



Borough of Manhattan Community College • The City University of New York  
A Journal of Award-Winning Students and Mentors  
2011-2012





## A Journal of Award-Winning Students and Mentors 2011-2012

Once again, I have the pleasure and privilege of introducing *Marks of Excellence*, BMCC's annual journal of outstanding academic achievement.

This third edition comes at a special time in BMCC's history as we continue to celebrate the reconstruction and reopening of The Miles and Shirley Fiterman Hall. Just as the original Fiterman Hall transformed our campus and brought us into the 21st century, the new Fiterman Hall will take us further, ensuring BMCC's future as an incubator of curiosity, innovation and accomplishment.

Those three attributes characterize each of the 11 individuals profiled in these pages. There are aspiring scientists and artists, entrepreneurs and healthcare professionals. Some have set and achieved ambitious goals in the face of daunting obstacles. Every one is a self-starter who has followed his or her own path to excellence.

But they'll be the first to tell you that the support, advice and encouragement they received from faculty and staff mentors kept them going through hard times and was critical to their success. Accounting major Odette Geraldino, who graduated this year with a 4.0 GPA, is now pursuing a bachelor's degree in accounting at Baruch College. Her mentor,

professor Corinne Crawford, "sold me on the accounting dream like nobody else," she says. "But she told us it was hard, and not for everyone."

Year after year, producing a publication like *Marks of Excellence* involves difficult choices. The reality is that space is limited and many BMCC students who exemplify academic excellence at its highest level cannot be featured. But they too deserve our acknowledgment and applause.

It wasn't that long ago that community colleges were valued primarily for their role in vocational training. To be sure, they play a more vital role than ever in workforce development and economic growth.

But community colleges today are also a locus of academic excellence, no less than our most prestigious four-year colleges. You'll find the proof in our classrooms, labs and studios on our main campus at Chambers Street, at our other sites including Murray Street, Fiterman Hall—and, of course, in these pages.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Antonio Pérez".

Antonio Pérez, President  
Borough of Manhattan Community College  
The City University of New York



# A Dream Conferred

Marcus Dargan writes about Harlem's gentrification,  
and wins the Jacob A. Weiser Playwright Award

"As a student at BMCC, if I showed an interest in anything, I didn't have one professor who wouldn't spend time outside class, helping me develop that interest," says alumnus Marcus Dargan.

One person who inspired Dargan was adjunct professor Rosemary George. "We speak every week, even now," says Dargan, who recently performed with Professor George in the musical revue, *Torch 'N Blues*, at the B'Hai Center in Manhattan's East Village. "I've been touring with Rosemary ever since I graduated, singing jazz, Broadway show tunes, and classical pieces," he says.

BMCC theatre professor Diane Dowling has also, Dargan says, "been a phenomenal support" for his work. "Professor Dowling offered to let me direct a production, *Pippin*, the musical," he says. "Her support is what inspired me to do it." Dowling also made it possible for Dargan to stage and direct plays at BMCC during African History Month. "A theatre artist's 'lab' is rehearsal and performance, and I knew Marcus had what it takes to 'experiment'," she says.

After graduating from BMCC, Dargan earned a B.A. in Theatre from City College/CUNY, where he is now working toward an M.S. Ed. in Educational Theatre. His commitment to bringing theater to youth began when he taught at performing arts camps in rural Pennsylvania, as well as at Manna House Workshops and Our Children Foundation in Harlem.

"I like the experience of giving people the tools that make them successful in theater," he says, "whether it's ensemble building, communication

skills, or making connections to literature, you're exposing young people to a better world than they see on MTV or the Internet."

Today, Dargan describes himself as a "director, performer, playwright and teaching artist." He wrote and produced the play, *Dream Deferred*, which highlights African-American residents of an apartment building in East Harlem, as they struggle against the looming commercial dominance of a newly built condominium, just across the street.

The play won the Jacob A. Weiser Playwright Award from the City College of New York, CUNY, and was staged at the NuAfrikan Theatre in Harlem, which was founded by Dargan as well as Jajmi Robinson, Deborah Sitton-Garvin, Cynthia Staton, and other BMCC and CUNY alumni.

Looking back on his years at BMCC, the classmates who became his colleagues, and the professors who inspired him, he says, "I'm grateful for the chance they gave me, and now I want to be a change agent for others."



"I trusted Marcus's artistic intelligence, and encouraged his ambitious projects, even after graduation. I have great respect for his unique critical perspective, theatrical imagination, and sheer force of energy; I can't wait to see his next production!"

—Diane Dowling, Professor,  
Speech, Communications, & Theatre Arts





# A Platform Dreams Are Built On

BMCC graduate Odette Geraldino sees a world of possibilities in the field of accounting.

Odette Geraldino lives just blocks from another community college, but chose BMCC, she says, “because it’s close to the financial district, and I like the diversity at BMCC.” Having moved from the Dominican Republic to the Bronx at age 16, she graduated high school the month she turned 17, and entered college that fall.

In June 2012, just before she turned 19, she walked across the commencement stage to accept her associate degree in accounting from BMCC—and celebrate her 4.0 GPA. “As I was growing up I thought of being a journalist, a diplomat, a detective,” she says. “But gradually I noticed I’m good at business and finance.”

At BMCC, Geraldino earned the Josh Wolfson Scholarship, the Sr. VP/Dean of Academic Affairs Award, and the Latino Honor Society Award for Academic Excellence—all the while working in a tax agency in the Bronx. “I studied when I got home at night,” she says. “I’d stay up till one or two if I had to.”

She was also involved with BMCC’s New York Fellowship Program sponsored by Goldman Sachs, and completed an internship at the NYC Department of Finance, where she audited attorneys’ vouchers for experts to testify in court. Finding time to relax isn’t easy but when she does, “I like playing basketball even though I’m short,” she says, “and I like reading. My favorite novelist is Paolo Coehlo. *The Alchemist* shaped my high school years; it’s about finding yourself and your dreams.”

Now working toward a bachelor’s degree in accounting at Baruch College, CUNY, Geraldino intends to minor in Italian. “One of my dreams is to travel to Italy and work in an international accounting firm,” she says, adding that her focus will be auditing. “I think it’s the most social branch of accounting because you have to meet with clients,” she says. “It’s not just about punching numbers into a system.”

One of Geraldino’s role models, BMCC professor Corinne Crawford, “sold me the accounting dream like nobody else,” she says. “But she also told us it was hard, and not for everyone.” Professor Crawford, says Geraldino, “applied her own experience as an auditor in Big Four firms to her lessons in class, and explained how accounting can be a platform for building your future; whether you want to be an entrepreneur, work in a large firm, a small firm, or even academia. It opened my eyes to the possibilities of accounting as a chosen field, and a place to start your professional life.”



“Odette is a motivated, hardworking student who excelled both inside and outside of the classroom, a quiet leader who leads through example, was always willing to help a fellow student and has a bright future in the accounting profession.”

— Corinne Crawford,  
Assistant Professor of Accounting







# Engineering a Brighter Future

Erika Villamarin measured solar cell efficiencies and now studies environmental engineering at City College, CUNY.

Erika Villamarin began her college career as a business major, only to decide her heart lay in a different area. “I switched my major to engineering science,” she says. “I wanted to see what I could do.”

A fast learner, Villamarin soon attracted the attention of BMCC Science Professor Friedrich Hoffman, who was doing research on solar cells. Never one to shy from a challenge, she signed on with Hoffman as a research assistant and immersed herself in the study of solar energy, measuring the efficiencies of solar cells, conducting materials research, and presenting her work at the 2012 Urban University Conference in Engineering, held at City College of The City University of New York.

“I’m always looking to learn new things,” says Villamarin, who grew up in Ecuador, the child of middle-school teachers. “Professor Hoffman challenged me to take on more and more responsibility and gave me the confidence I needed to present my findings before large audiences.”

Villamarin is one of several students currently participating in the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP) program, which provides research assistantships, academic support and financial stipends to minority students in the STEM fields—science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Having just graduated from BMCC, she’s continuing her studies at City College, CUNY, en route to earning a bachelor’s degree in environmental engineering.

She’s drawn to that field, she says, because “It’s about the future. We are not lacking in energy resources, but we need to develop renewable ways of using those resources.” Villamarin herself represents an underutilized, and highly needed resource; that is, more women and minority students moving into science, math, engineering and technology.

“History has shown that a disproportionate number of students in the STEM fields make it to a certain level and then fall by the wayside,” says Sefton Bennett, BMCC’s LSAMP activity coordinator, who notes that the program counteracts that trend, by “helping to keep them motivated by providing a broad-based support system.”

Bennett, says Villamarin, gave her advice on “the basics of public speaking,” while Professor Hoffman, she says, “helped me understand ethical standards that are in existence in all areas of scientific research.”



“Erika is hard-working and intellectually curious, and has quickly become familiar with an area that was totally new to her. She is not only conducting experiments, she is learning how to present her research to others.”

—Friedrich Hoffman,  
Assistant Professor of Science





# From Starbucks to Standout

Valedictorian Andre Barber is a hospital volunteer, coffee shop manager, academic tutor—and outstanding student.

The first time Andre Barber enrolled at BMCC, “I wasn’t ready,” he says, adding that after a few years working as a terminal manager at John F. Kennedy airport, “I realized if I wanted to get ahead, I needed my college degree. I felt limited.”

The next time Barber enrolled at BMCC, he was not only ready, but earned a 4.0 GPA, and received the honor of being BMCC’s 2012 Valedictorian. He credits his success to maturity, as well as the “strong support system” he found at BMCC.

“Health Education Professor Olivia Cousins was so supportive and scholarship coordinator Sussie Gyamfi kept me on track, academically,” he says. Barber, an aspiring doctor, adds that, “Science Professor Shalton Colquhoun answered all my questions about med school, and I asked a lot of them!”

While attending classes, he also volunteered at Metropolitan Hospital on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, by reading to young patients, and managed a Manhattan Starbucks. “I’ve definitely made mistakes,” he says, “but working there has sharpened my people-skills and taught me how to manage others, as well as the importance of rallying a team.”

He says he brought those skills to BMCC, “and that’s when opportunities began to grow.” He’s been active in the Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) honor society, the BMCC Debate Club, Scholarship Society events, and also worked as a tutor on campus.

The summer after graduating from BMCC, he took a course on becoming an Emergency Management Technician (EMT), “in order to gain experience in the health care field,” he says, and pre-calculus. He’s now majoring in biology at City College/CUNY, and taking part in a project researching the effects of contrast dye on the human liver, through Metropolitan Hospital.

“The nurses and doctors I’ve met are so informative and helpful,” Barber says, and notes that he’s learning more than technical skills from their example. “I love the idea of balancing patient care with a soothing aspect. That’s what patients need; a doctor with a caring bedside manner.”

Barber even practices martial arts in his spare time, and advises his peers, “You may not reach the goal you want, but if you don’t take risks in life, you’ll never know.”



“Andre had the drive to succeed, but needed guidance in choosing a major. I asked him, ‘What do you like to do?’, ‘What do you see yourself doing, in ten years?’ and his path began to be more clear.”

— Sussie Gyamfi,  
Scholarship and Special Services Coordinator





# Honoring Diversity

Alumnus Steven Roberts is pursuing a PhD in Psychology, and hopes to expand awareness of racial identity.

Steven Roberts graduated from BMCC in 2009, and went on to New York University (NYU), where he earned a bachelor's degree in applied psychology, with a minor in urban education. Today, he's working toward a PhD in developmental psychology at the University of Michigan.

"I chose Michigan because they have a strong focus on racial minority research," Roberts says. "I'm really interested in biracial identity development. There's very little research in that area, and a definable lack of research on minorities in general." Eventually, he hopes to address the need for diversity awareness, in the counseling setting.

Roberts, who grew up in Germany, Texas and Italy—his father was in the military—moved to New York in 2005 to live with his grandmother in Staten Island. "It was pretty segregated," he says, but his world changed when he enrolled at BMCC. One person who made an impact on him there was Associate Professor of History, Kwasi Konadu, who teaches in the Center for Ethnic Studies.

"When I took his class, it was the first time I took a class that was taught and led by a black man," Roberts says. "No games—it was a really challenging, rewarding class. And that really inspired me to get into academia. I thought, 'I want to be like this guy'."

Eventually, he says, "I plan on teaching at a university, maybe spearheading interventions geared toward getting minorities into higher education."

Roberts himself received support through the Community College Transfer Opportunity Program (CCTOP), which offers up to \$22,500 in

scholarship aid and enables students to transfer at least 60 credits to the NYU Steinhardt School of Education, Culture and Human Development.

CCTOP is overseen at BMCC by senior academic advisor Allana Hankey-Thomas. "I remember seeing Ms. Hankey-Thomas the day before the NYU deadline," Roberts says. "I still hadn't applied to the program, and she yelled at me. She said I'd better hurry up and get my application in. I'd never been in an academic environment where anyone had expressed such caring for me and my future."

That future, Roberts says, will see a shift in psychological research applied to people of color. "There's racial minority research today, but it tends to be very general," he says. "It refers to African Americans, but isn't broken down to categories such as Afro-Caribbean." He looks forward to contributing research that counters that trend, and deepens understanding of racial groups. "Michigan's a great school," he says.



"Through CCTOP, I meet students with the potential to offer a unique perspective to their chosen field. I saw that potential in Steven, and guided him to a program at NYU where he received the kind of one-on-one guidance he thrived on, at BMCC."

—Allana Hankey-Thomas, Senior Academic Advisor, Academic Advisement & Transfer Center







# Intelligent Design

Multi-Media Arts alumna Cindy Donald turns graphic design into a business, and a way to help fund her next degree.

"Presentation is everything" is the slogan for Cindy Donald's new business, Graphic Express Design. The BMCC alumna has designed a logo for a health food store and business cards for a law firm, as well as posters, magazines and websites for non-profits and other clients.

"It's fun. I love what I do. I have a passion for design and everything I design for my clients comes from the heart," says Donald, who just earned her Associate in Multimedia Arts degree at BMCC and represented the school as part of Phi Theta Kappa's 2012 All-New York Academic Team, receiving a medal and certificate in a formal ceremony held in Albany.

To apply for the Phi Theta Kappa award, she says, "I wrote an essay about a trip to Grenada that I made in 2011 with a church group, to help people get vaccinated, have dental work, and receive other assistance with their health care. I designed a handbook, flyers and other materials for the mission."

Deciding now on which bachelor's degree program to apply for, Donald feels she has already garnered much practical experience. "I loved the labs at BMCC," she said. "The software was always up to date. They don't just teach you how to use the software, they explain, 'This is how you use it when you go into a business, and work with clients'."

Donald also interned at the NYC Department of Probation while attending BMCC, and stayed on, as a volunteer, the summer after she

graduated. "I learned a lot there about timekeeping, bookkeeping, and other skills that are useful in starting my business," she says. "I designed a booklet and flyers for the Department of Probation, and helped the staff learn Excel and other office software."

All this has happened since Donald graduated from high school at age 16 in Grenada, and moved to live with her aunt in New York City, first working as a nurse's assistant, and then in a printing house, where she realized, she said, "I have a passion for graphic arts."

Eventually, she wants to earn a bachelor's degree in graphic arts, and start a family, options that are more viable, with the income she'll generate working from home as a graphic designer. So far, her plan is going well. "Referrals come to me because people who know what I do, tell other people," she says. "That's how it works."



**"Cindy is fiercely determined—her passion for learning is infectious. She is an exceptional young scholar who stood out in my class for her colorful designs, her strong work ethic and her ability to work with her fellow students."**

**—Jody Culkin, Department Chair,  
Media Arts & Technology**



# Lights, Camera, Action!

A knack for finding scholarships leads aspiring filmmaker Anival Gonzalez through BMCC and on to NYU.

"I'm a scholarship junkie," says Anival "Ajae" Gonzalez, who just earned his Associate degree in Video Arts and Technology (VAT) at BMCC with a 3.8 GPA—concurrently attending classes at New York University, and earning ten academic scholarships, along the way.

Gonzalez received his GED and worked as a waiter and bartender before enrolling at BMCC in 2009. "BMCC was the second chance I needed at that point in my life," he says. "I wasn't ready for college until I worked for a few years, which taught me how to be a people-person. But I wanted a formal education."

At BMCC, Gonzalez received aid from the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, Telemundo, which also awarded him a laptop; Study-Travel Opportunities for CUNY Students, through which he studied digital photography abroad, and a CUNY Performance-Based Scholarship.

His attendance at NYU was assisted by Phi Theta Kappa and Community College Transfer Opportunity Program (CCTOP) scholarships. He's also been active in New York Needs You, a college mentorship program, and was a leader in CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP.

"Through ASAP and New York Needs You, I've met many students in GED programs. I tell them I remember what it was like to feel so lost," he says, adding that, "BMCC set me up to succeed. When BMCC professors and staffers see a standout student, they validate and push them. This made me work even harder."

Gonzalez, an aspiring filmmaker, and his friend, BMCC alumna Angie Minaya have just formed a production company, Reel Wicked Films. "I worked with people from the VAT program at BMCC to create my debut horror film," he says. "It's called *The Unexpected*, and has been submitted to film festivals." He also created a music video for singer Kristin Cooke. "I'm directing and Angie's editing," he says.

His first semester at NYU was spent in the school's Study Abroad program in Paris, and after he earns a bachelor's degree in media communications, he hopes to make a documentary film about a Latino family. "I love to highlight my ethnicity; our story isn't told as much," says Gonzalez, who is first-generation Puerto Rican and recently spoke at a Congressional Hispanic Caucus event with BMCC President Antonio Pérez.

"My advice to adults who are hesitant to go back to school," he says, "is don't get stuck on things you can't change. Instead, change how you react to things. Jump at opportunities; don't always stay in your comfort zone."



"Mr. Gonzalez brings such sensitivity to his work, powerful insights about people and their relationships, a burning curiosity and stunning intelligence, all qualities that will distinguish his work as a filmmaker."

—Sandra Poster, Professor,  
Speech, Communications & Theatre Arts





# Music Man

**Liberal Arts major Ngozi Maduakolam wins a coveted music award at NYC's Webster Hall—and scores a music producing gig.**

"I enrolled at BMCC as a stepping stone to a music career," says Liberal Arts major Ngozi Maduakolam. "I studied marketing in the past, but after taking some time off from school, I decided to pursue what I really loved, and that was music. I wanted to go for it, full-throttle."

Maduakolam, a New Yorker of Nigerian descent, credits his family, especially his brothers, for exposing him to music as a teenager. "Growing up, I loved hip-hop, R&B, and Michael Jackson," he says, "but I also liked Sting and Alanis Morissette. I love how music comes together."

The tech-savvy scholar has used computer programs such as GarageBand to create various musical beats, and interned at Universal Music Group in Manhattan to learn more about the music industry. "I did mostly administrative work, but I didn't mind," he says. "I was just happy to be there, around creative people."

He also won modernbeats.com's online music campaign. "Listeners said they liked my drums and chord progressions," says Maduakolam. "They said the music was very clean and smooth."

At BMCC, he enrolled in a Music of Western Civilization class taught by Professor Howard Meltzer. "We learned from where and how music stemmed," says Maduakolam. "As someone who always liked music instrumentation, the class completely piqued my interest."

Professor Meltzer, says Maduakolam, "was so patient; he encourages questions. We also share an interest in a variety of music genres and I liked hearing how Professor Meltzer started in the music business."

At BMCC, Maduakolam served as Treasurer of the Music Club. He also received a Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson Certificate of Academic Achievement from BMCC's Honor Society of Black Student Scholars, and volunteers for The Rites of Passage Program for Youth, part of the non-profit organization, The Moriah Institute.

Last summer, Maduakolam won a "beat competition," sponsored by the iStandard Producers Showcase at Webster Hall in New York City. "I still can't believe I won," he says, adding that, "they want me to come back and be a featured producer there."

Eventually, Maduakolam looks forward to a career as a music producer on Broadway or in the recording industry. "College teaches you time management, which is important in the music industry," he explains. "Getting your degree shows the world you can juggle so many different things. I view college as boot-camp for real life."



"Ngozi has a degree of interest in music that's very deep and varied. He's very inquisitive, flexible and open-minded, and that's what makes a musician."

—Howard Meltzer,  
Chair, Department of Music & Art





# Programmed to Succeed

Emerging computer science professional Dana Smith solves everyday computer challenges.

Most college students are experts on cell phones—from the consumer point of view. Dana Smith, who just earned an Associate in Computer Network Technology degree at BMCC, has a different perspective. “I like gadgets,” she says, “or tools to solve everyday problems, like having a gadget that can program the channels on your TV, or a phone app that controls the lights in your house when you go on vacation.”

As part of an honors project with BMCC Professor Jose Vargas of the Computer Information Systems (CIS) Department, Smith researched virtualization software implementation on an Android phone app. With support from the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP) program, she worked with CIS Professor Ching-Song D. Wei to research the electronic exchange of patient medical records.

“Working with Dr. Wei helped me realize that my real passion is computer science and research,” says Smith, who presented her findings—one of eight CUNY students among 150 students, overall—at the 2012 Puerto Rico Interdisciplinary Scientific Meeting (PRISM) at the University of Puerto Rico.

She also received support from Out in Two, a BMCC scholarship program designed to help students graduate within two consecutive years. “Out in Two has helped me become much more well-rounded,” says Smith, explaining that apart from the program’s emphasis on academic excellence, “We’re encouraged to engage in community activities.” Hers included helping out at the Food Bank of New York and volunteering in Each One Reach One, which pairs students with peer mentors.

This past fall, Smith started computer science classes at Lehman College/CUNY, pursuing a degree in which less than 10% of the students, nationwide, are women, a fact that does not phase her in the least.

“I plan to continue enhancing my programming skills and engage in more hands-on projects, such as website and software design,” says Smith, who will also make use of opportunities outside of class. “Lehman has internships at companies after hours or on weekends, where you take part in networking, programming and other projects,” she says.

Meanwhile, she stays in touch with her mentors at BMCC, and works there as an IT Technician. “I was always naturally good at fixing computer software problems. I was never afraid to try different solutions or to experiment,” she says. “The computer field is a growing industry, controlling so many parts of our world, it’s almost scary. I want to be part of that.”



“Dana has learned a lot while making key contributions to the project. Putting in 10-to-20 hours a week on the project, she has proven herself a fast and intuitive learner with a talent for working independently.”

—Ching-Song D. Wei, Associate Professor,  
Computer Information Systems





# Reading, Writing and Wrangling

Terry Tom Brown has been a geese-wrangler and butterfly docent, and brings his love of wildlife to literature and writing at Columbia University.

BMCC alumnus Terry Tom Brown unites his two passions—science and writing—in his monthly column in *The Observer*, “Love and Other Animals,” exploring the courtship and mating habits of animals as diverse as the spotted hyena, whiptail lizard, and marine flatworm.

He sometimes even writes about human relationships. “*The New York Times* was the first outlet, outside of school, that published my writing,” says Brown, referring to his essay appearing in that paper’s “Modern Love” section. “It was very validating and reinforced my decision to follow this career path.”

Now with a Phi Theta Kappa scholarship that helped him transfer to Columbia University, Brown is working toward a bachelor’s degree in English and Comparative Literature, with a focus in Environmental Biology. He first realized he wanted to write professionally, he says, when he was enrolled at BMCC.

“It had been many years since I’d stepped foot on a college campus,” he says. “I remember sitting in the Murray Building, anxiously wondering if I was too old to go back to school.”

Those fears evaporated as he became active in BMCC’s student honor society Phi Theta Kappa, and served as editor-in-chief of *Voice of the Voiceless*, the college’s student newspaper. “Writing for the college paper gave me the opportunity to engage with the diverse types of people who are educated, teach, and work at BMCC,” he says.

Brown also appreciates the encouragement he received from faculty such as English professor, Gary Richards, who told him, “Live your dreams every day, and the rest will fall into place,” and that he “needed to be a writer.”

“I’ve been a geese-wrangler with the U.S. Wildlife Service, a butterfly docent at the American Museum of Natural History, and a caretaker for all sorts of exotic animals,” says Brown. At BMCC, he found the confidence to bring his fascination with living things to his writing, and his academic goals became clearer. This year he plans to focus on his writing and science studies at Columbia, and complete an internship in the children’s publicity and marketing department at Simon & Schuster—all the while wrapping up a young adult novel that “has a lot to do with Darwin,” he says.



“One of my favorite things to do in English 101 is to call a student out into the hallway, and tell them what a wonderful writer he or she is. Most are quite surprised. Terry was one such student...he was given a gift. As I was, when he entered my classroom.”

—Gary Richards, Adjunct Professor, English





# Setting His Mind to Succeed

Marine veteran Vincent Acevedo overcame combat injuries to excel in criminal justice.

On August 25, 2006, says Vincent Acevedo, “I was an explosives handler in the U.S. Marine Corps, on assignment in Iraq. We’d taken over an insurgent stronghold right outside the city of Ramadi, about 65 miles west of Baghdad.” Acevedo and his unit were bunked down in a house that night when the blast from a rocket-propelled grenade hurled him through a wall. “Thankfully, I’m in one piece,” he says. “I had all my gear on, and that saved my life.”

Last June, Acevedo graduated from BMCC with an Associate in Criminal Justice degree and a 3.94 GPA, and he’s now working toward his bachelor’s degree at John Jay College of Criminal Justice—but the journey from that terrible night in Ramadi has been anything but smooth. After completing tours of duty in Africa, Saudi Arabia and New York at the United Nations, his combat injuries resurfaced.

“I’d suffered what was diagnosed as a mild traumatic brain injury,” he says. “The thing about that type of injury is that the symptoms may go away for a while only to come back later.”

Treated at veterans’ hospitals in Washington, D.C., California and Maryland, Acevedo underwent intense cognitive rehabilitation. He was also treated for PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder. “A lot of us come back from overseas and find we have problems adjusting to civilian life,”

he says. “Being an explosives handler is hard. You want to save the world—or save your friends.”

Throughout all of this, his resolve to return to school never wavered. “I think of the brain as a muscle that has to be constantly trained,” he says. “It’s still hard for me sometimes to remember certain words or put sentences together. Repetition is key to recovery, and I work at it every day.” In class, he records lectures and re-listens to them at home. Also, he says, “My professors at BMCC have given me extra time on assignments and tests and been totally accommodating and understanding.”

While pursuing his bachelor’s degree, Acevedo’s interim goal is to become a New York City Firefighter. He doesn’t know exactly what shape his career will take, but “What I do know is that I love helping people,” he says.



“Vincent is an impressive person and a phenomenal student who takes advantage of every opportunity available to him. There’s just something in him that keeps him going forward.”

—Jennifer Hernandez,  
Program Coordinator, CUNY Justice Academy



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