



Borough of Manhattan Community College • The City University of New York
A Journal of Award-Winning Students and Mentors
2012-2013



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Welcome to the 2012-2013 *Marks of Excellence*, our annual showcase of outstanding academic achievement by BMCC students and alumni.

Common wisdom holds that diversity, whether in academia, the workplace or society at large, is fundamentally about fairness—guaranteeing equal opportunities for everyone, irrespective of race, religion or nationality.

At BMCC, we begin with that definition but we take it further. We see diversity as a “rich tapestry,” in the words of poet Maya Angelou—a treasured asset that enriches and deepens the educational experience for all our students. To foster diversity, we invest heavily in services and programs designed to help a wide range of students be successful.

Moreover, we don’t view diversity exclusively in terms of ethnicity, but also in the variety of skills, achievements and life experiences our students bring to the table.

Indeed, to be part of the BMCC community, whether you’re a student, teacher or the college president, is like attending a wonderful dinner party where every guest has a fascinating story to tell.

For example, you may find yourself seated next to Ron Wallace, who started his own design company, NAMM Clothing, after earning a

degree in Multimedia Arts at BMCC and found a mentor, Bob Bland, at Manufacture New York, a fashion incubator. Seated across from you is Tasmia Hoque, who came here with her family from Bangladesh—a forensic science major who is looking ahead to working in a crime lab analyzing blood spatters and DNA.

Over coffee, you might chat with Daryl Griffin, an ex-Marine who saw combat duty in Afghanistan and later overcame severe personal challenges to rebuild his life, excel academically and counsel other veterans.

Ron, Tasmia and Daryl are among the 12 remarkable individuals profiled in these pages—scientists, healthcare professionals, teachers, entrepreneurs. Each of their stories is unique—but together, they are part of the magnificent, multifaceted tapestry that is BMCC.

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

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



A Passion for Education

BMCC alumna Alexa Pomales builds an early
childhood education career at Rockefeller University.

"I was born in the midtown part of Manhattan known as 'Hell's Kitchen,'" says BMCC alumna Alexa Pomales. "My father was born in Puerto Rico and my mother came to New York from Peru as a small child. She worked as a hotel housekeeper and ran a family childcare center out of our home."

Each parent contributed, by example, to her current skill set as an educator. "My dad was always on the floor playing with the children," she says, "while my mom was very structured. She recommends a career teaching small children, but "only for people who have a love and a passion for the field."

After high school, Pomales first enrolled at City College, CUNY, then took some time off and worked in a discount store. Returning to school, she chose BMCC because "I figured I could bring my grade point average up, and then transfer to a four-year school"—but her direction sharpened one day, in her first semester. "I saw these pamphlets in the hallways about early childhood education," she says. "I thought to myself, 'You can teach babies? How does that happen?'"

Pomales earned an associate degree in early childhood education from BMCC in 2003, then a bachelor's degree in psychology at Hunter College and a master's degree in early childhood education at City College—all the while working at the Child and Family Center at Rockefeller University,

where she had started as a student teacher from BMCC. Eventually, she was promoted to Head Teacher and became the Center's Assistant Director.

Today, Pomales guides teachers to support children's learning in activities like block building or sewing, where they string together cut-out shapes and objects. "I love being a witness to a child's growth, and seeing the progression of their development," she says.

Her days at BMCC continue to be a resource. "As a teacher of young children, you don't want to be talking down to them, and our professors at BMCC were careful not to be that way, either," she says. "Rachel Theilheimer is one person I remember vividly. She was very descriptive when she spoke about a classroom practice. She welcomed our ideas—and that's the kind of assistant director I'm trying to be."



"Alexa's classwork was great, and when I observed at her fieldsite I saw how intuitively responsive and fully present she is with children. Now, she's like that with staff, too."

— Teacher Education Professor
Rachel Theilheimer



Building a Cleaner Planet

Luis Aragon volunteers, makes the Dean's List and is planning to build a cleaner planet.

"Seeing climate changes and problems coming up because of human interaction makes me want to help find creative solutions for a better balanced planet," says BMCC engineering major Luis Aragon.

A BMCC Foundation Scholar and on the Dean's List, Aragon is also a member of Phi Theta Kappa and volunteers with New York Cares. "I've done everything from spread mulch in parks, to reading books with kids, to helping the elderly use a computer," he says, and also finds time to work part-time in a restaurant near his home in Queens.

"Starting at BMCC is just the first of many steps," he says. Already accepted into the environmental engineering program at City College, CUNY, he's thinking about a career "developing clean energy with a company like General Motors, or with companies that make wind turbines." He likes the idea of building a career in California, he says, because "they have the strictest environmental regulations."

Meanwhile, he's completing his associate degree at BMCC, and among his favorite classes are those in mathematics. "I'm all about the numbers," he says, and particularly enjoys Professor Barbara Lawrence's differential equations class. "It's a tough class but a challenge worth taking. She pushes the students to practice, and it's engaging. She doesn't give 'easy A's'."

Aragon grew up in Bogota, Colombia and moved to Long Island City, Queens, in 2011. "I love living in New York," he says. "You can find free shows in the street; there are the parks, street fairs, art on the piers. What I love most about this city and also about BMCC is that I can find a piece from every country, every day."

Also, he says, there are lessons to be learned from the sharing of space and resources he sees at BMCC and throughout New York City. "We need to learn to coexist," he says. "We're smart enough to live here without destroying our planet. We have the resources, the know-how—we just need the will."



"Luis is an extremely bright young man. His interest in mathematics extends far beyond the classroom and is the model of what a mathematics student should be: conscientious, mature and talented."

—Math Professor Barbara Lawrence



Left to right: Nechama Gluck, Natalia Sorokina

Defying Limits

Natalia Sorokina and Nechama Gluck leave their homes behind, to start promising new lives.

Natalia Sorokina and Nechama Gluck were among the first communication studies majors at BMCC. Now Sorokina is enrolled at Columbia University and Gluck is at New York University, both having earned generous merit scholarships to attend the prestigious schools—and having come a long way to get there.

“My first night, I slept on Brighton Beach with my suitcase,” says Sorokina. “In Russia, I didn’t feel I was free to be who I am,” she says, referring to that government’s notoriously anti-gay stance. “I was beaten up by skinheads, just for holding my girlfriend’s hand. The police were watching and their response was, ‘Skinheads and gays, let them kill each other’.”

Meanwhile, Nechama Gluck was coming of age in Rockland County, Upstate New York. “It was a very closed Hasidic community,” she says. “My dream was to go to college, but a woman there is expected to marry early and be a housewife.” At age 16, “I dropped out of high school and ran away to Queens,” she says. “I lived with an aunt there who encouraged me to get my GED, to get a job.”

Eventually, the two women met at BMCC. “Definitely going there and majoring in communication studies was a big step in the right direction,” says Gluck. “How much they cared about our futures was amazing.” Now

pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Media, Culture and Communication Studies at NYU, she was awarded scholarships from both Phi Theta Kappa and the Community College Transfer Opportunity Program. Eventually, “I’d like to pursue a career in broadcast journalism,” she says.

Natalia Sorokina is seeking a bachelor’s degree in Human Rights and International Public Affairs at Columbia University, thanks to winning that school’s coveted New Student Scholarship. “My dream,” she says, “is to affect policy regarding the LGBT community, and women around the world.”

She hopes her family can visit New York someday, as she doesn’t plan to return to Russia, and Gluck reflects that “we’ve reconciled, my family and me. We love each other and they’re proud of me, now that I’m in college.”



“Our faculty are very proud of Natalia and Nechama who exemplify our students who overcome incredible obstacles to get their education, learn, succeed and go on to fulfill their dreams.”

—Communication Studies
Professor Hollis Glaser



Honorable Mention

Rada-Mayya Kostadinova receives honorable mention
for the prestigious Barry M. Goldwater scholarship.

Recently, BMCC student Rada-Mayya Kostadinova was one of four CUNY students to receive honorable mention for the Barry M. Goldwater scholarship—the premier federally funded scholarship for undergraduates in the sciences, engineering and mathematics.

Thousands are nominated for this award, but according to James Airozo, CUNY Director of Student Academic Awards and Honors, only a small number of community college students receive the scholarship or honorable mention “simply because they have less research experience than the juniors with whom they are competing.”

BMCC alumna Rada Kostadinova gained an edge in the competition by participating in the research project “Bio-Removal of Heavy Metals from Wastewaters by Spent Tea Leaves,” under the guidance of science professor Abel Navarro. She also took part in the research project “Reiki Treatment on Colon Cancer Cells,” led by science professor Patricia Deleon.

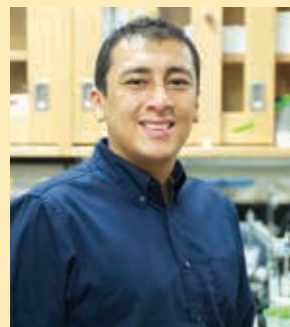
These projects led to valuable conference experience, as Kostadinova co-presented posters at the 2013 Earth Science and Climate Change Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada and the 2013 Student Collegiate Science Technology Entry Program (C-STEP) Statewide Conference held at Lake George, New York.

Now pursuing a bachelor’s degree in biology at Queens College, CUNY, where she earned a full tuition scholarship from the Transfer Honors

Program, her next steps are to attend dental school at SUNY Stonybrook, become a periodontist “and conduct my own research about growing teeth from stem cells.”

Kostadinova, who grew up in Bulgaria and lives with her two sisters in Queens, New York, remembers her father’s painful experience with misdiagnosed peritonitis, or gum disease, and hopes someday to return to Bulgaria “to improve the dental care people receive.”

In Summer 2014 she will volunteer in a dental clinic in Tijuana, Mexico, and complete an internship in a private dental practice. At BMCC she was a Foundation Scholar, a member of Phi Theta Kappa and on the Dean’s List. She also volunteered at New York Presbyterian Hospital and the New York Blood Center. “When I look back, I’m so glad I found BMCC,” she says. “The people are amazing and the professors really want you to do well.”



“Rada is always looking for opportunities to improve her research skills. She has a perfect GPA, but she goes beyond the classroom to understand biological concepts and what directions science can go in.”

—Science Professor Abel Navarro



Moving Forward

Christian Meyers juggles family, work and school, to build a career in information technology.

“Developing a relationship is key to building a career,” says BMCC alumni Christian Meyers, and he credits his achievements at BMCC to the supportive relationships he formed with staff, faculty and fellow students while he earned his associate degree in computer information systems.

Now he’s working in BMCC’s COPE program—helping connect students with the services they need—and attending night classes at New York City College of Technology, CUNY, completing a bachelor’s degree in computer network security.

“I want to work in IT [Information Technology],” he says. “With all this hacking going on, at corporations and with personal accounts, I want to be part of the wave of people developing new encryption methods and systems to protect people’s data.”

A returning student, Meyers has a son attending college in Georgia and is raising a new daughter. “I want to be a role model for my children,” says the BMCC Foundation Scholar who made the Dean’s List, volunteered as a student ambassador and worked in the college’s computer center. With the help of his computer information systems professor Lin Leung, he also took part in a mobile forensics project at Pace University.

The road to these accomplishments has not been easy. “In 2006, I was sitting on Rikers Island, in jail at age 30,” says Meyers. “When I got out, I felt confident I would pass the GED test, and with encouragement from my fiancée, I applied to BMCC.”

Receiving scholarships and moral support at BMCC “boosted me to a whole new level,” he says. “For the first time, I felt like a winner. I even find myself advising the young guys at school, because I know how fast your life can change from one bad decision.”

As a new student at City Tech, “Honestly, it’s hard,” he says. “I go to classes at night so I mainly just show up for class, then leave as soon as it’s over. But I’ll find a way to connect like I did at BMCC. I’m moving forward, that’s what matters.”



“Christian Meyers impressed me with his perseverance and willingness to help other students. I was pleased to help him enter the cyber-security workshop at Pace, where he was a positive impact on that group, too.”

— Computer Information Systems
Professor Lin Leung



Paramedic of the Year

Alumnus Michael Blecker is honored for saving a life.

No one wants to experience a medical emergency. But if you do, this is the person you want on your side: BMCC alumnus Michael Blecker, who received New York State's highest honor for paramedics, the 2013 ALS (Advanced Life Support) Provider of the Year award.

Blecker's nomination for the award followed his life-saving intervention when a fellow paramedic was having an allergic reaction to strawberries. "Her throat had closed, she had broken out with hives and couldn't speak," says Blecker, who quickly applied Rapid Sequence Intubation, a procedure in which the patient is medically paralyzed and a tube is threaded down the trachea. "Within 11 minutes," he says, "she was intubated, medicated, and she made a full recovery."

Michael Blecker grew up in Athens, Greece and moved to Brooklyn, New York with his family at age 15. When he entered BMCC he had already been working as an EMT—Emergency Medical Technician—and his perspective on emergency response deepened as he joined recovery efforts after the World Trade Center attacks of September 2001. "We slept in Stuyvesant High School and the Staten Island ferry terminal," he says. "We did mostly search and recovery—a lot of digging."

During that year, Blecker gained "a more comprehensive knowledge base about pharmacology, medical interventions, intubation, electric therapy

of cardiac rhythms," he says. "The faculty at BMCC make the classes interesting, and I've kept up with them over the years."

Blecker has also earned NYS Department of Health and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) certifications on Weapons of Mass Destruction Awareness, Hazardous Materials and the Incident Command System. Now a Lieutenant in the Special Operations Division at Empress EMS, he handles situations such as "a construction accident at a site where asbestos is present, or a radiological emergency in a lab."

He also supervises BMCC paramedic majors completing "ride alongs" with EMT teams. "I tell them it's a great field to be in now," he says. "Each day is different. The technology and equipment changes, and no two days have been the same. That's what I love about my career. Things happen when you least expect them to."



"I have been fortunate to maintain contact with Mike as he developed from a 'rookie' to a respected paramedic with additional training in hazardous materials and rescue operations. We are proud to count Mike Blecker as one of BMCC's graduates!"

—Allied Health Professor Gene Iannuzzi



Reaching Out and Up

Alumnus Daryl Griffin studies criminal science while helping other student veterans.

Recent BMCC alumnus Daryl Griffin was on the Dean's List, active in the Student Government Association and a member of Phi Theta Kappa while he earned his associate degree in criminal justice. Now working toward a bachelor's degree in criminal justice at John Jay College, CUNY, he says, "I'd like to get a government job in homeland security or do outreach with veterans within CUNY or beyond."

The confidence in his voice has been well earned. "I lost my father at a young age and my mother, brothers and I moved around a lot," says Griffin. After high school, he studied culinary science and worked as a chef at a resort in Pennsylvania—"but my heart wasn't in it, so I enlisted in the Marines," he says.

After serving in combat, Griffin returned home with a drinking problem and severe anxieties about his future. "It was a tough time," he says, but with support from friends and family he got back into shape and one day in 2009 got in touch with Eric Glaudé, BMCC's counselor specializing in veteran affairs.

Before long, Griffin was president of the BMCC Veterans Club and earning straight A's. He also became involved with PROVE—the Project

for Return and Opportunity in Veterans Education. At BMCC's Student Veterans Resource Center, PROVE interns from the Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work counsel veterans and recruit peer mentors, and Griffin continues working there today.

"All sorts of problems can arise when you're a newly returned vet," he says. "For example, VA [Veterans Administration] benefits can be tricky, but we have good working relationships with the college's bursars and registrars, so I can usually intercede on a veteran's behalf and solve the problem."

Griffin credits BMCC and his work with Eric Glaudé as an integral part of his reentry to civilian life. "He guided me in setting benchmarks, laying down 5-, 10- and 15-year goals," says Griffin, who is thriving at John Jay College. "I don't plan on getting anything less than an A."



"Daryl and I hit it off from the beginning. This is a bright, highly motivated young man, willing to do whatever was asked of him—and determined to get an education."
— Student Veterans Counselor Eric Glaudé



Solving Mysteries

Tasmia Hoque plans to work in a crime lab someday, applying forensic science to unlock cases.

"I want to work someday analyzing fingerprints, DNA and blood splatters in a crime lab, working with a homicide unit," says BMCC alumna Tasmia Hoque. "Crime solving rates haven't caught up yet with the technology, and I want to be part of making that happen."

Now pursuing a bachelor's degree in forensic science at John Jay College, CUNY, she's using lab skills she first practiced at BMCC, conducting a research experiment under the guidance of Science Professor Jun Liang Rice.

"We introduced stress triggers, including heat, to what are known as 'C. elegans', or pond worms," Hoque explains, "to measure the impact on their life span." Now at John Jay, her focus has shifted from biology to chemistry, "but we use similar lab skills," she says, and in addition to her studies, she works in a busy clothing store. "It's very tough, keeping up with my classes," she says, but has managed to do so, and even make the Dean's List.

Tasmia Hoque grew up in Bangladesh and moved to Queens, New York with her family in 2008. Just before graduating with an associate degree in liberal arts from BMCC, she made a poster presentation under Professor Rice's guidance at the prestigious 2013 Northeast Regional Meeting of the Society for Developmental Biology. Held at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, the conference

attracted students and scientists from an array of Ivy League and private colleges and universities.

"We were the only ones there from a community college," Hoque says. "This was my first conference and I was really nervous, but I could answer their questions, and I felt they were appreciative of my answers."

Professor Rice agrees. "For Tasmia," she says, "it was good to talk with people working on projects; it helps you understand different research models. Also, seeing graduate students in the field helps you see the paths that science can go in."

Building her own path now, Hoque hopes to land an internship next year, "hopefully with the NYPD." Eventually, she says, "I'd like to solve cases with the FBI. I like solving mysteries."



"I was very impressed by how fast Tasmia learned techniques as we began the research. Her devotion and independence allowed her to complete the project smoothly, and I wish her a successful career in forensic science."

— Science Professor Jun Liang Rice



Telling Stories in School

Xavier Ilyas designs his own degree in film and creative writing.

“Ever since I was a little kid, I loved telling stories,” says liberal arts major Xavier Ilyas. “As I got older, my interest turned to movies.” Soon, he’ll transfer into the CUNY Baccalaureate for Unique and Interdisciplinary Studies—or as it’s often called, the CUNY BA Program—and focus on both. In this special program, students work with faculty mentors and academic advisors to design their own course requirements. For Ilyas, it was the perfect solution. “I want to do film but I’m not really interested in theory,” he says. “I’m more interested in the practical and creative-writing aspects of filmmaking.”

Having grown up in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, Ilyas moved to Brooklyn in Fall 2011 with his mother and sister. Right after high school, he entered the New York Film Academy and “I made about eight short films and screened my thesis film for about 100 people,” he says.

His next step was to transfer to BMCC. “I started taking business classes, but I realized that’s not for me,” says Ilyas, who changed his major to liberal arts. Then, he says, “I fell back in love with film.”

It started in an English class led by Professor Julie Cassidy. “I wrote about what my goals are, when it comes to film,” he says, “and I had kind of an epiphany. When you write that stuff down, you get a clearer idea of who you are and what you want.”

In the CUNY BA program, he’ll earn a dual degree in creative writing and film, taking writing classes at Brooklyn College—with Professor Cassidy as his faculty mentor—and film classes at Hunter College. His interest has run toward “really strange movies, like those by David Lynch,” he says, “but I also like the Indie ‘talkie’-type movies. I’ve always wanted to morph the two.”

As for the technical side of filmmaking, “I use digital video, but I have shot on film—I6 millimeter,” he says. “I’ll probably take editing classes, too.” Meanwhile at BMCC he’s staying busy with Phi Theta Kappa and making the Dean’s List. “I guess my interests are just quirky enough,” he muses, “to have led me to this point.”



“Xavier tackled every assignment with creativity and dedication. For one assignment, he created a picture book using scenes from famous horror movies, and cleverly included movable pieces and pop-ups. Another assignment showed his skill with rhythm and imagery—overall adding new angles to the groundwork he will need to pursue his film degree.”

—English Professor Julie Cassidy



The Value of Child's Play

Out-in-Two scholar Sarah Tiapula Stein plans a career working with autistic children.

Liberal arts major Sarah Tiapula Stein grew up in Singapore and is fluent in Mandarin, French and ASL—American Sign Language. She's an Out-in-Two scholar, a member of Phi Theta Kappa and on the Dean's List.

"I'm also participating in a research fellowship at Teachers College, Columbia University; a Saturday enrichment program for children with autism," she says. That program, led by Teachers College Professor Hsu-Min Chiang, is held at a community center in Chinatown.

"There are about 20 kids in the group, ages three to 10," says Stein. "Some are nonverbal and some speak either Mandarin or Cantonese. I'd say a third of the children speak English." The volunteers "conduct play therapy groups, and incorporate dance, language and math," says Stein, who is building toward a career focused on "the education, psychology and neurological side of the development of children with autism and developmental disabilities."

Stein was born in Hawai'i, then the family moved to Southeast Asia. She moved to Florida as a young adult, then New York, where she enrolled at BMCC. "I think for someone who hasn't been in a classroom for a long time, this is a wonderful place to start," she says.

One of her best experiences as a student has been her anthropology and human geography classes with Professor Paula Saunders. "She's made me

want to go into anthropology as a field," says Stein, "and look at learning from the point of view of education-based research."

She has also been inspired by her literature class with English professor Stephanie Carberry. "She makes me want to throw my entire brain into the English language," says Stein. "She made me love poetry; I used to hate it and now I'm writing it on the subway."

As for next steps, Stein has applied to bachelor's degree programs at Vanderbilt University, New York University and City College of New York, CUNY. "Then, I want to attend the early childhood education program at Teachers College, specializing in children with disabilities," she says.



"Sarah is academically curious to learn everything about people. Her extensive travel and experiences abroad have given her a global perspective that will enable her to succeed in our diverse world. I have no doubt that she will succeed in all of her future endeavors."

**—Social Sciences and Human Services
Professor Paula Saunders**



The Height of Fashion

Ron Wallace earns an Associate in Multimedia Arts degree, then starts his own fashion line.

"Growing up, I couldn't draw much, but I was good with Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop," says Ron Wallace, who graduated from BMCC in 2012 with an Associate in Multimedia Arts degree.

"I had some amazing professors, like Alizabeth Towery and Josephine Culkin," he says. "They showed me that even without knowing how to draw, I could bring fashion and graphics together."

Today, at age 22 he heads his own design company, NAMM Clothing, garnering media attention and a growing clientele. The business started with screen-printed T-shirts that were sold on the street and in one store, "but in that one store, we sold out in three weeks, so I knew I had something," Wallace says.

Last year, he connected with Manufacture New York, a hybrid fashion incubator and factory. "They were starting a pilot program to provide a shared workspace for clothing and jewelry designers," says Wallace, who learned of the company on Facebook. "I immediately messaged the CEO, Bob Bland, to tell her I was good at construction and would be happy to help in any way."

Bland took Wallace up on his offer and soon he found himself pouring concrete and knocking down walls at their pilot space, in the heart of

Manhattan's Garment District. In addition to providing him with a workspace fully equipped with machinery and computer workstations, she gave him a wealth of pointers on how to build his business and "taught me everything," he says.

Inspired by his mentors, Wallace has also found that design ideas "can come from surprising places," like watching cartoons with his nephew. "I like shirts with a splash of color—but not a lot of in-your-face graphics," says Wallace, who participated in New York Fashion Week 2014 and is hoping to show his designs at Paris Fashion Week. He also plans to continue his studies in fashion design—"most likely Parsons or FIT"—and take his company worldwide.



"Ron Wallace was a great student! He was involved and engaged, asking questions, and working hard to improve his skills. While he took his work seriously, he had a great attitude!"

— Music and Art Professor Alizabeth Towery



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