Where True Change Begins

DIVERSITY & FIRST GENERATION CELEBRATION FOR FAMILIES

MAY 2024
2023 DIVERSITY & FIRST GENERATION CELEBRATION FOR FAMILIES
Thursday, May 16, 2024 | 5:00 p.m.

_Lift Every Voice and Sing_
_Lyrics by James Weldon Johnson, Music by J. Rosamond Johnson_
_Timothy Gabriel Smith, M.A. ’23, Music & Music Education_

INTRODUCTION
_Carmen N. Martínez-Roldán, Associate Professor, Bilingual/Bicultural Education_

WELCOME
_Thomas Bailey, President of the College_

REMARKS
_Drew X. Coles, Lecturer, Music & Music Education_

STUDENT SPEAKER
_Obedrey Willys, M.A. ’24, Adult Learning & Leadership_

MUSICAL INTERLUDE
_You Gotta Be_
_Music & Lyrics by Ashley Ingram & Des’ree Weekes_
_Timothy Gabriel Smith, M.A. ’23, Music & Music Education_

STUDENT LETTERS
_Na Lor, Assistant Professor, Education Policy & Social Analysis_

STUDENT LETTERS
_Felicia Moore-Mensah, Professor of Science & Education, Chair, Department of Mathematics, Science & Technology, Science Education Program Director_

STUDENT LETTERS
_Manuel Enrique Cardoso, Lecturer, International & Comparative Education_

REMARKS
_KerryAnn O’Meara, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Provost, and Dean of the College_

FAMILY ROLL CALL
_Janice Robinson, Vice President for Diversity & Community Affairs_
_Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Professor of English Education_

GRADUATES RECESSIONAL
_We ask that guests remain seated until graduates have exited the auditorium._
Dear #TeamWayneGlass,

My gosh, what a journey this has been. Three years of school; working multiple jobs; attending school part-time; paying tens of thousands of dollars; navigating hundreds of hours of reading, writing, and talking. We. Have. Made. It.

September 2020 was the month/year I submitted my application to the Masters of Education in Mental Health Counseling program. Four years later, we have reached the finish line. If you would have asked me if I would finally make the pivot from my previous career to Mental Health Counseling, I would have likely told you, “This is/ was never going to happen.”

Words cannot describe how grateful I am for the DOZENS of friends, family, peers, and even strangers who have physically, emotionally, and financially supported me throughout my academic endeavors. If it were not for the ‘GoFundMe’ I created in January/March of 2021, I do not think I could have paid for my first semester at Teachers College. If it were not for the flexibility I was allotted from being able to work full-time and take classes, part-time, in-person/virtually, I do not think I would have been able to navigate my program. If it were not for my husband, Ryan Cole, who served as the ‘Money Maker’ for the past year, I do not think I could have finished my program. If it were not for the multiple part-time jobs I navigated, in addition to Fieldwork/Practicum, I do not think I could have finished my program. If it were not for my mother, Debbie Wilson, who I speak with nearly every day, I do not think I could have finished my program. If it were not for the amazing support I received from Dr. Brewster, Dr. Sandil, and Dr. Reed, I do not think I could have finished my program. If it were not for my fierce and fabulous peers, particularly Santosh, Elise, and Sabrina, who listened to me ramble about nonsense within personal/professional life and serve as a ‘sounding board,’ I do not think I could have finished my program.

In the wise words of RuPaul Charles, ‘It takes a village, people!’ My degree reflects an amalgamation of hundreds of meaningful/transactional relationships who have helped shape/reshape my thoughts, feelings, perspective, and approach to the world of Mental Health Counseling. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

Wayne Glass

My family’s support meant everything to me throughout graduate school. For generations, my family has endured attempts of ethnic cleansing of Albanians in the Balkan region, preventing all of my loved ones from following their dreams. Hearing my parents and other relatives speak of the careers and lives they wanted for themselves, but couldn’t achieve due to ongoing war, motivated me to follow my dreams in their honor. When they see me passionately talking about my plans for my future, I know they are happy about what they helped me accomplish. I wouldn’t be where I am today without their pride and faith in me. I hope I continue to make you all proud.

Elsa Bucaj
Mom and dad, thank you for all your support and encouragement. I truly would not be here without you both.

Brianna Rios

Dearest family,

I am filled with immense gratitude for your unwavering love and support. Your encouragement over the years has been my guiding light, and for that, I am truly thankful. As an African American woman, mother, sister, daughter, aunt, cousin, and friend I recognize this is a BIG DEAL! A win for US! Not many of us make it this far, yet I am here. Your love, hugs, and offerings of iced coffee and matcha propelled me forward every step of the way. Your belief in me has been a constant source of strength, especially during the challenging moments.

While this chapter closes, I continue to carry the legacy of resilience and perseverance that runs deep within our family. As the next chapter opens, I’m honored to have you by my side as new adventures await.

I love this for US!
Danielle Herring, Ed.D., MPH, MCHES (that’s a whole-lotta letters 😊)

Beloved family,

I am eternally grateful for your love and support throughout this journey. I could not have done it without you. Your consistent cheerleading helped me see myself as the seasoned Black queen I am. When the world’s narrative of me rendered me invisible, your words of affirmation brought me out of the shadows. I stand tall and proud today, knowing that I am the hopes and dreams of my ancestors. This degree belongs not to me alone but to all of you who helped me along the way. Whether you cooked, cleaned, read my drafts, were a shoulder to lean on, talked me off a cliff, or prayed, I heard and saw you. Your confidence in me kept me going, and I am grateful. I honor the many family and friends here in 2018 when I started this journey but have since joined the ancestors. Each of you represents the philosophy of Ubuntu - I am because you are. Special thanks to my husband Darrell, who is the epitome of “It’s never too late,” my 94-year-old mom who gave me a perspective of history not included in my readings; my son Spencer, whose challenges in school were the inspiration for my dissertation and my sister June whose perseverance throughout my journey demonstrated strength and resilience. Thank you to all my sister-friends for showing up for me.

Love,
Susan Pope

The unconditional love and support I had from my family and my friends throughout this journey was incredible! Love you all so much, couldn’t be more grateful.

Amna Maryam
Querida familia,
To begin, I wish to express my appreciation for every one of you. You each have shown me from the start how much you wish to see me succeed in this journey, your presence here today is another reminder of that. The decision of furthering one's education is never easy, especially when deciding to move across the country. However, I am lucky. I am lucky because from the start you all extended your support, hearts, prayers and blessings to me in order to make sure that I gave myself this opportunity. While it has not been easy, it has been worth it. This program has reminded me that life has its challenges, this world is very complex and filled with many different people with different experiences than my own. However, my culture, my roots and values have kept me grounded and reminded me of who I want to be and who I am. Who I am is a reflection of you all, your unique personalities have contributed to my resilience and personal growth throughout my journey here. Mami y papi, nunca me cansaré de decirles lo mucho que los admiro, lo agradecida que estoy de tenerlos como mis padres. Sus sacrificios me han dado la oportunidad de estar aquí hoy. Gracias hoy, mañana y siempre. Espero que estén igual de orgullosos de mí como yo estoy orgullosa de ustedes y de todo lo que han logrado en esta vida. Los amo.

Karla Marquez Canjura

____________________

To my dearest family and friends,

As I sit down to reflect on my journey through graduate school, I am overwhelmed with emotions, and I feel compelled to express my deepest gratitude to each and every one of you. You have been my pillars of strength, my guiding lights, and my unwavering support system throughout this incredible journey.

When I embarked on this path, I knew it wouldn’t be easy. Your unwavering support lifted me up during the toughest of times and propelled me forward when I felt like I couldn’t take another step.

To my family, you have been my rock from the very beginning. Your sacrifices, whether big or small, have paved the way for my success. Your endless love and encouragement gave me the strength to pursue my dreams, even when they seemed out of reach. Mom and Dad, I miss you and I have used your memories as my strength. Your sacrifices and unwavering support have shaped me into the person I am today, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

To my present family, you have been my constant source of laughter, joy, and support. Your words of encouragement kept me going when the going got tough. You celebrated my victories and lifted me up during my defeats, reminding me that I was never alone on this journey.

As I stand today in the new chapter of my life, I carry with me the lessons learned, the memories made, and the love and support of each and every one of you. Your belief in me has given me the courage to chase my dreams and the strength to overcome any obstacle that comes my way.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for being my unwavering support system, my cheerleaders, and my champions. I am forever grateful for the love, encouragement, and belief you have bestowed upon me.

With love and gratitude,
Chiri
Sunita Verma

____________________
For as long as I’ve known myself I always wanted to be a teacher. All of my younger siblings, cousins and friends, you have been victims of me thinking playing school is the best pastime. Mommy you instilled in me the love for learning. You tried to stay up late with me while I did my assignments, escorted me to every first day of school, including this one at Teachers College, and traded in watching TV to listen to me read novels because I told you it would keep our brains alive. Although I’m not sure if you enjoy my thirst for learning, you seem to have gotten used to me pausing our readings or TV shows to look up something I don’t know or understand. I remember when my cousins would come spend the summer break in New York with us and we all had to spend the morning doing work together that you made for us before we were allowed to go outside. This supported my belief in collaboration and getting your work done before enjoyment. To this day, I know the free days of every museum, zoo, garden and aquarium. Mommy you’d pack all of us up on these long train rides to help us see everything that was available to us in all 5 boroughs. To this day, I ensure my students go on affordable trips every month.

However, one specific cousin came and left a significant imprint on my life. Jenielle, you have been my beacon since I was a small child. You came to this country to get your bachelors in IT and ended up working at Starbucks for a very long time. However, even in my 5th grade yearbook I told people I was going to Medgar Evers College. I wasn’t even sure if they had a teacher education program but they did and I graduated from Medgar Evers College in 2018. Life came full circle because you started working with special education students transitioning to adulthood, just as I was becoming a special education teacher. Thank you for ensuring that you can always answer my questions. It was you who, for Christmas, gave me the children’s encyclopedia that, much to mommy’s dismay, I used to figure out where my siblings were coming from.

My youngest sibling, Isaiah, I started this letter acknowledging the victims of my intent to teach. You have spent the most time under my wing, walking everywhere and learning against your will. In my time as a teacher education student, I have found deep appreciation for all forms of generational success. I want to give a very special shout out to all tradesmen like you Isaiah because, even at your young age, you are providing for your family as you like to say. A masters degree isn’t the only way to success but there is a path for everyone like so many of our forefathers who have paved a way for our success by plowing fields, cleaning schools and building houses.

My most favorite carpenter is My Sam. I am a Peace Corps fellow. The Peace Corps has not only literally afforded me this degree, but they have also helped me find love in improving special education in the Caribbean but also My Sam. This carpenter came into my life fixing everything and although you cannot be here today, I thank you immensely for building me an oasis and being my oasis. You have welcomed me and fashioned a space to ensure I can accomplish all my dreams even when I’m exhausted.

An extra special appreciation goes out to all my family members who included me and sent me pictures when I missed the family holidays while I was teaching abroad. You are all appreciated. This masters degree in intellectual disability and autism was inspired by you and completed for you.

Kenefa Auguiste

____________________

Dear parents,
Thank you for your sacrifice and support. I recognize I stand here today because you placed the stepping stools, I climbed up here. Thank you.

Olubusola Aje

____________________
Dear Mom and Dad,

You set the blueprint when you met on the same campus over 40 years ago. A Barnard student and Columbia law student, young and fired up about divesting Apartheid and equal rights for African Americans stateside. Fast forward to today, where we celebrate the accomplishments of doctoral conferral and I would be remiss if I didn’t thank you for all of your love and support. I thank you for showing me that anything is possible with God and family. You instilled values in us that created purpose, resilience, compassion and determination. We have our ancestors to also thank for this. All those that have paved the way to allow women and black students equitable access to quality education. This diploma is dedicated to you.

This degree is also dedicated to the families and children to whom I am forever indebted to: children with cerebral palsy who are non-ambulatory and who are often non-verbal. Your passion and joy inspire me to advocacy and growth as a clinician and as a human. Your daily activities require the effort of a marathon, but yet you continue to strive for higher, and to share your gifts with those around you. You are more than special to me; your efforts are seen and significant to this body of work, but most importantly to our society.

In conclusion, this PhD is also dedicated to the two little people who are of my greatest purpose-driven calling. Sarai Abena and Eron Akwasi, thank you for being my joy and my grace. You are my heartbeats and I hope one day you will understand why I sacrificed so many hours and days from you for this work. You are worth the best and that’s exactly what I intend to provide for you. I love you.”

Nia Mensah

My journey to Teachers College has been a remarkable odyssey, like a dream finally coming to life. Reflecting on when I first set my sights on attending in 2015, I can’t help but think about how far I’ve come. As a first-generation graduate student, I wrestled with self-doubt when it came to the decision of leaving behind the comfort of teaching in New Orleans to pursue my passions in the bustling metropolis of the Big Apple. However, my family has always been a consistent source of support for me. I remember those moments when I would perform a Google search on “notable alumni,” and seeing inspiring figures like Shirley Chisholm and Georgia O’Keeffe on the list. It was like a glimpse into the possibilities that awaited me, and it ignited a fire within to continually seek greatness. Over the years, my ambition to better myself has been the driving force behind this journey. I’ve always believed that personal growth is the foundation for making a meaningful impact in my community, especially in the realm of education. I knew that to become a true educator and role model, I needed to invest in my own development first. This journey to Teachers College represents the embodiment of my dedication to personal growth and my aspiration to become a beacon of inspiration for the next generation. Through my experiences, I hope to demonstrate that dreams can be realized with determination and hard work, and that a single individual’s growth can lead to a brighter future for an entire community. I would like to dedicate this moment of celebration to mother and father for their unwavering support and unconditional love throughout. Together, we made it. The next chapter awaits.

Lorenzo Johnson, Jr.

Gracias Mami y Pap! Thank you for my parents for never giving up on my dreams. You were the main supporters and my foundation to continue higher education. All those days and nights working in a factory to provide me a better future. Thank you! Now, I can provide for you two a better future. Now, it is my time to support your dreams! Los Amo!

Rosayris Suriel Cruz
Dear mom, papa, and didi,
Thank you. For supporting me in pursuing a discipline so wholly new to you and to our world, for trying so hard to understand what teaching and learning mean to me, and for doing your best from so far away to ensure I feel comfortable, confident, and strong to keep exploring and pursuing my passion.

Agreni

Agreni Batra

______________

Dear Papi, Mami, Raul and Chris,

In our family, we grew up hearing papi saying, “you made the wall.” That meant you reached an achievement, a pinnacle, a great success. It literally meant that your name was on a plaque on a school wall. Last night, I made the wall by getting hooded and receiving my PhD. Thank you papi, for texting me regularly during my doctoral journey asking if I needed any support; thank you for always saying, “give them hell.” And I did. My PhD is my gift to you as you turn 80 this week. All of these years, from Slocum to Smith to Bread Loaf to Teachers College, I would not have made the wall without you.

Mami, thank you for reading to me when I was a girl in the Bronx. From Little Women to Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret to the World Book Encyclopedia, you made reading a priority in my life, and I am grateful. I made reading and writing my life’s work as a high school English teacher and it was because of you.

To my paternal abuela, Paula, who once told me a story about being orphaned as a girl in Puerto Rico. A neighboring family took her in and she took care of their children. At one point, they sent her to school. She sat in the front row and raised her hand every day. But sometimes the teachers didn’t call on her because she raised her hand too much. She spent just a few years in a one-room school-house. I see myself in my abuela’s raised hand. I raise my hand just like her.

To my paternal abuelo, Fano, who was a sugarcane and tobacco sharecropper. In the 1940s, he stood on a picket line holding a sign demanding higher wages for trabajadores. In the pages of a Puerto Rican history book, there’s a black and white photo of him picketing with other men in the movimiento obreros, the workers’ movement. I see myself in my abuelo’s protest. I resist just like him. I raise my hand just like her.

To my brothers, Raul and Chris, you played cars on the floor together while I read books; you jokingly said I wore “Smith glasses” when I went to college; you held my hand when I came out. Thank you for seeing and supporting me all these years.

Together, we all made the wall.

Love, Yana

Ileana Jiménez, Ph.D., English Education

______________
To Antonio,

It is still wild to me that you support me to the depths that you do. Your effortless grace in standing by me stems from the depths of your character and the richness of where and who you come from. Knowing all of you has brought immense joy and profound humility. You being there for me in 2016 at ASU (AYO! 2 MA Club!!), to Ukraine care packages, to Missouri YouTube accounts, and now, in this moment, your presence transcends borders. Thank you for ensuring I was never alone. Thank you for simply being there, a constant beacon of comfort and strength. I am endlessly grateful for your presence in my life and the role you’ve played in shaping the person I am today. Thank you for today, for this week, for the past and for the future.

Ashly Emerson

____________________

To Erika,

Before you start feeling a certain way about being second, it is because I tried over and over again to write this in honor of you. There are two main things I want to say. First, please know that the moments where I have memories of family support, you were there. You were late, or loud, sorry - ‘tardy’ or ‘boisterous’ (this is Columbia!), but you were there, and you were proud of me.

Secondly, when reflecting on the past, I realize that we have both navigated challenges, learned, and grown. Neither of us are supposed to be where we have gotten to today. We got here because we were thrust into it not by choice, but by duty and destiny. It is for and because of Viola, Betty, Glo, Shierly, Pat, Michelle, Mike, Mia, and yes Frances. While I may be a teacher, you are a matriarch, a community leader, and a fighter. I am so proud of and thankful for you and above all, I wish to acknowledge your sacrifices, both big and small, which haven’t gone unnoticed.

I think that we have both come such a long way. It is all the more reason for us to take up as much space as possible from now on. Whether it be through soft winds or loud thunder, it should always be unapologetically. Thank you for your unwavering presence. Thank you for being here! Please know that the only reason I am here is because of the support and pride you uplift me in.

Thank you, from the depths of my heart.

Ashly Emerson

____________________

To my family,

I could not have been here without you. I wake up every day with a heart full of gratitude and a soul full of joy because I was blessed with such a loving, supportive family like you. Thank you for being there for me since day one and really creating a safe space for me to dream as big as possible. To my mother, thank you for your constant support, delicious home cooked meals that have guided me through my life’s journey. To my brother, thank you for taking care of the family as I focused on my education and launching my own coaching business. To my sister, thank you for being my best friend and paying attention to all that I desire. To my father, may you rest in all the heavenly peace heaven has to offer, and thank you for being the best father I could have ever asked for. Without your prayers Dad, I wouldn’t be here today. I am here because of each and every one of you and I am so happy to accomplish this big milestone with you all by my side. I love you all, always.

Sumaya Ahmed
TC was a dream come true, and this dream would not have been possible without you, my incredibly supportive parents. The sacrifices you’ve made and the unwavering love and support you’ve given me are something I will always strive to repay. Not only did you support my journey moving halfway across the world, but you also allowed me to come back when I hit a wall and needed a break. Your unwavering support has allowed me to blossom into the person I am today, and it continues to motivate me to become better.

I look up to the both of you, and hope to make as deep of an impact as you have on the people you interact with. You both treat everyone with such love and kindness, and you deserve it returned tenfold. I have every intention to shower you with the same love and support you’ve shown me.

And to my brother, I couldn’t have done it without you. You’re my best friend and I’m so grateful that I get to go through this crazy journey of life with you. I will always be your biggest cheerleader.

So thank you, Mama, Papa, and Vedu, from the bottom of my heart. While this is my graduation, it is a celebration of us. Only onward and upward from here, for all of us. I love you unboundedly and unconditionally.

Forever grateful and with all my love,
Vyushti Jouhari

____________________

To my Loved Ones,

My Great Grandmother on my mother’s side grew up on an Indigenous reservation. On my father’s side, Mathis is the last name inherited from ancestors who endured the hardships of slavery. Who would’ve thought a child from two oppressed groups would be graduating from Columbia University’s Graduate School with straight A’s? It comes down to the morals that can be observed from family history. Resilience. Resilience is the key factor that is seen in both family histories. Two separate cultures, both able to relate to the need to embody resilience to survive. Oppression bred resilience. Resilience so that each following generation becomes successful. Each subsequent generation preserved and fortified that resilience, thereby enhancing the foundation for the next, gradually smoothing the path for successive generations to tread upon, eventually reaching even smoother ground.

Each struggle, each triumph, woven into the fabric of my ancestry, a testament to the indomitable spirit of those who came before. Resilience, a steadfast guardian, walks beside me, whispering tales of courage in the face of oppression. It is the guiding star that leads me through the darkest nights, illuminating the path to a brighter tomorrow. With each step, I honor the legacy of resilience passed down through generations, adding my verse to the song of triumph over adversity.

Being a first-generation student might be a watered-down accomplishment or even an expectation for some, but for this Black Indigenous Woman, it means everything. The critical factor I learned from my family is resilience. Resilience led to this milestone we are celebrating today. Let us not minimize the significance of this Diversity and First Generation Celebration. I am proud to be able to be a representative for my family. But in all honesty, they have each been role models for me. I am pleased to continue to add to the foundation for my nieces, nephews, cousins, and future children.

Thank you to my higher power, family, friends, teachers, and counselors for instilling in me the importance of drive, work ethic, and bouncing back from adversities. They all lifted me out of the pit of despair, the mud, and the mire. Setting my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along. The critical factor is resilience, and now I can stand on solid ground. Who would have thought? Thank you!

Sincerely,
Deja Mathis, A Black Indigenous Woman
Dear Family, Friends, and Faculty,

The time has come for me to graduate. As a little girl born in a small village in China, I feel incredibly fortunate to have been able to enroll in college and eventually attend Teachers College as a graduate student. There were countless difficult moments when I doubted whether I could even complete my studies, especially during my K-12 years. I am so grateful for your encouragement and support, which helped me overcome these challenges.

Throughout my graduate studies, I’ve often been asked why I chose education as my major. The answer is deeply ingrained in me: education has profoundly changed me. Growing up in a village and frequently facing gender discrimination, I was always told that studying hard was my pathway to success. As a first-generation student, there were many obstacles where guidance was scarce—people could only urge me to study hard, but couldn’t explain what success might look like or how to navigate the journey towards it. However, I am so lucky to have your encouragement and presence which were the only support I had, and for that, I am eternally thankful. It has led me to not only finish my studies at Teachers College but also to understand my life’s mission: to address educational inequality and help more students access higher education in China and beyond.

The stories and struggles shared by my classmates and the kind words from my professors have also deeply inspired me and clarified my life’s purpose. I am committed to giving back to the community that raised me and to continuing the fight for equal educational opportunities.

Thank you, my dear family, friends, Teachers College, and New York City, for nurturing my growth and standing by my side. I promise to make you proud and to contribute meaningfully to our society.

Looking forward to the next chapter and hope our paths cross again soon.

With all my love and gratitude,
Kefei Chang

To my dearest husband, family, and friends,

As I sit down to reflect on this pivotal moment in my life, I can’t help but feel overwhelmed with gratitude for each one of you. In a world where families and friends often need to drift apart in pursuit of opportunity, I am reminded of the strength and resilience that binds us together.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents, who embarked on a courageous journey of their own, leaving behind everything familiar as they immigrated to Queens, NY, in pursuit of a better future. Their unwavering courage and selfless sacrifice laid the foundation upon which I stand today, and I carry their legacy with me in every step of my journey.

And to you, my beloved husband, I am filled with profound appreciation for your unwavering support. When I made the decision to embark on this doctoral journey, carrying our first child and soon thereafter our second you stood by me without hesitation. Your belief in me gave me the strength to push forward, even in the face of doubt and exhaustion (and trust me, there were a few rounds of that).

To my family and friends in Peru and across states, degrees are not meant to be kept or hung on a wall but shared. In celebrating this achievement, I also celebrate each of you, for you have been integral to this journey of chipping away at glass ceilings, breaking through barriers, and paving new roads.

I am forever grateful for the love and support that binds us together across distances and through time.

With heartfelt gratitude and love,
Ivy Torres
Stepping into the future, strong and bold.

Armed with knowledge, passion and resilience untold.

A black woman in a field where we are barely ten.

First-generation, Master’s earned, from one of the best graduate schools in the nation, where all odds have been bent.

I kept pushing, never losing my intent.

Juggling research, part-time work, I fought through every obstacle. Teachers College, I thank you for your support. You helped me grow, you steadied my course.

Thank you for the spark that only ignited my flame.

To those who did not cheer, who prayed I’d fall, watch me rise-- I’m reaching the top despite the pain.

I’m the image of change, paving a new way. A dream my ancestors had, now a reality today.

Upon this graduate journey through the concrete jungles, Audre Lorde’s words guided me through.

This is my fight, my dedication.

I will not let hate set my destination.

To probe the unknown, to simply make things right.

With my first APA coming soon, I’m ready to light up every room.

I define myself, I set my own line, I won’t be confined—this path is mine.

To those who reached the end, I hope I made you proud, through every struggle, both silent and loud.

I am proud to say I found my power through those who are here today. Love Jasmine

Jasmine Rename

They see you as blind, but you saw deep into my soul. They disparaged you as a vagrant child, but you were a rock and raised me to be strong. You conceived me while participating in protests that eventually lead to the passage of the ADA. You inspired me to be everything I could be, and give everything I could give. Thank you, mom, for exemplifying kindness, bravery, and persistence, and giving me the foundation on which I can thrive.

Rachel Rain Michaels
Dear Chosen Family,

As I approach the threshold of graduation, my heart swells with a blend of emotions – sadness, disappointment, gratitude, and a sense of accomplishment. This journey, with its myriad twists and turns, peaks and valleys, has been traversed alongside my chosen family, who have served as my unwavering pillars of support.

In a world often unjust to disabled queer trans people of color, you have been my haven, providing solace, understanding, and steadfast support. As a disabled queer and trans person of color, the path to this moment has been fraught with unique challenges, particularly when I found myself pushed into navigating a non-credentialed program, a journey marked by spirals of disappointment. However, your presence has not only made this journey more bearable but transformative.

From tearful early morning conversations filled with camaraderie to vulnerable moments shared over meals at Dun Huang, you have been my haven, reminding me that I am seen, heard, and valued for exactly who I am. Your acknowledgment of the hardships faced as a disabled queer and trans person of color in a predominantly white institution, along with your dedication to fostering a space where I can authentically be myself, has profoundly shaped my graduate school experience, anchoring me during moments of despair and disillusionment.

As I prepare to stride across the stage and receive my diploma, I am compelled to express my deepest gratitude for the indelible impact you have had on my life. Your love has been a glimmer of hope in the most trying of times, illuminating a path filled with some hope.

Here’s to you, my chosen family, epitomizing love, resilience, and solidarity. As I embark on the next chapter of my journey, I carry with me the care and support you have bestowed upon me. I am honored to call you my chosen family, eagerly anticipating the continuation of our journey together wherever it may lead and living together.

With immeasurable love and gratitude,

Jai Yee

Hi Mom,

I hope this letter finds you well and filled with the excitement of your first international solo adventure! First and foremost, I want to congratulate you on this remarkable achievement. This is a celebration for both of us.

I still remember the day I shared the news of my opportunity to study abroad on the other side of the world, you said you always knew this day would come. And from the moment I was born, you set aside a portion of your earnings, ensuring that my educational pursuits would never be hindered by financial constraints. Although we were just a regular middle-class family, you and Dad have always invested in my education and tried your best to support what I needed.

I know you always say that we shouldn’t say thank you to each other because we are families. But I still have to tell you and Dad: thank you for being the best parents and continuing to grow with me; thank you for teaching me how to be strong, independent, and kind; thank you for always believing in me and being my backup; thank you for always being there for me regardless of the 12-hour time difference; thank you for always listening to my complaints, cries, and random thoughts; thank you for reminding me every day that I am loved and supported.

There’s so much more I want to say, but I’ll save that for later! I just want you and Dad to know that I love you both and I’m so proud of how you’ve also grown as individuals!

Xinyu Wang
Mauricio,
As I sat down to write this, I found it hard to find words that truly show how thankful I am for you. You’ve been more than just my partner; you’ve been my safe place when times got tough. On those long nights, you were there beside me, keeping me company, making me laugh, and just holding my hand while I worked. Those simple acts and your patience mean the world to me. Your belief in me and your constant support have helped me keep going, even when things felt too tough to handle. Every challenge we’ve faced together has shown me how much we can overcome with you by my side. As we get ready to move to a new city, I feel so lucky because I know I’ll always have your heart with me—my true home, no matter where we are. Thank you for being everything to me—my laughter when things get crazy, my calm in the tough times, and my love every single day. I treasure you now and forever. Thank you for being my partner, my best friend, and my biggest supporter. I value every moment we share and am truly grateful for everything you do. You mean everything to me, and I love you more deeply than I can say. Every day, I’m reminded of how lucky I am to have you with me. You’ve been my rock and my comfort throughout this whole journey. Your constant belief in me shapes who I am and who I want to become. With every encouraging word and every moment of patience, you help me build and accomplish my dreams. Thank you for everything.

To my brothers and sisters,
I want to say thank you for the invaluable roles each of you has played in my upbringing. Being the youngest of six, I was fortunate to grow up with so many role models in my life. No matter the distance or the circumstances, you’ve all been a constant presence, guiding, teaching, and supporting me through every step. Your belief in me and your encouragement have been foundational. Every conversation, every laugh, and every piece of advice has not only supported me but has added immense value to my life. You’ve taught me, guided me, and cheered for me like only a family could. Thank you for being more than just siblings; thank you for being my co-navigators in this journey of life. No matter where our paths take us, or where we are in life, you are the ones I look up to. No matter where life takes me, I’ll always carry a piece of each and every one of you with me. Our bond is unbreakable, and I am eternally grateful.

Para mi mamá y papá,
Cada sacrificio que hicieron desde que dejaron México para construir una nueva vida aquí ha trazado el camino que recorro hoy. Su valentía, amor y sabiduría son mi constante inspiración. Me han enseñado que es importante trabajar duro, no tener miedo de enfrentar desafíos, mantener la cabeza en alto y seguir adelante, sin importar lo difícil que sea. Esta maestría que estoy obteniendo también es suya. Han sido una fuente constante de inspiración, y siempre atesoraré los recuerdos que hemos creado juntos. Aprovecharé al máximo esta increíble oportunidad que me han dado y me esforzaré por hacerlos sentir orgullosos en todo lo que haga. Gracias desde el fondo de mi corazón por todo lo que han hecho. Su amor, sacrificios y dedicación me han hecho la persona que soy hoy, y por eso, les estoy eternamente agradecida. Los quiero mucho y estoy muy orgulloso de ser su hija.

Araceli Barrientos

To the PHARN and TONTHAT lineages that run through my veins, thank you for the prayers, sacrifices, and unwavering devotion that made it possible for me to become who I am today. Your love has given me the strength and courage to follow my dreams. It allows me to serve humanity with humility and honor. This celebration has been made possible because of you and our ancestors.

Con yêu bố mẹ ♥♥

Rachel Pharn
Dear Family,

I owe my entire academic success to my mother, Claire. My mother is the person in my life who always pushes me to be the best version of myself. She encouraged me to graduate from my undergraduate degree in 2.5 years and to buy my first home. My mother is the reason I applied to Columbia University. She believed in me even when I struggled to believe in myself. I would not be here if she was not my mom, and I will forever be grateful to her for that. Thank you Mommy for always being my biggest cheerleader.

Halfway through my Masters of Arts degree, I had surgery on my hip. I had issues walking and could no longer get to class on my own. I was so scared that I would have to take a break from school. My father, Donald, sat with me by my bedside and cared for me when I needed it the most. Knowing how important school is to me my father drove me to Teachers College for class. He would walk me to classes and wait for me to be done to take me home. I would not be a part of this graduating class without his help getting me there. Thank you Daddy for being the support I needed.

During my time at Teachers College, I got the chance to learn so much wonderful information. With learning in school I began to learn more about myself. Thinking about a career and next steps after school was difficult for me to decide on. Garett gave me the direction I needed. He listened to me rant about my favorite parts of my courses. Garett gave me the idea to pursue a career in Management Consulting. Thank you Garett for helping me get to the next steps of my career.

Being older an older sister to Amanda, Jaxon, and Abigail is where my passion for leadership comes from. I have had the pleasure of being able to give them advice and lead them through various situations. In my classes, I often think about how they spiked my interest in wanting to lead a company one day. Thank you Amanda, Jaxon, and Abigail for always being my inspiration.

I will be forever grateful to my family for helping me through my journey at Teachers College of Columbia University. I am a stronger and more educated woman because of each of them. I am so excited to see what comes next. Thank you for being my family and joining me on this amazing ride.

Breanna Doane

____________________

My Dear Mom and Brother,

Thank you for your unwavering support throughout my journey into higher education and adulthood. You always believe in me, especially when I’m at my least self-confident. I’m so lucky to have you in my corner! I hope so much that I make you and our family proud.

I love you so much and we are stronger together.

Los quiero mucho,

Melissa

____________________
Growing up, it was never a clean cut answer on the deadly question of what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I went different pathways, tried a couple of ideas, made mistakes and landed up here—at my happiest, doing what I love but most importantly alongside the people I love. Aspiring to be as great as all my teachers and hoping to become one of my own is one thing, the dream college was the other. When I tell you this is truly a dream come true, someone actually pinch me please. It was an absolute honor to attend this wonderful college, obtaining the experiences and knowledge throughout the semesters, having an outstanding program with amazing mentors and my loved ones by my side.

To my parents who always wanted better for their kids, thank you. Mom and dad, you didn’t just help me pay for school (which I mean a big thank you on that too), but you supported me. You worked so hard just so I can be here today, graduating. I’m representing not only myself, but you too. This is not just my degree, but our degree and our moment. I love you both so much.

To my two older brothers, I got my Masters guys! I’m forever grateful for allowing me to have my mental breakdowns and you both sticking through it all. I hope you’re both incredibly proud of me as I am to have the coolest siblings, Andrew and Brian. I love you forever.

To my dearest Aunty Madorie, you were my push to even apply. I would not even be able to write this today without you. Thank you for holding on to hope, encouraging and believing in me when I didn’t. I am truly blessed to have you. I love you dearly.

My amazing roommates, Kate, Leslie, Bria and Ying. Thank you for making our suite into a loving home. I knew if I had a difficult day or just a good cry, I would come home to all of you-ready for our midnight snack and a bunch of laughs. We were never really good at being roommates honestly, we were bound to always be family. Much love for all of you supporting my journey.

Lastly, to my incredible boyfriend Justin who met me towards the end of my college journey, thank you. Thank you for finding me, supporting me and loving me unconditionally. I can’t wait to grow old together and more importantly, tell you all about my work days for life. I love you.

I have a lot to be thankful, grateful and blessed for. I could go on and on but I’ll stop here. Congratulations to everyone and the class of 2024. Thank you thank you THANK YOU!

Megan Ramanand

To Mom, Dad, Pauly and Tim, Thank you for loving and supporting all that I am and strive to be in this world. Mom thank you for my first cello lessons, Dad thank you for letting mom pay for said cello lessons, Pauly you’re welcome for watching Leo and Tim thank you for going on this insane journey with me!

Tony Rodriguez
Music has always been a language for my soul. It wasn’t just the sound of instruments, but the stories they told, the emotions they evoked, and the journeys they took me on. This profound connection ignited a lifelong pursuit of growth as a musician, a scholar, and a teacher. This personal statement is a reflection on that journey, the challenges encountered, the lessons learned, and the never ending story of my creative journey.

My earliest encounters with music were a series of enthusiastic, yet slightly clumsy, attempts at playing the piano. Each scale felt like a mountain to climb, each chord a puzzle to decipher. I’ll be honest and say I hated it at first, until I played my very first song. The joy of conquering those challenges, of creating music that resonated with me, fuelled my passion. My teachers, patience and encouragement, instilled in me the importance of technique, theory, and most importantly, musicality. Daily practice became a necessary ritual, not only because I was terrified of disappointing my teachers, but it encouraged me to hone my technical skills. My fingers gained a newfound fluency, gliding across the keys with a newfound ease that allowed me to tackle complex passages with confidence. Technical proficiency alone couldn’t capture the soul of music; true artistry demanded the art of interpretation, bringing lifeless notes on the page to life. Driven by this revelation, I listened to recordings by legendary pianists, meticulously dissecting their phrasing, dynamics, and the captivating narratives they wove through their music.

However, as mentioned earlier the path wasn’t always smooth. Frustrating encounters with the music I was learning led my progress to a halt. Self-doubt crept in, whispering questions about my potential and if I should even be doing this. However, I had to overcome this in order to succeed. Seeking guidance from professors was so helpful, and venturing beyond my comfort zone unlocked new possibilities. Experimenting with a wider range of music; not only in my piano journey but also in my vocal journey broadened my artistic perspective and rekindled my artistic flame.

Musicianship is enriched by a deeper understanding. This realization sparked my scholarly pursuits and encouraged me during practice. Music theory served as the foundation, unlocking the mysteries of harmony, counterpoint, and musical form. But music transcends technicalities; it’s a language with a rich history and cultural context. Music history courses illuminated the evolution of musical styles, the lives of composers, and the social and political landscapes that shaped their creations. While music history provided a solid foundation, my academic curiosity soon led me to explore my own legacy, the Latino culture. This exploration further blossomed into a broader fascination with the historical contexts that shaped musical traditions across the globe. Through critical analysis of musical works, I learned to deconstruct scores, analyze compositional techniques, and articulate my interpretations. This analytical skill has proved to be valuable even beyond the classroom. It improved my attention to detail during practice sessions, enhancing my technical accuracy and musical expression.

The desire to share my passion for music with others led me naturally towards pedagogy. I will never forget my first experiences teaching, I was so nervous and had a lot to learn. However, witnessing the spark of understanding ignite in a student’s eyes brought me so much satisfaction. A crucial turning point came when I understood that effective teaching requires a broader skill set than just technical mastery. Empathy, patience, and the ability to tailor instruction to individual learning styles became crucial tools in my pedagogical toolbox. I learned to celebrate even the smallest of victories along with major breakthroughs, recognizing that every student progresses at their own pace. I believe the best teachers are also eternal students, constantly refining their methods and adapting to new challenges.

Music transcends mere education; it’s a universal language that empowers self-expression. It offers a boundless canvas for interpretation, unconfined by cultural or linguistic barriers. Even before grasping words, children connect with the emotional core of melodies, a testament to music’s inherent power to unite us. My journey as a musician, scholar, and teacher is far from over. However what I have learned over the years has ignited my own philosophy in music education.

More than imparting knowledge, I see teaching as a catalyst for igniting potential. Every classroom presents a unique tapestry of learners, and I strive to create a space that caters to diverse learning styles. This means getting to know each student and weaving their interests and experiences into the curriculum. Respect for oneself and others is a cornerstone of my classroom. By fostering self-esteem, I empower students to learn
from mistakes and embrace challenges, rather than focusing on negative self-talk. Openness to curiosity is paramount, I want to encourage students to explore their ideas, sparking a love of learning that extends beyond the classroom.

As an educator, I view myself as a lifelong learner. Collaboration with students, colleagues, parents, and the community fosters a dynamic environment where everyone contributes. By incorporating diverse perspectives, I ensure my lessons resonate with students and provide opportunities for growth. My classroom will be a haven of organization, where students understand daily objectives and feel comfortable approaching me with any concern. Together, we will navigate challenges and celebrate triumphs, fostering a space where students develop not just academically, but as individuals.

The pursuit of excellence in musicianship requires ongoing practice, exploration of new repertoire, and a willingness to push my boundaries. As a scholar, I remain committed to expanding my knowledge, engaging in critical discourse, and contributing meaningfully to the ongoing study of music. As a teacher, my commitment is to foster a lifelong love of music in my students. I envision myself creating a learning environment that is both challenging and nurturing, one that empowers students to not only play music, but to use it as a language for their own creative expression.

Michelle Natal

____________________

Dear Mama y Papa,

I am so grateful that you are able to be here today to celebrate my Teachers College graduation! Thank you so much for always supporting me in anything I do. I would absolutely not be where I am today, working as a music teacher in NYC, without your endless love and devotion. From working overtime to be able to give me a violin and violin lessons, to allowing me to move across the country to pursue a college degree and career in music education, I appreciate everything you have done to help me reach my dreams.

Once again, thank you so much for doing everything you can to support my success, I am so proud to be able to share this day with you.

Love,
Viviana Garcia

____________________
Dear Family, Friends, and Close Loved Ones,

Addressing everyone gathered here today, it’s truly surreal to stand before you and announce that I’ve officially achieved a Master of Art in Communication & Education from Teachers College, Columbia University!

To all my family and close loved ones, I know you’re well aware of how I’ve always had a deep love for learning and school, yet even I couldn’t foresee reaching this milestone. When I received my acceptance letter into Teachers College, affiliated with the esteemed Columbia University, I was in complete utter shock. As a born and raised New Yorker, I understood the deep prestige of attending an Ivy League like Columbia University and receiving that electronic acceptance letter back in Fall of 2021 during the ever most uncertain Covid-19 pandemic times was a moment of immense honor, not just for me, but for my entire support system.

My journey towards this degree was anything but conventional. It took me two and a half years of relentless effort to get to this very moment today. Balancing a full-time job at the New York City governmental agency, the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), while still supporting myself and my loved ones, I persevered. Throughout such a demanding period of my life, I still was able to maintain a perfect 4.0 GPA for the full duration of my program. There were moments when I felt like giving up, when reaching the finish line seemed impossible. But here I am, a testament to the fact that perseverance really does pay off.

I owe immense gratitude to the administrative faculty, professors, my advisor Jin, and all my fellow students who crossed paths with me during my time here at TC. Their support and guidance made this laborious journey manageable. Despite the challenges of juggling work and studies, I’ve acquired a wealth of knowledge in the ever-evolving fields of education and communication, knowledge that will undoubtedly propel me forward both personally and professionally.

In my final program year, I even managed to become actively involved on campus, serving on the E-Board of the Black Student Network (BSN) as their Signatory and Director of Community Outreach. I’m immensely proud of BSN’s achievements thus far, including winning not one, but two awards at TC’s Provost’s Student Excellence Awards ceremony this year for our efforts to promote a sense of security, equity, and inclusion for our diverse Black student population on campus.

To Teachers College, I extend my heartfelt thanks for the invaluable experiences and knowledge I’ve gained. This once-in-a-lifetime experience has equipped me with the tools to navigate the challenges ahead, and I’m determined to make the most of every opportunity that comes my way.

To my mother and father who are here with me today, thank you for being my unwavering support, my pillar of strength! Thank you for being my rock from beginning to end, your ongoing encouragement has sustained me when I felt defeated. To my aunts, uncles, and cousins, thank you for showing me what it means to be a strong black resilient woman in today’s society and always showing up for me in everything that I do.

Finally, to my two late grandmothers who I miss dearly and are unable to be here with me in the physical today, I hope I’ve made you proud. Your memories continue to inspire me every single day!

With the utmost sincere gratitude,

Brianna Hayes
Dear Maa and Paa,

I will take this opportunity to tell you how grateful I am for having the most understanding and supporting parents I could have asked for. It is hard to tread away from the traditional path and take up something challenging, but you made it easy. Sometimes all you need is for someone to believe in you, and all 500 tasks suddenly seem doable. Thank you for believing in me. All my love to you.

Mishu (Yoshita) Dawar

Dear Kalia family,

I remember the first time I mentioned to you that I wanted to get my higher education in the U.S. You were all deeply stunned with my courage yet felt completely hopeless, and I could see that in your eyes. “How will you do it? We can’t even think of this being a possibility for anyone in our family. We don’t have anything.” You responded. And I, not wanting to acknowledge the reality, nodded with hesitance. Yet, there you were, the very next day, running to the bank to consolidate all the funds you could, exhibiting confidence in my ability to make my dreams a reality.

I remember the day when I received my first acceptance letter for my undergrad, you had tears filled in your eyes, exuding immense pride and happiness, and you rang each and every person you knew to tell them how proud I made you.

I distinctly remember when I graduated with my bachelor’s and applied to Teachers College with barely any confidence for my masters degree, you persuaded me to believe in my ability and reassured me that things will fall into place like they always have. I believed in me because you believed in me, and here I am, with my master’s degree 2 years later! Your happiness and your belief in me is what kept me going through the hard times, the days I wanted to give up because graduate school was incredibly challenging, but looking at your proud eyes gave me the strength to drive myself to my finish line. Here I am, commencing a new chapter of my life, because you gave me the strength to be here and to be ME.

I’m proud to pronounce that today, I’m the first master’s degree holder in my family- Drishti KALIA, and that wouldn’t be possible without you, my KALIA family. Thank you for believing in me, forever and always. I promise to strive towards making you feel prouder with every passing day.

With immense love and gratitude,

Drishti Kalia
Dearest Family,

I’m standing on your shoulders as I graduate from the top education graduate school with my Master’s Degree. You’ve instilled in me tenacity, resilience, and the ability to make a joyful path in whatever I’m doing. I want to thank you for all you’ve sacrificed in order to make this moment - this moment of transition as I graduate with my Master’s and embark on my Doctoral at Columbia University’s Teachers College - possible!

This is for my parents, who didn’t have the opportunity to attend or graduate from high school. This is for my mom, Zdislawa Simianko, who dreamed of becoming a medical doctor but was denied education past eighth grade due to her status as a refugee. This is for my dad, Kenneth Persons, who dropped out in 10th grade when his father, LeRoy, passed so that he could work and join the Air Force as a way to care for his eight siblings and his mom.

This is for my little sister, Alexandra Lee. I watched my parents fight the school district and the State of Minnesota to “mainstream” all classrooms in the late 1980s so that she could have access to the same educational opportunities that her non-disabled peers had.

This is for my Babusya Wera and my Dziadek Edmund who spent their teens and early twenties running from the Nazis rather than getting a formal education. This is to honor the hardships and horrors you endured as you were eventually captured, my Dziadek murdered on the spot and my Babusya and my mom taken to the camps. This is for my mom and her family who grew up in the Displaced Persons camps of post World War II Germany and who didn’t have access to books, much less running water and electricity.

This is for all of my family members and ancestors who taught me how to be resourceful, how to find magic in any situation, and how to be kind. You taught me the value of all kinds of education, and you believed in me before I believed in myself. It’s because of you that I am here. It is because of you that I am.

With love and gratitude,

Nady Persons

P.S. Dad, I made good on the promise I made twenty years ago to get my Master’s Degree!

Familia,

Muchas gracias por estar siempre ahí para mí y por apoyarme. Estoy tan agradecida de que me hayan apoyado durante mis estudios.

Alexito, siempre me haces reir cuando estoy estresada o triste. You remind me that I can do big things. I am so proud to be your big sister.

Mamá, aspiro a ser como tú cuando sea mayor. Me has enseñado a ser resiliente y a nunca dejar que nadie me diga lo que puedo y no puedo hacer.

Papá, tu capacidad para cuidar de los demás es algo que trato de emular tanto en mi vida profesional como personal. Me ha enseñado como trabajar duro y recordar de ver lo positivo de la vida.

Familia, los quiero muchísimo. Estoy tan feliz de que estén aquí celebrando conmigo.

Con mucho amor,

Maureen Guilbot
I am incredibly proud to be here, to have graduated from Columbia University, and to contribute to the 8% of Latinas with a master’s degree. I hope this number continues to grow in the years to come.

A special thank you goes to my mother, who had me young, and together we grew up. Despite her youth, she has been the best mother I could possibly have asked for because, no matter what, she gave it her all. She always pushed me to be better, do better, and try harder, always encouraging me to reach my full potential.

Sometimes I didn’t understand why she pushed me so hard, but now I know it’s because she always knew I could be better. She constantly told me the sky’s the limit, and I’ve always believed in myself because of her unwavering support.

I am immensely grateful to her and her endless encouragement. I love you, Mom!

I am also thankful for my siblings. I strive to be the best big sister and role model I can be for them. I want them to always know that they can achieve anything they set their minds to in this world, and because of our mom, they will succeed.

I also want to give a shout out to my village, especially my grandma, who helped raise me and has never left my side. Thank you for being with me through this journey and always believing in me.

Johanny Paulino

__________

They say it takes a village to raise a child. Moving countries to pursue the collective dream of gaining a better education and empowering myself to be a voice for change was nothing short of a rebirth. I couldn’t have flourished without my village.

Mom, Dad, Shaurya di, Sahil jiju—no combination of 26 letters can express my gratitude to you for understanding me through this rollercoaster of a ride. I know it wasn’t easy when we couldn’t talk due to my hectic schedule and the time zone differences, or when I couldn’t be there for family dinners and preparations of Di and Jiju’s wedding. Yet, you kept supporting me without making me feel the burden of extra load of responsibilities you had to bear in my absence.

To my masis, mamaji-mamiji, didis-jijus, nieces-nephews, and the entire extended family—thank you for being my calm in the storm, and for encouraging me to lead the way while standing beside me in case I fall. Your words of comfort and stories of resilience kept me going.

And to the strangers on campus who turned friends, thanks for making the initially intimidating Big Apple my second home! Every moment spent with you is a cherished story. I’ve locked all those memories in my heart and will always hold them dear to me. We’ve pulled all-nighters together, laughed, cried, stressed, cooked, danced, and rejoiced. Our journeys have been unique yet shared, all at the same time! Today, I proudly stand next to you all and scream, “We made it!”

To my village, I fold my hands in gratitude and make a promise to stand tall, courageous, and unafraid to truly make this world healthier, happier, and more just for all.

Stuti Munjal

__________
Dear Family and Loved Ones,

I stand here today with gratitude for all the love, support, and encouragement you have given me throughout my journey. From being a first-generation graduate of Howard University to becoming the first in my family to attain a Masters degree, I have always known I would succeed. However, my certainty is not based solely on my strength but on the strength God has placed inside me. And more than any, my success is attributed to the people He has placed in my life.

To my mother, thank you for always reminding me, “I can do all things that I put my mind to.” This life lesson has kept me going when challenges surfaced and will continue to guide me toward success. To Emmanuel, thank you for constantly speaking life into me as I traversed graduate school. Having you by my side made the heavy load feel lighter. To my sisters, thank you for proofreading my many papers and never letting me doubt myself for too long. The laughter and joy you all brought into my life kept me motivated. To my ancestors, thank you for your prayers and steadfast perseverance despite the plight of adversity, discrimination, and oppression endured since the inception of our people in this land over 400 years ago. I am your wildest dreams, and it is because of you that I present to you today as a resilient, confident, and educated woman. Being a first-generation student is not easy, but I did it! We did it! Those dreams are now a reality. And thanks to our diligence, future generations will be equipped with the everlasting belief that they, too, can do all things they put their minds to.

As I bring this letter to a close, here are a few seeds I would like to plant in hopes that they will be watered one day.

1. Never allow anyone to tell you what you can and cannot do.
2. If you believe, you can and will accomplish anything you put your mind to. So, keep believing no matter what your circumstances look like.
3. Always remember to give God the glory! It is through Him that all things are possible.

With love always,
Jakyra Anderson

Amada familia, no tengo palabras para expresar todo lo que siento por vosotros. Espero que con este poema podáis saber todo lo que significáis para mi.

¿Mi tierra?
Mi tierra eres tú.

¿Mi gente?
Mi gente eres tú.

El destierro y la muerte para mi están adonde no estés tú.

¿Y mi vida?
Dime, mi vida, ¿qué es, si no eres tú?

~mucho amor,

Lucero Molina
As I reflect on my journey in graduate school, I find it difficult to locate words that sincerely express the love and appreciation I have for my family and friends. Their unwavering support, guidance, inspiration, and love have safely navigate me through the many challenges and successes of graduate school. This journey has been filled with extreme highs and lows, moments of monumental interpersonal growth (i.e., yay therapy), and periods of sincere doubt (i.e., imposter syndrome). Through the tough, I mean extremely tough, times I knew I had my friends and family giving me strength and perseverance to continue my journey. Whether it was encouragement from friends during endless study nights, my tia Lizzy’s phone calls telling me how proud she was, or my mom coming all the way from California just to be by my side, the constant support kept me grounded.

There were times I felt incapable of continuing this extremely difficult journey but with the help of friends and family, I found ways to develop my skills of self-love and compassion. I started therapy again and found myself embracing this difficult path. All the love, acceptance, support, and compassion from my friends and family have led me to this magical day of graduation.

To each and every one of my loved ones, thank you for leading me this far, and thank you for shedding your light on me so I can shine brighter. To my parents, thank you for being you, for being my rocks during challenging times, for letting me lean on you when things got tough, and for believing in me even when I didn’t, most of all thank you for loving me endlessly. To my tia and tio, thank you for illuminating of path of higher education, pushing me to be the best version of myself, for always supporting me, for being nerds, and thank you for loving me unconditionally. To my beautiful siblings, thank you for pushing me to be the best role model I can be for you, for replying to my texts (sometimes), for following in my footsteps (tehe), and thank you for your being authentic selves. To everyone else, thank you for everything, I truly could not have achieved this much without you all.

Victoria Garibay Echevarria

____________________

Dear Family and Friends,

It is pertinent that you all know that I could not have made it to the finish line without you. Who knew that I would have been accepted to Teachers College, Columbia University! It took a pandemic and the thought of “Go for it! You can never live with the regret if you did not aim for admission. Please know...I thought that I would never go to graduate school. Although I know that I am an eternal student who registers for classes that intrigue me I did not see myself matriculating.

Not only was I shocked that I had gotten into a school that has shaped the minds of Shirley Chisholm, Dr. Ruth and so many other brilliant leaders, but I got an even bigger surprise when I discovered I was pregnant!! Many told me I was crazy for attending graduate school, having a baby, acclimating to married life and moving into a new home in a new area. Despite all the reasons I should have waited a year to start the program or just said “There’s no way I can do it!”. You all pushed me through. Even Granny, Grandma, Popop, Mamacita, Wanda and all the other ancestors lifted and reminded me to continue to push on the many days and nights that I asked myself, “Why am I doing this?!” and even pondering giving up. Despite the rigor and high expectations of my outstanding professors...We Did It!!

Please know that I will eternally cherish all the love, support, and encouragement during this season. As I have accepted my degree here at TC Columbia University, always remember that we did it together.

Love,
Crys

____________________
Dear Family,

As I stand on the brink of a new chapter in my life, preparing to graduate from Teachers College, Columbia University, I am filled with a profound sense of gratitude and reflection. The journey that has led me to this moment has been one of trials and triumphs, obstacles and opportunities, but above all, it has been a testament to the unwavering support and love of my family.

Growing up in the vibrant yet challenging neighborhoods of Harlem and Queens, the odds seemed stacked against me. But you, my dear family, refused to let those odds define my destiny. From the very beginning, you saw the potential in me, and you nurtured it with boundless love, encouragement, and sacrifice.

Mom, your strength and resilience have been my guiding light. Your unwavering belief in my abilities, even when I doubted myself, gave me the courage to dream big and reach for the stars. Dad Ben, your steady presence and guidance taught me the value of hard work and determination. You showed me that no obstacle is insurmountable when faced with perseverance and grit.

Ashley and Jay, your unwavering support has been the cornerstone of my success. Your belief in me never wavered, even when the road ahead seemed daunting. You stood by me through every challenge, cheering me on with love and encouragement.

As I embark on this new journey as the CEO of Mcmillian Tutorials, an affordable tutoring and mentorship company, I carry with me the lessons and values instilled in me by each of you. I am determined to pay forward the love and support I have received by making a meaningful impact on the lives of children of color in our community. Just as you believed in me, I will believe in them, empowering them to dream without limits and achieve their fullest potential.

You guys are my rock, my inspiration, and my greatest blessing. Without your love, guidance, and unwavering support, I would not be standing here today. As I walk across the stage to receive my diploma, I know that it is not just my victory, but ours. Together, we have defied the odds and proven that with God, everything is possible.

With all my love and gratitude,

Jimmy Mcmillian

________________________________

Everything that I am is because of my mother--مَا هُمَّهُ سَيِّدَةُ أَمْهَمَّ مَنِيسَي

Nahla Menasy

________________________________