grad has done more than just attain high grades. Many have overcome obstacles that have not deterred them from their collective and individual determination to obtain a college education. Each Great Grad exemplifies the College’s continuing mission of ensuring that people from all walks of life will have access to a college dedicated to the idea that a democratic society begins with educational opportunity for the whole people.

As they embark upon the next chapter of their lives—as healers, educators, researchers, mentors, public servants, policymakers, entrepreneurs and more—they continue the City College tradition of doing remarkable things.
When Dania Alhandawi was three years old, her father was the victim of an assassination attempt by death squads sent by the government in her native Iraq. Given a 10 percent chance of survival after a bullet passed through his face, he made it to the U.S. for medical treatment. When the government discovered that her father was alive, Alhandawi and her mother and sister were given 48 hours to leave the country. Journeying through Syria and Jordan, they made it to America through the intervention of then-U.S. Sen. Hillary R. Clinton.

That trauma shaped the course of her life. Entering CCNY as a pre-med major to fulfill parental aspirations, she discovered her true calling when Professor and Chair of Psychology Robert Malara suggested she take four entry-level psychology courses.

"After these four psychology classes, I couldn’t let go," she said. Scarred by her experiences, inspired by her faith, and motivated by her passion, she graduated with her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in psychology with a Credentialed Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC) trainee certification. "Substance abuse involves every aspect of psychology," she said.

As an advocate for mental health within the Muslim community, she volunteers at the Muslim American Society of New York’s social services department and has made presentations at the Muslim Mental Health Conference with her mentor, Assistant Professor of Psychology Waleed Sami. “He helped me bridge my identity and psychology,” she said.

She now seeks to destigmatize mental health treatment in the Muslim community, aid those with substance abuse-related traumas, and pursue a doctorate.
Zane Amray’s passion for civil engineering was sparked by his mother, a civil engineer. She instilled in him the belief that engineering has the power to change lives and construct the world. It’s a conviction that was reinforced at the Grove School, one that Amray will take with him to Columbia University this fall.

The son of Pakistani immigrant parents, he’s graduating from Grove with a engineering bachelor’s degree. At Columbia, he'll pursue a dual master’s degree in structural and geotechnical engineering. The goal is to further his knowledge as an emerging leader in civil engineering’s disciplines, smart cities, and the integration of buildings, infrastructure, transportation, and public space.

The foundation was laid at CCNY, where Amray has excelled, earning national research honors such as the Eisenhower Fellowship from the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration; and engineering scholarships from the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Structural Engineers Association, and others. He was awarded a scholarship for an architecture semester abroad in Copenhagen, named the “World Capital of Architecture” by UNESCO in 2023.

The scholarship was “a pivotal experience that contributed to diversifying my growth in structural engineering,” Amray remarked. He supported his peers, too, serving as engineering senator in the student government, and as secretary of the Tau Beta Pi Engineering Honor Society. He spent his final semester at CCNY working full time as an assistant project manager for consulting firm ZOFS Engineering.
“My biggest dream is to help build a hospital for cancer patients and cancer research in my hometown.”

Agsa Anjum knew she wanted to pursue a career in the medical field since she was a seventh grader, when she saw her uncle fall ill to jaw cancer. Unfortunately, he had limited access to quality healthcare in Faisalabad, a city in the Pakistani province of Punjab.

This sparked an interest in oncology and healthcare disparities. “My biggest dream is to help build a hospital for cancer patients and cancer research in my hometown,” said the 22-year-old, who resides in Queens. “I want to work with local clinicians and administration to further research and provide greater access to facilities for patients so that what happened to my uncle does not happen to others.”

During her time at CCNY, she enjoyed participating in student life and was on the e-board of two clubs as president of the Pakistani Students Association and vice president of CCNY City Honors’ illustrious Mentor Program. As a Macaulay Honors student, she was awarded a four-year full-tuition merit scholarship. In addition, she was on the Dean’s List.

Through Macaulay, she was able to become a Horace W. Goldsmith Scholar, which allowed her to study abroad in Morocco. She also received the Anne Duncan Somsen Memorial Fund and the Thomas W. Smith Academic Fellowship.

After graduation, she is pursuing a Master of Public Health degree in Health Policy and Management through the Macaulay SPH 4+1 Program Bachelor’s/Master’s pipeline program. When she completes the program, she intends to go to physician assistant school to work in the field of oncology.
“What brings me joy? Helping people to embrace the mess of life.”

ALIVYA BARRY
BA/MA, RESEARCH PSYCHOLOGY
COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

“My entire life is full of serendipity,” Alivya Barry said about herself, which may account for her seemingly modest confession that she struggles to select which of her multitude of experiences shaped her life to date. But the Colin Powell School’s 2024 valedictorian has seized every opportunity that presented itself.

Growing up in a family that fostered more than 70 children, domestically and internationally, she attended a dance-focused boarding school that offered little formal education, then moved to New York to study at the Alvin Ailey School. After a stint as a nanny in the West Village, Covid struck, leaving her isolated in her apartment. Unravelling a long scroll of brown paper, she ruminated on what brought her joy. The answer: “Helping people to embrace the mess of life.”

Given a second chance at education by the Borough of Manhattan Community College, Barry earned a place in the first Manhattan-Bridge program cohort, receiving a T-34 NIH research trainee grant to study trauma at the insistence of the program’s director, Hawai Kwok. The grant “changed my life,” she said, as she went on to complete her BA and MA in research psychology in four years. She presented her master’s thesis, “The Moderating Effect of Attachment Between Childhood Sexual Abuse, Depression, Anxiety, and PTSD,” at the Eastern Psychological Association’s annual conference in March.

Barry manages to combine her passions by sharing dance with low-income families as a means of expression and mental health, and by promoting emotional regulation for at-risk adolescents. She plans to teach clinical and developmental psychology as she continues to research issues of childhood sexual trauma in pursuit of her doctorate.
“I was fortunate to join a cohort of brilliant and passionate students, many of whom I consider dear friends of mine.”

EAMON BURKE
BA, ENGLISH AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
DIVISION OF HUMANITIES AND THE ARTS

To all who encounter Eamon Burke, it is obvious that he will make great strides in his life and that he is already on the path to achieving them. Born in Manhattan and raised in Santa Barbara, Calif., Burke was courted by CCNY to play baseball but was sidelined by the pandemic. Despite the literal distance between him and his new community, Burke thrived among his dedicated teachers and diverse classmates.

A double major in English and international relations helped him to conceive his future that he is putting into action today. Once pandemic restrictions finally lifted, Burke moved to Manhattan, where he lives on Broadway, just minutes from campus. In the summer of 2023, he returned to Santa Barbara as the legislative intern for U.S. Rep. Salud Carbajal (D-Calif.).

His most memorable experience at CCNY was being an S Jay Levy Fellow. “I was fortunate to join a cohort of brilliant and passionate students, many of whom I consider dear friends of mine,” he said. The professional development and academic rigor of the program was exhilarating.

He was also the recipient of the Kaye Scholarship, the Lilian Feder Scholarship, and the Julius and Betty Lewis Isaacs Scholarship, all of which helped to support his academic undergraduate career. A stint to study overseas in Reims, France was the result of a U.S. Department of State Gilman Scholarship where international relations took center stage, including an opportunity to attend a three-day session of the European Union in Brussels. The opportunities presented to Burke at CCNY have helped pave the way for him to define and follow his dreams. He hopes to pursue a career in the U.S. Foreign Service or in international development.
As with many in her chosen profession, Cailin Campbell was inspired by a teacher. Her sixth-grade teacher in Hamilton, Mass. only spoke to her students in Spanish from day one, making it “fun to learn.” That is something that Campbell instills in her students as she continues her career.

That teacher motivated “a hesitant and reserved 17-year-old” to venture to Argentina for five weeks, solidifying her passion for the Spanish language and Latin American culture. “I had never traveled before,” she said. “I returned from the trip wanting to be fluent.”

Campbell subsequently spent her gap year in Ecuador as a Rotary Youth Exchange Student. As an undergraduate at the University of San Francisco, she studied abroad in Bolivia, adapting her 20-page research paper on labor rights and exploitation in the country into a trilingual children’s book on the topic. She has also traveled to Peru, Nicaragua, and Chile, and served as a development coordinator at a non-governmental organization that advocated for disability rights and inclusion in Guatemala.

She credited her experience at CCNY with preparing her to be a better Spanish teacher by providing her with the theoretical framework to support her teaching practice. She has put those tools to use as an NYC Teaching Fellow; for almost two years, she has taught Spanish to grades six through eight at PS/IS 30 in Brooklyn. The experience has been “full of lessons learned,” she said.

For now, “I can’t imagine myself doing anything else than teaching,” she said. “I love being in the classroom.”
A first-generation college student and Bronx native, Kelly Estrella came to CCNY as a SEEK student, honing her analytical skills while developing a passion for economics and an interest in the financial industry.

From being a marketing analytics trainee at Nielsen IQ to her current role as an HPD marketing agent intern at Micki Garcia Realty, she gained invaluable experience in financial analysis, marketing analytics and community leadership. That will help her pursue a career in the corporate sector or in the financial industry.

During her time at CCNY, she became a member of the XAE Honor Society in 2022 and is involved in the CCNY Financial Literacy & Stock Market Club. Estrella was honored with the Milton Stern Scholarship in 2022, the Distinguished SEEK Mentor of the Year in 2022-2023, and the Outstanding SEEK Graduate of the Year Award in 2024.

“The City College of New York has challenged me to become well-rounded, providing academic rigor, and personal and professional growth opportunities,” said the 23-year-old, who is proud of her Dominican heritage. “The support and mentorship from faculty and peers have also bolstered my aspirations and confidence as I prepare to enter the workforce.”

She is graduating Magna Cum Laude with a 3.5 GPA and is also passionate about empowering communities and guiding others. She has served as a youth leader in the Bronx, a peer mentor at CCNY, and a SEEK tutor for economics, writing and psychology.
Bronx native Rainbow Sarah Farr enrolled at Borough of Manhattan Community College after high school. Her Nigerian parents saw college as a mandatory step in her future, but she struggled and ended up leaving to focus on being a stay at home mother.

She attempted to go back twice, but ended up dropping out because her third child was born with an accumulation of cerebrospinal fluid in the brain and had to undergo emergency surgery. She also had to focus on helping her two children with their schoolwork.

In 2011, while giving birth to her fourth child, she suffered from internal bleeding and had to have one of her ovaries removed. During this time, she was forced to raise her four boys alone because her husband was incarcerated. Shortly after, she was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver and received a liver transplant in 2015.

Her near-death experience compelled her to focus on her studies once again, and she enrolled at CCNY. “The knowledge I have obtained as an early childhood education major has given me more love and insight into teaching and how I can provide children with a solid foundation they will use for their entire academic futures,” said the 48-year-old.

She was part of the National Society of Leadership and Success and made the 2020 Dean’s List. She received the Women’s Forum Education Fund Award, Quest Peter Cott/Ken Leedom Memorial Scholarship, and the Quest Scholarship. She hopes to obtain her master’s degree in education focusing on children with learning disabilities and her New York State Teaching Certification.
FARLEY GULSTON
BA, INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS AND SCIENCES: HISTORY, POLITICS AND SOCIETY
DIVISION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AT THE CENTER FOR WORKER EDUCATION

At 12 years old, Farley Gulston journeyed to the U.S. with his West Indian family, settling in South Jamaica, Queens. His elementary and high school years were filled with challenges, leaving him unprepared when he first entered Queensborough Community College in 1978.

He left Queensborough from 1980 to 1990 after being put on probation, finding employment at a nursing facility that treated HIV and AIDS. He eventually worked his way up to director of support services. Told that he needed a degree for future advancement opportunities, he enrolled at Medgar Evers College.

At 41, he ran cross country for the College’s track team and was voted MVP. Although he was excelling at his studies, they would come to a halt when he lost his job, and had to prioritize taking care of his family and focus on paying his daughter’s college tuition.

Gulston started a cleaning service and, a few years later, started working as a senior supervisor in CCNY’s custodial department. From there, the CCNY-based CUNY School of Medicine hired him, and he enrolled at the Center for Worker Education. He graduated with a 3.8 GPA.

“As an immigrant who faced significant challenges in the education system, CCNY provided me with a second chance to pursue higher education and fulfill my potential,” said the 64-year-old. “The supportive environment and dedicated faculty helped me develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in my career.”

After graduation, Gulston would like to pursue a master’s degree in history at CWE.
At age four, Hannah Khanshali would accompany her mother to the College of Staten Island, where she was pursuing a biology degree. She recalls sitting in an algebra class, copying in a coloring book what to her young mind were indecipherable figures on the blackboard and later showing them to the professor. Little Hannah got an A+ from the professor, powerful early inspiration for a future standout college student.

Eighteen years later, she’s graduating from CCNY with a BS in biology, a flawless 4.0 GPA, and distinction as the Class of 2024 Salutatorian. She’s also mulling a future in immunology or cell molecular biology, in the realm of cancer research. She initially aspired to a veterinary career, gaining invaluable experience at the Animal Medical Center in Manhattan. Khanshali participated in complex research as an intern at Columbia University’s Irving Institute for Cancer Dynamics. Her stellar academics earned her Dean’s List recognition every semester. In addition, she was named a Macaulay Honors Horace W. Goldsmith Scholar and an S Jay Levy Fellowship 2023 co-Valedictorian, and is now a peer mentor as an alumna of the Fellowship. An artist and musician seeking the intersection between her passion for the arts and science, she used the $4,000 grant from the Goldsmith Scholarship to take a study abroad winter class in photography in Italy last January.

She said of her CCNY experience: “City College exceeded my expectations. Not only is it very diverse in terms of cultural backgrounds but also in a student body from unconventional backgrounds.” A Staten Island native, she’s from a Yemeni and Irish-Italian household.
AMY HO

B ARCH, ARCHITECTURE
BERNARD AND ANNE SPITZER SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

Finding community no matter the circumstances, Amy Ho appreciates opportunities when they present themselves. As such, she is a member of the first graduating class of the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture’s “5+1” B Arch accelerated master’s degree in urban planning. Her B Arch conferred in 2024, she will graduate with her master’s degree in urban planning in 2025. Without the accelerated option, it would have taken 50 percent longer to achieve her goals.

Born in the U.S. and raised in Vietnam, her childhood was split between the two countries, and her heritage includes roots in China. “My childhood in Vietnam left me with a deep appreciation for diverse living environments and the architectural forms that define them. This blend of experiences fueled my passion for residential architecture, propelling me towards enrollment at The City College of New York with a desire to design living spaces that are both practical and inviting,” said Ho.

In her freshman year at CCNY, isolated from normal student life due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ho met the challenge with grace and charm. She started the Arts and Crafts Club at CCNY. “The club provided a vital platform for students to connect remotely, fostering a tight-knit community for destressing and socializing. It also offered me the chance to create art and forge friendships across diverse backgrounds outside of architecture,” said Ho.

A resident of Gravesend, Brooklyn, Ho has a GPA of 3.972, the highest in her B Arch 2024 cohort. Her teachers and the chair of the Architecture Department, Associate Professor Sean Weiss, know her as a talented architectural designer. She intends to work toward becoming a licensed architect within the next five years, while obtaining her master’s degree at CCNY.

“My childhood in Vietnam left me with a deep appreciation for diverse living environments and the architectural forms that define them.”
As the daughter of an Ecuadorian-born mother and a father in the U.S. military, and the first in her family to go to college, Jennifer J. Martinez has done it all at CCNY. The Media and Communication Arts major, English minor, and a graduate of the Publishing Certificate Program took her interests and applied them to all aspects of her academic life. She joined the Public Relations Student Society of America’s CCNY chapter and became its vice president. A Kaye Scholar, she worked in the Division of Humanities and the Arts’ administrative office, where she ran the social media operation of the Master of Fine Arts degree in film department.

Born and raised in San Diego, she graduated high school in South Carolina. At 18, she hurriedly wed and gave birth to her first son. At 19, she was widowed while pregnant with her second son. She survived the trauma of an abusive spouse while being a single mother barely out of her teens, and always followed her dream of higher education. Today, she lives in Hamilton Heights with her two middle school-age sons. Being close to campus, she was able to integrate fully into campus life. The publishing program allowed her to combine her favorite things: books, literature, and marketing.

“If you grow up a strong reader, it helps you in the rest of your life,” said Martinez. Upon graduation, she has a paid summer internship at Finn Partners, a global marketing agency. She’s continuing her search for other paid internships in the fall and is actively looking for freelance jobs in media and communications. Once she has an established job, she hopes to pursue a master’s degree.
Andrew May’s exceptional CCNY experience as a foreign doctoral student from Canada’s Pacific shores has its roots in an encounter, while an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia (UBC), with two visiting Grove School chemical engineering professors.

“They talked about their research and they talked about City College, and it really piqued my interest,” said May, who graduated from UBC with distinction in 2017. “They seemed just like people I wanted to be around with.”

What followed were five outstanding years at the Grove School, where May distinguished himself. He was recognized widely for his research. He placed second out of several hundred entries nationally in the student poster competition at the 240th Electrochemical Society Meeting in 2021. It brings together the most active researchers in academia, government and industry—professionals and students—to engage, discuss, and innovate in the areas of electrochemistry and solid state science and technology.

May also received six national conference travel awards, including the highly competitive Kokes Awards presented to the top catalysis researchers. On campus, May started two informal book clubs; one on spectroscopy, and one on electrochemistry that included chemical engineering and chemistry PhD students. The electrochemistry book club morphed into the foundation of an Electrochemical Society Student Chapter at CCNY.

“I attended CCNY to build a research acumen, I was able to achieve a lot more, due to the opportunities made available,” said May. “However, I was able to achieve a lot more, due to the opportunities made available and the encouragement of the faculty and my peers.” His current research is lithium recycling for lithium-ion batteries.
SEBASTIAN ORTIZ
BS, APPLIED MATHEMATICS
DIVISION OF SCIENCE

Math wiz Sebastian Ortiz transferred to CCNY midway through his junior year seeking a new academic path. What he found was new joy, thanks to CCNY’s friendly and accessible faculty.

“I think that the faculty here is a lot more open to communication outside of the classroom,” said the Queens resident, who was attracted to the College’s mechanical engineering program. “I remember trying to speak to some of my professors at my old school, and some of them were not immediately open to conversation outside of the classroom. There’s more of a sense of community between the professors and students here.”

Ortiz is graduating with a BS in applied mathematics and a 3.89 GPA. His honors include the Dean’s List, and he’s volunteered as a mathematics tutor at St. John’s Preparatory High School in Astoria, Queens. Putting graduate school and any future teaching career on the back burner, Ortiz’s next move after CCNY is to put his mathematical skills to work in a financial setting.

“After school, I hope to find a job in a finance or investment firm. I find finance kind of interesting, just being in the environment,” he said. “I think I would be good in data analytics, something having to do with numbers or graphs and their interpretations. After I work for some time, I would like to go back and get a higher degree.”

Ortiz was born in New York of immigrant parents. His mother is Colombian and his father is Ecuadorian.
Like many of his peers in the Class of 2024, Viren Sehgal had been a CCNY student for two and half years before first setting foot on campus. He was in class for one year before completing the Sophie Davis Biomedical Education program’s biomedical science degree last fall with a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Now, in his first year at the CCNY-based CUNY School of Medicine, he’ll address his peers as valedictorian of one of the most extraordinary graduating classes in the College’s history. It was a class educated, for most parts, remotely through the first two years. It was an exhilarating and enlightening experience for Sehgal, a New Hyde Park resident.

“The student body is what makes City College what it is, and what really defines it. Everyone’s there to push you—they make you the best that you could ever be.”

It pushed him to the Dr. Yick Moon Lee Scholarship, awarded to a single student for excellence in academics and a commitment to community service. Sehgal also won the Dean’s Award for Academic Excellence; the S Jay Levy Fellowship for Future Leaders; and the Merit and Strong Community Service award.

He interned at several institutions across New York City, including the Melanoma Research Alliance and Rockefeller University. He’s also volunteered as an EMT with the Garden City Park Fire Department.

Born in Queens of Indian immigrant parents, Sehgal is now a first-year medical student. He’s scheduled to earn his medical degree in 2027.
Jamie Thiessen may describe herself as a “full-time mom to a small child with additional needs and graduate student dedicated to her studies,” but she is much more than that.

Performing and dancing since she was three years old, Thiessen bounded out of the University of California at Irvine and came to New York, performing in regional theater, national tours, cruises and sketch comedy troupes as a writer, choreographer and costumed character. At Christmastime, she was a member of a troupe that partnered with Make A Wish, touring regional malls that lacked full time Santa Clauses and elves.

Supplementing her theatrical career by teaching ballet and acting as a catering manager at the American Museum of Natural History, work dried up when the pandemic hit. After deciding to return to school, she discovered her love of working with students with disabilities.

“That’s when entered the world of special education,” she said. “I wanted to teach theater to students in special education.”

Combining her two passions, she entered CCNY in the spring of 2021. During her studies, she was the summer conservatory director at Broadway For All, which works to build a more inclusive and powerful arts industry, worked as a substitute teacher, volunteered to bring educational theatre to underserved student populations in the Bronx, and served as an officer of the Arts Ed @ CCNY Club.

Thiessen also won CCNY’s Lillian Weber Award as a student teacher who contributed to the development of an environment and classroom context that supports learning, and the Arthur Miller Foundation Scholarship.

“I always assumed that I would be a teacher,” she said. “I just didn’t know when.”