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RWU Celebrates LGBTQ+ Graduates in First Lavender Graduation

Juan Siliezar
Roger Williams University

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RWU Celebrates LGBTQ+ Graduates in First Lavender Graduation

The event recognizes the strength, resilience and success of graduating seniors who are part of the growing LGBTQ+ community at RWU

Senior Mary Dinnean puts a lavender cord around senior Joanna Skora at RWU’s first-ever Lavender Graduation.

BRISTOL, R.I. – Roger Williams University honored its lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, pansexual, intersex, non-binary, and gender nonconforming (LGBTQ+) students during its first-ever Lavender Graduation ceremony on May 9.

Lavender Graduations, which have been gaining prominence over the last decade, are ceremonies held on numerous university campuses to celebrate the accomplishments of graduating students who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

“We are recognizing that queer and transgender communities are here at Roger Williams and that they are robust,” said Gabby Porcaro, RWU’s coordinator for LGBTQ+ programs.

Twenty-two RWU students were joined by family, friends, RWU faculty and staff in the Great Hall in the North Campus Residence Hall. There, they were presented with lavender cords that they can wear at the university’s main commencement ceremony similar to an honors cord. Within the LGBTQ+ community, the color lavender is known to represent strength and resiliency.
The Great Hall in the North Campus Residence Hall was filled with students, front, receiving their cords and people there in support.

The lavender cords students were presented with.

“For me, it’s just being proud of who I am,” said Julia Ackerman, a public relations major. “Letting other people know that it’s okay to be who you truly are. It will be such a great moment to walk across the stage as who I am – comfortable in my own skin.”
Julia Ackerman ’18 embraces Brittany Fulgione ’18 after Fulgione presented Ackerman the lavender cord.

“It’s a symbol that I have come to terms with my sexuality,” said Joanna Skora, a biology major. “It’s a celebration.”

The cords were presented to students by Porcaro or a chosen family member or close friend. Many of the presenters spoke about growing close with the student receiving the lavender cord and supporting each other through difficult periods, such as coming out to friends and family.

Along with students who chose to participate in the ceremony, the event also celebrated those from the LGBTQ+ community who were unable to participate, such as students who are not publicly out yet, Porcaro said.
“The event is meant to celebrate, honor and acknowledge all of our queer and transgender students,” Porcaro said. “Whether they are known to us or not.”

During the event, a moment of silence was held for those students.

Faculty and staff speakers kicked off the event by sharing words of wisdom, inspiration and resiliency with the graduates. This year’s speakers included MiNa Chung, associate director of RWU’s Intercultural Center; Laura D’Amore, associate professor of American studies; and Professor of Criminal Justice Yolanda Leott, who gave the keynote address.

“Together we rise to greater heights,” Leott, a leader in RWU’s LGBTQ+ community, said in her address. “You must know that you are not alone. You never have been. You are not only grounded in a proud, rich tradition of resistance that continually bears universal justice for all, you are manifestly the engine of persistence,” Leott said. “It has always been a good time to be the first. Primarily, because you are second to none.”

After the speakers, students received their cords and celebrated their time as a part of RWU’s LGBTQ+ community.

Nine of the students who received their lavender cords.

The event was organized by the Intercultural Center with support from departments across campus.

The Lavender Graduation ceremony was originally created by Ronni Sanlo in 1995 at the University of Michigan. Sanlo is now director emeritus of the UCLA Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center.