A Passionate Advocate for Social Justice

Jill Rodrigues
Roger Williams University

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A Passionate Advocate for Social Justice

Willie Borkai ‘14 discovered a love for activism at RWU that will spring him into a budding career after Commencement

May 12, 2014  |  Jill Rodrigues ‘05

BRISTOL, R.I. – As the last day of classes drew to a close, Willie Borkai ‘14 received the call each soon-to-be graduate hopes to get. Offered a position as case worker with the Key Program in Providence – an agency that provides outreach and advocacy for troubled youth – Borkai was thrilled to learn he would launch his professional career with work that’s aligned with his passion for social justice.

“I love working within the community,” said Borkai, a psychology major and anthropology + sociology minor who has interned in the children’s unit and psychology research department at Bradley Hospital in Providence, and has volunteered at both an orphanage and an ex-convict reintegration program while in South Africa studying abroad at the University of Cape Town.

“I’ve learned through education the importance of having positive role models and how positive people can change the social environment,” he added.

One of his aims on campus and beyond Bristol is to provide a positive example as a young, black man via his cheerful, honest attitude – often through his advocacy for open and positive dialogues about race and simply by being himself.

“I’m very passionate about this topic. I talk about race because it’s an issue that affects who I am,” he says.
By challenging his friends and classmates – yes, he will readily contest misconceptions raised in class – to reflect on their perceptions, he hopes to create change that will advance equality among all.

“We need to talk about race. If we don’t talk about it, there won’t be any improvement.”

Borkai says he discovered his voice for discussing what many find an uncomfortable topic while at Roger Williams. His family fled war-torn Liberia after he was born, and lived in refugee camps in Ghana, West Africa, before immigrating to Providence, R.I., when Borkai was 12 years old. With that experience, and having attended urban schools in the state’s capital, he says he was exposed to people of so many races and ethnicities that differences just didn’t seem all that different to him. Arriving at RWU with a full tuition scholarship via an Intercultural Leadership Award, he began exploring issues around diversity and inclusion in courses and co-curricular activities like the Multicultural Student Union – and recognized that not everyone has had the same cultural experiences he has had.

“I gained confidence to share my voice because I was so passionate about diversity,” he said. “A lot of times it made me want to speak up.”

Borkai found the American Studies courses on race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation most appealing to him.

“Because it’s offered here, I was able to learn about these topics I’m very interested in,” he said, noting that Professor Laura D’Amore’s enthusiastic discourse on these subjects and her fearless contention of potentially offensive beliefs expressed in class served as his inspiration to become an advocate for social justice. “You can’t help but love her classes,” he added.

Graduating on May 17 as the recipient of two prestigious University awards – a President’s Core Values Medallion and the Melisa Carrasquillo Intercultural Citizenship Award for a student who has increased awareness and expanded the civil discourse on diversity – his achievements demonstrate the verve with which he pursued this passion via several avenues. A co-president of MSU, he helped produce events aimed at talking about issues and equality, and attended summits on diversity and inclusiveness on campus. With D’Amore and a group of students, he presented a paper on how the media has the power to portray a positive representation of transgender people at a conference on popular culture in Washington, D.C. In his volunteering with African orphans and ex-convicts learning to assimilate into society, he was ardent about how the experience was just as transformative for him.

“Gaining those real-life experiences from people was even better than the classes,” he said, emphasizing that courses on “Africa in the Globalizing World” and “Race, Class and Gender in Africa” should have been hard to top for him. “But what I was reading for class was being applied directly by working with these people.”

These firsthand accounts bolstered an appreciation in Borkai of the fact that some people aren’t given the same opportunities to succeed. Asserting the importance of continuing his advocacy work after graduation, he says he’s energized to pursue this endeavor advocating for disadvantaged
adolescents within the city that has become his home.

“I’ve always been driven,” he says. “But in most cases in low-income communities, if those resources are not there, and a positive role model is not around, the children don’t know what they can do and they’re not as engaged – it hinders you from doing what you can actually do.”