



The City College  
of New York

# Great Grads 2023



**Meet the Great Grads, among the most talented and distinguished members of The City College of New York's Class of 2023.**

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

**A democratic society begins with educational opportunity for the whole people. Since 1847, City College has made its mission ensuring that people from all walks of life have access to a college dedicated to this idea. And so it is to this day, with each Great Grad of 2023. As they embark upon the next chapter of their lives—as healers, educators, researchers, mentors, public servants, policymakers and more—the 2023 Great Grads continue the City College tradition of doing remarkable things.**



**“City College offers something for everyone. It just depends on what club you want to join or what path you want to take. There are so many resources: scholarships, fellowships, career opportunities.”**

## SOFIA BLANDON

**BS, CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & BA, PSYCHOLOGY  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

Teaching has been a dream of Sofia Blandon’s since she was seven years old, when she attended Saturday morning classes at the nearby New York Botanical Garden.

The daughter of a single mother from Nicaragua, she carried that learning experience throughout her academic career. Since 2017, she facilitated workshops for children and spoke at NYBG public events. During the COVID-19 pandemic, her NYBG classes grew food that they donated to local Bronx soup kitchens.

“Learning about growing my own food solidified my desire to provide that experience in a classroom setting by connecting nature and the environment,” she said.

She also volunteered at the Mott Street Senior Center, guiding Asian American seniors remotely as they painted and drew, and leading art-based discussions.

Blandon knew that City College was the right place for her at freshman orientation. “Everybody was so excited, and felt so prepared, to go into education,” she said. “It drew me in.”

Her experience confirmed those initial feelings.

“City College offers something for everyone,” she said. “It just depends on what club you want to join or what path you want to take...There are so many resources: scholarships, fellowships, career opportunities.”

Having completed her second-grade student teaching at the Manhattan Country School, where she currently works as an educator in its extracurricular after-school program, Blandon plans to continue teaching children in both formal and informal educational settings in the Fall.



“Having a college support system was something that I highly valued, and I’m truly thankful to have been chosen to be a part of an academic support program.”

## PAOLA CARCHI

BA, PSYCHOLOGY  
COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND  
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP  
SEEK PROGRAM

As a first-generation college student, Paola Carchi credits The City College of New York and the Percy Ellis Sutton SEEK Program for providing her with the academic support she needed to excel in college. The 21-year-old Queens native is graduating with a 3.9 GPA and is this year’s SEEK Valedictorian.

“Oftentimes, because you are the first to graduate in your family, you are left to do most of the exploring and research on your own,” said Carchi, whose parents emigrated from Ecuador. “Having a college support system was something that I highly valued, and I’m truly thankful to have been chosen to be a part of an academic support program.”

Carchi attended the High School for Health Professions and Human Services, and when she started her freshman year at CCNY, she became a SEEK student. During her senior year, she became a member of the

Chi Alpha Epsilon National Honor Society for her academic excellence. As a SEEK Scholar, she got to participate in the SEEK Mentoring Program and received the SEEK Award for outstanding Scholastic Achievement.

She is also a member of Sigma Alpha Pi, the National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS), and completed FirstGenU, an America Needs You virtual program developed specifically for first-generation college students. Becoming a Braven Fellow helped Carchi develop workforce skills such as leadership, networking, teamwork, communication and problem solving.

After graduation this June, Carchi plans to pursue a career in human resources and will eventually obtain an MBA in human resources management so that she can become an HR business partner (HRBP).



## JIALE (JERRY) CHEN

BS, APPLIED MATHEMATICS  
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE

Jiale (Jerry) Chen's undergraduate experience shows the transformative power of a CCNY education and echoes the stories of first-generation immigrant students. Molded by adversity after arriving in the U.S. at age 15, Chen persevered and graduated summa cum laude with a 3.95 GPA and a BS in applied mathematics, with minors in computer science and economics. Along the way, he made the Dean's list, received the William E. Macaulay Scholarship, the Emil L. Post Memorial Award, the Asian Alumni Scholarship, and was named a Climate Policy Fellow.

At CCNY, Chen developed his technical and interpersonal skills while exploring the technologies that can improve people's lives. After participating in two micro-credentials—one in data analytics and one in finance—he developed a passion for business analytics, which has the theoretical appeal of math and the applicability of engineering. More importantly, it matches his adventurous personality as he would make use of evolving data science technologies to uncover

useful intelligence. "Combining my devotion to addressing challenges facing underserved communities with my passion for business analytics, I see myself using data science as an instrument to nurture social entrepreneurship that addresses the challenges faced by underserved communities," he said.

He has also been engaged in the community at CCNY. Having received guidance from students in multiple clubs, he has become committed to mentorship and has taken several leadership roles to build a more inclusive and accessible community for students. Through conversations with aspiring engineers and scientists, who are as passionate about social justice as he is, he has realized the importance of having a wide range of cross-disciplinary skills and knowledge.

Chen has explored the interface between policymaking, social dynamics, economics, and tech innovations. He will pursue an MS in business analytics at Columbia.

**"Combining my devotion to addressing challenges facing underserved communities with my passion for business analytics, I see myself using data science as an instrument to nurture social entrepreneurship that addresses the challenges faced by underserved communities."**



**“I want to use my knowledge of the law to create effective change and uplift entrepreneurs.”**

## NIJA DANIELS

**BA, INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND  
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP**

When Nija Daniels was 17 years old, she saw her uncle sentenced to a nine-year prison sentence due to his lawyer’s negligence. She then witnessed her Jamaican immigrant widowed mother’s efforts to start a business. Those two experiences steeled her determination to protect the rights of struggling communities, such as the low-income immigrants in her family, by means of a legal career.

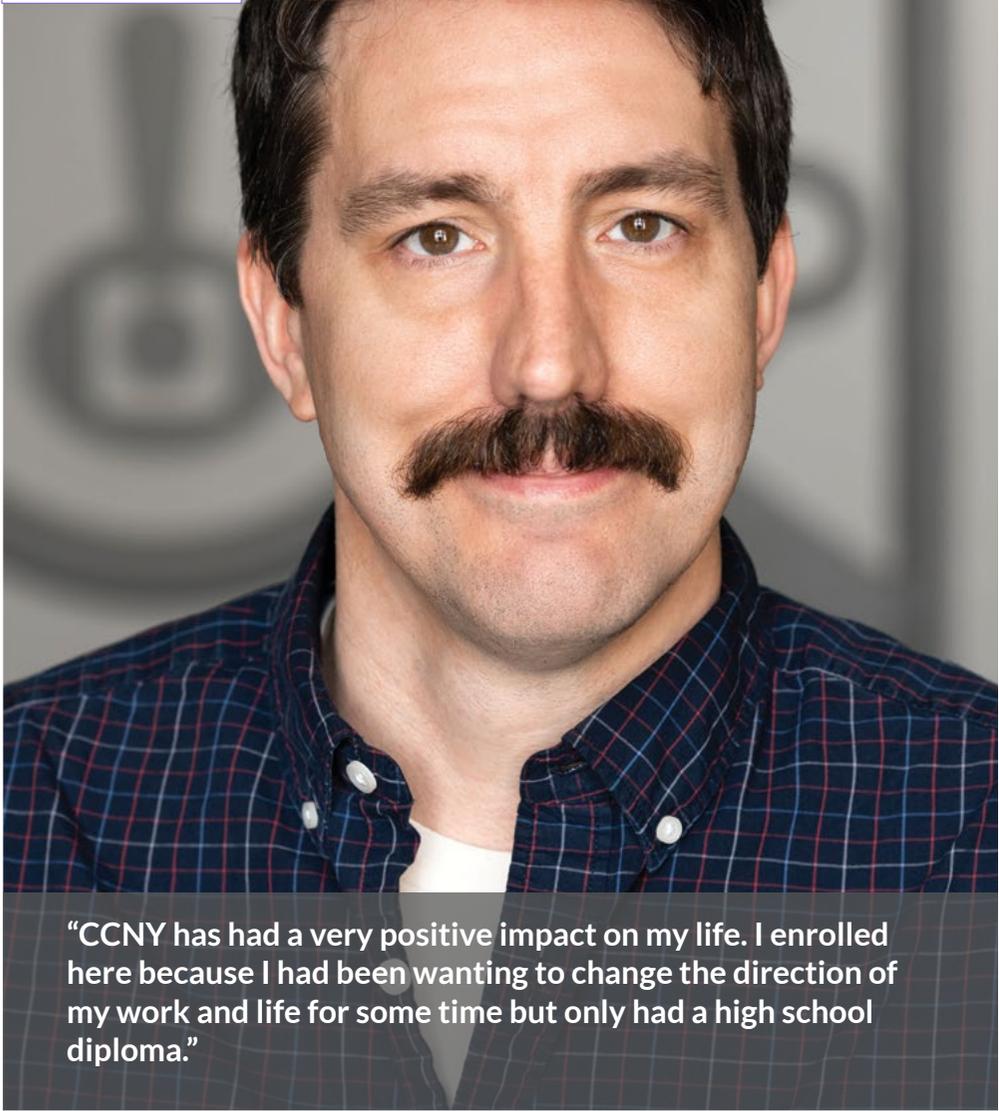
“I want to use my knowledge of the law to create effective change and uplift entrepreneurs,” she said.

She put her passion and intellect to work at City College in the service of that determination. In addition to a 3.95 GPA, she earned Watson, Colin Powell and S Jay Levy Fellowships, and a Reed Smith Scholarship in the Honors Program in Legal Studies. She also served

as secretary of the Undergraduate Student Government Senate, and as vice president of the S Jay Levy Alumni Board of Advisors. She continues to work remotely as a policy assistant for the Brussels-based European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless.

Seeing injustice all around her spurred her interest in policy and legal reform, she said. Believing that “policies and laws are the building blocks of society,” she will spend the year before law school putting her legal writing skills to work at the Center for Women & Enterprise, helping budding entrepreneurs with forms and contracts.

“Having clear and concise contracts can mitigate disputes,” she said. “That leads to beneficial, longstanding relationships between parties.”



“CCNY has had a very positive impact on my life. I enrolled here because I had been wanting to change the direction of my work and life for some time but only had a high school diploma.”

# DYLAN EWING

**INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS AND SCIENCES:  
LITERARY, MEDIA AND VISUAL ARTS  
DIVISION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES  
AT THE CENTER FOR WORKER EDUCATION**

Originally from Cincinnati, Dylan Ewing started at The City College of New York in the fall of 2019. Returning to school after a long hiatus, he worked diligently to obtain an undergraduate degree while working full time.

a premier nationally recognized honor society for adult learners, and excelled in literature and film studies. Throughout his time at CCNY, he maintained a 3.9 GPA and is graduating summa cum laude.

“CCNY has had a very positive impact on my life. I enrolled here because I had been wanting to change the direction of my work and life for some time but only had a high school diploma,” said the 42-year-old, who has lived in Brooklyn since 2006. “I felt that going back to school would help me move forward.”

“Taking things one step at a time, I found a renewed passion for education, research, and writing, and a much better sense of direction than when I started,” he said.

After graduation, Ewing plans to attend graduate school, and pursue research and writing opportunities in the humanities and arts.

He is a member of Alpha Sigma Lambda Honor Society,



**“CCNY taught me the connection between business and journalism, a pretty unique experience compared to other schools.”**

## JENNIFER GARCIA

**BA, BUSINESS MANAGEMENT  
COLIN POWELL SCHOOL OF CIVIC AND  
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP**

First generation student Jennifer Garcia started her academic career in architecture and found that she didn't like it, but not before incurring onerous debt due to a lack of financial literacy—a taboo subject in her Mexican family.

She then took a gap year and, determined to ignore the taunts of friends who derided public colleges as inferior, applied to the Colin Powell School. Once accepted, she majored in business management and aspired to promote financial literacy in the Hispanic community. She has been able to achieve that and more; she mentored students in her community, particularly at Leaders High School in Brooklyn, to make correct financial decisions. She also served as a Student Success Guide at the Colin Powell School and as a CUNY Student Ambassador.

Fulfilling a desire to write, she declared journalism as a minor and became a member of the inaugural cohort of the NBCU Fellows Academy Program, which aims to diversify the journalism field. She interned at NBC Olympic Research and at CNBC en Espanol, where she was able to pitch stories on financial literacy, “a big issue that holds students back,” she said.

Combining her major and minor at CCNY taught her the connection between business and journalism—“a pretty unique experience compared to other schools,” she said.

Garcia has already been accepted to the Craig Newmark School of Journalism at CUNY. During and after her time there, she will apply her “unique perspectives to seek out those stories that would otherwise go untold.”



“The City College of New York is truly one of the most unique schools in the world with its rich history, diverse student population and inherent devotion to the community.”

## PETER GIANNARIS

BS/MD, SOPHIE DAVIS BIOMEDICAL  
EDUCATION PROGRAM  
CUNY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Peter Giannaris credits The City College of New York for pushing him out of his comfort zone, and despite the challenging undergraduate curriculum, he continued to pursue his passion—medicine—graduating Summa Cum Laude with a 3.95 GPA.

“The City College of New York is truly one of the most unique schools in the world with its rich history, diverse student population and inherent devotion to the community,” said Giannaris, who graduated from John F. Kennedy High School in Bellmore, N.Y. “These are the very qualities that interested me and propelled me to attend.”

A fellow of The Rudin Research Fellowship Program, Giannaris received \$3,000 and the opportunity to conduct 200 hours of vascular research with Gokhan Yilmaz, MD, PhD, associate medical professor in the Department of Molecular, Cellular and Biomedical Sciences. He received the Sophie Davis Dean’s Award of

Excellence and is also president of the Cardiology Special Interest Group, where he organizes meetings for students to meet with professionals in the field of cardiology.

He has been a member of the CCNY lacrosse team since his freshman year, and his younger brother is also a CCNY student and part of the team. He is also a member of the Kappa Sigma Fraternity and was named Kappa Sigma Man of the Year 2022.

“From a young age, I’ve always been a team player, and my ongoing 16-year commitment to lacrosse has fortified the importance of working effectively in a team,” he said.

He is currently in his first year at CUNY Med where he will obtain his medical degree in 2026. Giannaris plans to work in an underserved community, and with people who do not have access to medical care or have been mistreated in the medical field.



**“For both me and my father, CCNY has been a place that allows immigrants and first-generation Americans to not only succeed but have the agency and power to aid in tearing down the systems that oppress their communities.”**

## CATHERINE HERNANDEZ

**BA, ANTHROPOLOGY  
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE  
CLASS OF 2023 VALEDICTORIAN**

CCNY’s reputation as a space for social mobility and social justice is what drew Catherine Hernandez to follow in her father’s footsteps.

Cuban-born Francisco Hernandez arrived at CCNY in 1991 with only enough tuition money for one class per semester. However, financial aid, scholarships, and a quality education would earn him a BA and admission to law school. He’s now a successful immigration lawyer.

Three decades later, Catherine is graduating summa cum laude from her father’s alma mater, with a 3.98 GPA and as Class of 2023 Valedictorian. She’ll receive a BA in anthropology with a minor in art history and Jewish studies.

“For both me and my father, CCNY has been a place that allows immigrants and first-generation Americans to not only succeed but have the agency and power to aid in tearing down the systems that oppress their communities,” said Hernandez. “It’s my honor to represent this legacy of social mobility and social justice.”

A participant in archaeological projects in Ecuador and Barbados, Hernandez developed a focused, activist-oriented research interest in indigeneity, cultural

patrimony, and repatriation. In her research and career, she hopes to implement community-based archaeological practices and to liaison with descendent communities to ensure that they have agency over the ownership of their patrimony and the portrayal of their heritage in the museum setting.

At CCNY, Hernandez has participated in several fellowships, including the Colin Powell Fellowship in Leadership and Public Service, the Racial Justice Fellowship, and the Rockefeller Fellowship. She has also dedicated herself to the promotion of intersectional feminist ideology as co-president of the Macaulay Feminist Society NYC Collegiate Sexual Violence Prevention Changemaker. Her academic honors include the Lloyd Blankfein Scholarship—the Macaulay Opportunities Fund’s highest honor—and the Rose and Herbert Rudin Award, which she received twice.

Currently, Hernandez is a curatorial intern at the MoMA PS1, an education intern at the Morgan Library and Museum, and a program facilitator for Art and Resistance through Education (ARTE). Hernandez plans on taking a gap year to apply for PhD programs in archaeology.



“City College taught me that I can turn my passion for sports into a profession.”

# IBRAHIM ABDI HERSI

BA, COMMUNICATIONS  
DIVISION OF HUMANITIES AND THE ARTS

Self-described sports junkie Ibrahim Abdi Hersi attended Central Park East High School in Upper Manhattan. The Harlem resident transferred from John Jay College of Criminal Justice after his freshman year due to the myriad majors and opportunities available at CCNY. “I took that opportunity to start my career in journalism, and because of that opportunity, I got into internships, fellowships, and grad school. All because of CCNY,” said Hersi, who will attend the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY after graduation.

‘Intro to Journalism’ was a turning point for Hersi, and his first broadcast journalism course sealed his fate. “I was certain that this was the career I wanted to pursue,” said Hersi. “City College taught me that I can turn my passion for sports into a profession.”

He wants to become a sports reporter, and eventually anchor the

sports or news. “This is a big dream for a young man like me who lives in Harlem. My parents came here from Somaliland, and my brothers, sisters, and I were born here. Our parents and our Muslim religion taught us humility, and that is a big part of who I am.”

Subsequently, he made the Dean’s List, Phi Beta Kappa, and is graduating magna cum laude.

Hersi wrote for the award-winning student online publication “Harlem View” and interned at Bronxnet.org, covering a variety of borough policies and events. His two years as an NBCU Academy Fellow (2021-23) “was a great experience and meant a lot to me,” he said.

Summers were spent giving back to his community through programs like ARISE and Summer Rising, at the Boys and Girls Club of Harlem, and the Harlem Dowling West Side Center for Children and Family Services.



**“The pursuit of the ‘American Dream’ is not what I had initially imagined. Multiple challenges have been thrown my way, yet I have paved my path, and I have no intention of stopping anytime soon.”**

## HANA KASSEM

### BE, BIOMEDICAL ENGINEERING THE GROVE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

At fifteen years old, Hana Kassem found out she was undocumented after applying to her first job. Through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), she was able to obtain an employment authorization card, but during her senior year of high school, her father was deported back to Egypt, which made it difficult for her family to stay afloat.

Kassem took on multiple jobs to help her mother with the finances and to help raise her two younger sisters. She was then diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, a rare genetic connective tissue disorder with no long-term treatment available. That eventually led her to The City College of New York.

“As I dove into a rabbit hole of articles for answers and treatments, the feeling of helplessness awoken my desire to pursue biomedical engineering, focusing on designing and advancing medical equipment and therapies,” she said.

At CCNY, she was also a student athlete and manager for the CCNY Women’s basketball team for the 2019-2020 season and a social media coach for the

CCNY Women’s soccer team during the 2021 season. Outside of biomedical engineering, she participates in figure skating classes.

Kassem was also the president of the Biomedical Engineering Society, as well as a peer mentor for the Black Male Initiative Urban Mentoring and Achievement Network. In the summer of 2022, she was accepted to the University of Michigan Summer Research Opportunity Program and joined its Computational Vascular Biomechanics Lab.

The program sparked an interest in graduate studies and strengthened her passion for pursuing a PhD after graduation.

“The pursuit of the ‘American Dream’ is not what I had initially imagined. Multiple challenges have been thrown my way, yet I have paved my path, and I have no intention of stopping anytime soon,” she said. “Though the restrictions on undocumented students remain, I continue to persevere, refusing to let the term ‘illegal’ define my life.”



## KAREN (KOON LAM) LI

BA, THEATRE  
DIVISION OF HUMANITIES AND THE ARTS

The Hong Kong SAR-born-and-bred Karen (Koon Lam) Li attended The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where she studied English, before coming to City College for her BA in Theater. She began her college experience during the pandemic in 2020, living with her parents, as she participated, loudly, in stage craft classes at 4 a.m. due to the grueling time difference. In summer 2022, she flew to New York, to meet her everyone in-person, knowing the extraordinary circumstances had already brought them together.

Her acting ability was tested in the roles of Shelley Parker in “Bat Boy: The Musical” and Mrs. Shandig in “The Runner Stumbles.” “Having to play such opposite characters in different genres of theatre productions back-to-back is a great acting challenge,” said Li. Recognized for her acting abilities, she was awarded a Harburg Scholarship and became a participant in the Kaye Scholar Program.

The 27-year-old plans to stay in the U.S. through the Optional Practical Training visa, auditioning, and hopefully being cast, in as many roles as possible to become eligible for an O-1 (artist) visa. “I wish to help develop more diverse productions,” said Li. This summer, she’ll film the lead role of Rose in “The Castaway,” which she played in a shorter version of the film, “The Castaway: Prologue.”

CCNY has set the stage for Li to continue her journey, where people of diverse backgrounds, talents, and interests create something unique. “I have met the most wonderful faculty and friends at CCNY. I believe having my own community is the most crucial key before stepping out into the professional world,” said Li. “Acting is a field that heavily demands trust and connection between people. I feel secure taking my next step because I know I will always have people helping, supporting, and having my back.”

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“CCNY helped foster the breadth of my interests, including creative writing, publishing, and research.”

## ELIJAH REY-DAVID MATOS

BA, ENGLISH  
DIVISION OF HUMANITIES AND THE ARTS

Brooklyn native Elijah Rey-David Matos graduated from the High School of Telecommunications Arts and Technology before he attended CCNY as a Macaulay Honors student, where he majored in creative writing.

Matos has made the most of his time at CCNY. He has used every networking possibility to further his goal to work in publishing and to become a published writer. His pride at being part of the Nuyorican community and his passion for Nuyorican literature fueled him throughout his time at CCNY, so much so that he parlayed his Penguin Random House internship into a commission to write for the publisher’s ‘Who Was’ young readers series.

“CCNY helped foster the breadth of my interests, including creative writing, publishing, and research,” said Matos. “Because of the incredible faculty, I felt the space

and encouragement necessary to believe in my craft while challenging myself to push all my scholarly and creative work forward. At CCNY, I honed skills like sharp writing, empathetic dialogue, and thoughtful, community-centered research.”

Rewarded for his hard work and vision, he was a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow (MMUF), won the David Markowitz Poetry Award and the Richard Shephard Award for Excellence in Writing, made the Dean’s List (2019-22), received a Certificate of Achievement in Portuguese, was awarded a William E. Macaulay Scholarship, and completed the Publishing Certificate Program.

He begins his MA at New York University in the fall, with plans to pursue a PhD. His goals extend into “becoming a trade book publishing editor and writing my own books (although maybe not at the same time!).”



“This is the first place where I encountered a real yes.”

# KIMBERLY PEREYRA MONERÓ

BA, POLITICAL SCIENCE  
COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND  
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP  
CLASS OF 2023 SALUTATORIAN

After seemingly hearing “no” throughout her youth whenever sharing her dreams, Kimberly Pereyra Moneró came to CCNY and finally heard “yes,” she could aspire. “No, you can’t become that. No, because you are an immigrant. No, because you don’t speak English properly. No, because you are a woman. No, because you are gay...I was undoubtedly one of those people who constantly heard rejections before coming to CCNY,” she said. “This is the first place where I encountered a real yes.”

A first-generation immigrant who has dedicated her coursework and professional life to learning about public service and social justice, the Brooklyn resident has been striving academically—and to make a difference—since emigrating from the Dominican Republic at age 15

all by herself to live with her sister who was 17 at the time. Six years later, Pereyra Moneró is graduating summa cum laude with a BA in political science, a 3.90 GPA and as Class of 2023 Salutatorian.

Mentors hail her academic excellence, civic-minded leadership and community involvement that make her truly representative of the best of CCNY. She dedicated three of her four years as an undergrad volunteering for Youth Over Guns, a community organization that advocates against gun violence. She is also part of the Jeannette K. Watson Fellowship, The Colin Powell Fellowship, The Skadden, Arps, Slate Meagher, & Flom LLP and affiliates Legal Honors Program and the 2022-2023 recipient of The Daphne and Stuart Wells Public Service Scholarship.



**“My time at CCNY shaped me into a better leader, advocate, and an overall more open and compassionate designer and individual.”**

## XIAO LIN WANG

**B.ARCH, ARCHITECTURE  
BERNARD AND ANNE SPITZER SCHOOL OF  
ARCHITECTURE**

Xiao Lin Wang, a graduate of Brooklyn Technical High School, was skeptical attending college in New York City. She thought she knew everything about the city in which she had lived since she was a young child. As the daughter of immigrant parents from China, and the first generation to attend college, she found that there was much to be gained by staying home. Confronted with new meanings and perspectives and exposure to different histories and cultures, she said that her time at CCNY shaped her into “a better leader, advocate, and an overall more open and compassionate designer and individual.”

Advocacy led to her involvement with the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), of which she is now chapter chair, as a liaison with professionals. She also served as a member of the Mentorship Committee in the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students (NOMAS).

Her internships were varied, from 3XN Architects, and Shawmut Design and Construction, to the New York City Department of Buildings and the Design Alliance.

Her accolades included being on the team that placed third in the 2021 APT PETC Masonry Arch Design Build Competition, the Melendez Architectural Scholarship, the Castagna Architectural Scholarship to study abroad in Barcelona, the Concrete Industry Foundation Scholarship, the HOK Diversity x Design Scholarship, the Professional Women in Construction Scholarship, the AIA Queens Foundation for Architecture Scholarship, and the WX Scholars Program Scholarship.

Upon graduation, she is still deciding what to do: work at Shawmut Design and Construction, attend Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, or both.



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