

REFLECTIONS

The Graduation Committee asked the runner-up student speakers to share reflections with their fellow graduates today.

Jennifer Colon

I stand here before my fellow graduates, faculty and invited guests and thank you all for sharing in this graduation experience with us and for also being so supportive and offering your ears and time during our time of stress, joy and anxiety. I have been fortunate to have such a wonderful network of people who never allowed me to throw in the towel on those occasions of weakness and feeling so incredibly overwhelmed. In the past two years here at Hunter college school of social work I have learned to not be afraid to stand out, in fact being unique is what I credit Hunter for being. It was my first year at Hunter that the all gender bathroom came about, and what a successful and triumphant journey that was for the students who organized it, and the many of us who supported it.

I entered Hunter unsure of my goals and roles in life and wondered if I was making the right decision of becoming a social worker. I was placed in a high school my first yr. and worked with a young Latino boy who had just arrived to the states about 3 yrs ago. He struggled with his English, but was so determined to succeed in his new land that he earned a place on the honor roll. He came to me for help finding a summer job and build his resume. In addition to helping him find a job I encouraged him to apply to a summer college program at Yale. He was so scared about applying and not getting accepted, and together we worked on his essay, resume and interview skills....and 6 weeks later he was not only accepted to the program, but earned a 4500 scholarship....that morning he ran down the hall toward me and shouted....Jen I'm I got ...I'm going to Yale...I'm going to Yale... and it was at that moment I realized, this is my role. This is what I want to do...I've made the right decision.

I thank you all for being here with us on this special day, and to the class of 2009, we may not make millions of dollars, but we'll make a million differences because every person we support and invest time in will be a million more times as grateful, and that's just as rewarding. Thank you.

Congratulations!

We are proud and happy for you and wish you the best of luck as you move forward!

Faculty and Staff of HCSSW

Gretchen Winterkorn

Today I want to talk to you about transitioning. The best way I know how to say something to all of you today that is meaningful is to start with my own experience. I had something pretty powerful happen to me this year as I was finishing up with school. My partner began to transition from living in this world as a woman to moving through this world as a man. As is often the case with transitions, the anticipation of the unknown elements of his transition from female to male caused me and my partner the most amount of anxiety and were the greatest challenges we faced. How were people going to react to the transition? What would our friends and families say? Would they support us? What will he look like? What will we look like as a couple? Will we like the changes? What if I don't like the "new him" or, worse, what if the "new him" doesn't like me? What will change about my identity? His identity? We asked these questions to ourselves, to each other, and to many others in classes, support groups, therapy sessions, and the living rooms of friends and family members. I wrote a lot in my journal. I cried, I got angry, I got excited, I read books and articles. It was hard. And then suddenly, once the changes started to take place, things began to get easier and easier. He picked a name; we came out to our families and then to pretty much everyone else, including the lady who runs the Laundromat down the street. He scheduled a surgery to have his breasts removed. We went through the surgery and I helped him heal at my Mom's house. We become closer to each other.

My partner's transition and our transition as a couple have reminded me of a very important truth. One of the deepest things in this world that we share as humans is our fear of the unknown. When you are on the brink of a transition, your mind reels faced with the openness of the future; the possibilities of what lies ahead. We may welcome changes but we also often question how will be able to handle losing what we are comfortable and familiar with in our lives. This is happening to all of us, all of the time. Life is transition and yet there are moments and changes that remind us of this very scary truth – we just don't know the future. After our graduation today, some of us in this room are entering the world of work for the first time which can be intimidating, especially in this economy. Some of us are entering the social work profession for the first time, coming from other fields. For those of us who have worked before and been in this field for a while, this transition may seem a little less overwhelming. But I can guarantee you that we are all experiencing the anxiety and excitement of own transition in a way that is unique to our lives. We don't know. We don't all know what our jobs will be, we don't know if we know enough after these years in school to be good or better, and we wonder if we will be able to make a difference in the ways we want to.

Pema Chodron says, "Fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth." And we all are. We are all moving towards finding out the answers to our questions, which may just lead us to more questions and then more answers. That is life. This graduation ceremony marks us teetering on the tip of the question of what we will make of these years we have just spent in school. And I ask that you all have faith, in however you understand faith, that your experience here at Hunter will serve you well, no matter what you choose to do.

Think back, if you can, to remember how you were feeling just before entering your very first class at Hunter. Just as you and I walked into those classrooms with confidence that it was where we were meant to be, we can trust in our next steps after graduation. If we let it, not only will this faith ground us as the ground moves beneath us, it will also help us pass this wisdom on to the people we serve who, like us, struggle to walk courageously into the unknown of the future.

Bojana Zezelj

What I am taking away from my years at this school is a lot more than understanding the person-in-environment paradigm, or knowing how to start where the client is, or being able to discuss the rise and fall (and rise again?) of the welfare state. It is more than a diploma and new letters on the business card, and more even than the sense of accomplishment and pride at having mastered a really big challenge. What I find the most unexpected and possibly the most valuable piece of this experience is how profoundly the program has altered my perception of the world in which I live, in which we all live. And I have not come here young and naive. If anything, I take less for granted than some of my colleagues might, considering that I am an immigrant, and from a country that not long ago disintegrated in the midst of a brutal civil war.

But even with this kind of life experience, I did not expect to learn that poverty, discrimination, violence, disease, loss and hopelessness are not occasional ills befalling some "marginalized" populations that, true to this attribute, live on the edges of our mostly functional, mostly fair, mostly good and promising world. On the contrary: travelling to and from the jail on Rikers Island, where I worked with incarcerated adolescent, almost all black or Latino, almost all inner city children, from poor and broken families and public schools that taught them nothing, I have come to realize that, despite the geography, we who live our reasonably safe, comfortable and predictable lives, we are really an island, while those who are suffering and disenfranchised, isolated and oppressed, they are the "sea of humanity."

Maybe what I am saying is nothing new for most of you in this room, maybe I was, despite my experience, privileged enough to remain ignorant, but that is all the more reason to feel deeply grateful to this institution for exposing me to a larger and truer reality. In the words of Paulo Freire, another author to whose work I have first been introduced here: "While both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation." And for us, social workers, it is also our only vocation.

Your real Diploma?

You will be notified by the Hunter College Registrar via your Hunter E-mail once your degree audit is complete and your actual diploma is available. This could take 6 weeks or more. Please keep checking your HUNTER E-mail.