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Graduating a Community of Civic Scholars

From committing to service on their first day as students to a deep dive into community-engaged work and real-world research projects, the Class of 2018 embodies civic scholarship at RWU



May 19, 2018 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – Each graduate arrived at Roger Williams University from different walks of life, with individual challenges they've surmounted to achieve this pinnacle moment of their academic careers. Yet during their time here, the Class of 2018 grew into a close-knit family that worked together on research projects, athletic and artistic performances, addressed social justice issues, and dedicated themselves to community-engaged work that made a significant impact on local and global communities.

On Saturday, May 19, the 1,127 members of the graduating class came together again as a family to create one more meaningful memory as they joined thousands of attendees to culminate their college careers at the University's annual Commencement exercises. They became the first graduating class commissioned as Civic Scholars – students who believe in the positive impact of community-engaged work, putting their knowledge and skills to work to solve real-world problems with community partners.



“You have every right to be proud of your accomplishments and to celebrate with your families here today,” University President Donald J. Farish said. “You leave us as the most accomplished class in our history. You will continue to augment our reputation, and we are proud to have you represent our institution.”

In addition to awarding bachelor’s and master’s degrees to the graduates, President Farish conferred honorary doctorates to two ecotourism pioneers in the Dominican Republic: Frank R. Raineiri, founder and CEO of Puntacana Group, and his son, Frank Elias Raineiri, vice-president of Puntacana Group and an RWU Class of 1999 graduate and member of the RWU Board of Trustees.

They were selected, Farish said, for their deep commitment to business practices that benefit humankind and the environment.

Frank R. Rainieri, who has been a leader in the Dominican Republic’s ecotourism industry, delivered the keynote address to a crowd of some 7,000 graduates and attendees. As founder of Puntacana Group, he’s developed the Dominican Republic’s eastern shore into a major tourism destination, while also dedicating his career to creating a visionary shift toward ecotourism.

Rainieri created the Puntacana Group Foundation as a nonprofit whose mission is to protect and preserve the country’s natural resources and establish programs dedicated to improving the health of local communities. In the Punta Cana region, the foundation has endowed a 1,500-acre ecological park that includes a research and education facility, and launched a partnership with RWU to create the Dominican Republic’s first marine ornamental fish hatchery, whose aim is to ensure sustainability in the marine aquarium trade while drawing more tourists to the reef.

In his keynote address, Raineiri urged graduates to lead their lives with vision and to commit to perseverance, hard work and social responsibility.

“Those that dare to dream must learn to pursue their dreams and work nonstop in order to make them a reality,” Rainieri said.

Even when a major hurricane devastated his Punta Cana Resort, Rainieri said he began rebuilding right away. “You will face adversity. People will tell you to give up or move on, but you have to persevere and keep going,” he said.



Earlier in the ceremony, student speaker Victoria "Tori" Davis '18 shared how her hopes for an ambitious academic career had often been overshadowed by discouragement from people claiming her genetic condition, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, stood in her way. She said that having a connective tissue disorder that causes her joints to dislocate and requires the use of a wheelchair would often make people see her disability first and not consider what she could contribute as a person. That is, she said, until she arrived at Roger Williams.

"I knew this wasn't going to be the case from day one [at RWU]," she said. "RWU has made it a special goal to make diverse students feel welcome." From the students to faculty members and facilities crew, everyone at the university help "make the campus a place where someone like me, with a disability, can feel at home."

With that welcoming environment nurturing her freedom to pursue college life, she joined the Campus Entertainment Network, wrote for the student newspaper, the Hawk's Herald, and yearbook, Crossings, and mentored incoming freshmen as an Orientation Advisor. She quickly met her soon-to-be best friend, Skyler, who made "me feel less like a chair and more like a ridiculous person who just so happens to be stuck in one." Together, they went on to win the Mr. RWU Spectacular last fall, accompanied by Davis's steadfast companion and service dog, Tony.

At first, she had enrolled as a biology major intent on grinding away long hours on research in the lab. "But when my Ehlers-Danlos syndrome got in the way of my dreams, it was purely through the compassion and dedication of my advisor, Professor Leavitt, and his friend in the communications department, Professor Scully, that got me through," she said. "Together, they spent hours helping me build an individualized major that combined my interests. One where I could be involved in the sciences that I loved, coupled with my passion for the written word."



The result was her own major in science communication, a rigorous curriculum based in marine science and journalism courses. This perfectly tailored major aligned her passions and career aspirations, landing her a coveted position writing for the American Association of the Advancement of Science's *Science Magazine* after graduation.

So while she had faced discouraging perceptions early in her life, Davis says she found scores of supportive voices uplifting her and "making sure my chair never sat in the way of my academic and professional dreams."

"With every shift in our country's political and cultural landscape, we have come to see that the powers that be view some of our citizens as less than others," Davis said. "I challenge you to stand true to the values that President Farish reminds us of during these uncertain times. That RWU is a family and that within this family, on this campus, you will always find support and willing listeners."

"Continue on your quest for knowledge after you cross this stage, be it in a graduate program, in the workplace, or just in your daily life," she said. "Be catalysts of change and fight for what you believe in. Stay steadfast and stand up for those in need."



The entire graduating Class of 2018 totaled 1,127, including undergraduate students, graduate students earning master's degrees and students graduating from the School of Continuing Studies. And in what has become an annual tradition, 15 students earned the President's Core Values Medallions in recognition of their academic, professional and community-based accomplishments.

Check out more images from the ceremony: [RWU Commencement 2018](#).

RWU Law Celebrates Commencement 2018

One day earlier, 130 students graduated from Roger Williams University School of Law, where Marielena Hincapié – executive director of the National Immigration Law Center – delivered the keynote address, emphasizing how this year's crop of graduates will shape the country's legal future toward "inclusivity, equality and opportunities for all of us."

"When I look at you, I see the future judges of Rhode Island's courts and our federal courts," Hincapié said. "I see state legislators and U.S. Congress members. I see lawyers who will take pro bono cases, who will represent indigent people, workers and refugees. I see future members of boards of directors of nonprofit organizations. I see so many of you who are going to work on developing new policies – that address climate change, that address gentrification and the housing crisis in this country, that ensure everyone has access to quality and affordable health care. "

During the ceremony, the law school presented an honorary degree to the Honorable George E. Healey Jr., retired chief judge of the Rhode Island Workers' Compensation Court.

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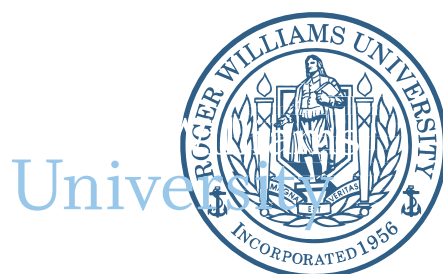
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