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A Conversation With 2019 Student Commencement Speaker Phoebe Thaler

Phoebe Thaler '19 spoke with RWU News about the significance of being student commencement speaker, the importance of representation, community, and advocacy and her hopes for the future



May 10, 2019 | Julia Rubin

BRISTOL, R.I. – Phoebe Thaler, this year's Student Commencement Speaker, says many of her friends call her "Mom."

This is not only an endearing nickname, representing Thaler's warm and welcoming spirit, but also a reflection of the transformative impact the graduating senior has had on the RWU community.

Thaler, a political science and American studies major, has broken down barriers for future generations, particularly those with minoritized identities. Having an intersection of underrepresented identities herself, as a Jewish woman and the school's first openly transgender commencement speaker, Thaler has paved the way for others in her four years at Roger.

As the first student to change their legal name and gender on campus, Thaler has since helped her peers through this process. Not only has she provided crucial logistical support, but she has also continuously fostered community, bringing students of minoritized identities together in spaces like the

Intercultural Center and the Queer and Trans Resource and Advocacy Center.

Thaler has held many leadership positions on campus. She served as Assistant Director of P.E.A.C.E, a social justice peer mentoring program, and Vice President of the Sexuality and Gender Alliance, and a student representative for developing the University's Equity Action Plan. She worked closely with the late President Farish, sitting in on meetings and search committees, and together, they advocated for policy change.

Thaler has taken her advocacy work beyond campus to political campaigns, interning at U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin's office on Capitol Hill, and to the nonprofit world, in her work with National Center for Transgender Equality and Project Weber/RENEW.

Thaler chatted with RWU News about the significance of being student commencement speaker, the importance of representation, community, and advocacy and her hopes for the future.

What does being student commencement speaker mean to you?

It's really exciting to give the student commencement speech here, especially because it's the only major student address on campus. What's great about the process is that we were able to put our ideas out there and craft a speech. And in the next round of edits, we were chosen based on what we were putting out there in addition to all the work we've put in over our time at RWU.

Historically speaking, it's amazing that someone like me who is a woman, trans, Jewish, queer, and has disabilities, was chosen to give such a large address and represent the class at commencement. That is really positive, not only for the campus to see but for anyone else who shares those identities or other minoritized identities to feel represented and feel like it's something they can do someday.

On a more personal level – being a trans person, we sometimes question if our family is always going to be there for us and always love us. For them to be extremely proud of me for being the first person in our family to give a commencement speech is really beautiful.

Can you give us a sneak peek of your speech?

My major theme for the speech is community – how RWU cultivates community and how I found my community here.

What is a significant memory you have from your time at RWU?

One of the most powerful community experiences I had here was during fall 2018, when the federal administration discussed issuing guidance that would marginalize trans folks and at the end of the week, Jewish individuals were murdered at Tree of Life Synagogue. After, I got together with a bunch of my friends who were all Jewish, queer and/or trans, and we cooked some of our cultural food in the Intercultural Center and just had time to be with ourselves who have an intersection of identities that

were adversely impacted that week. We're a campus where we had the space to have that gathering and there were a few of us with those shared identities. It was such a powerful experience at that moment that I really needed.

What advice would you give to other students who are coming out as transgender?

The first thing I would say is you're not alone. I know how you're feeling. You're not weird or strange. The thoughts you're having are totally normal. Identify your community and the people who love you, and talk it out with them. You'll know when you're comfortable. Also, google is your friend.

What are your hopes for the future for people who have minoritized identities?

I hope that in the future not only can people with minoritized identities succeed more and have fewer daily obstacles, but also that they have the opportunity to be celebrated for who they are and affirmed for having their own community, time and space.

What are your hopes for *your* future?

I am hoping to pursue a career in human rights policy and advocacy probably at a small nonprofit. I'm looking to land in D.C. or on a campaign. Maybe get a master's or law school in the future, but I'm still weighing my options, applying to different things, and figuring it out.

When you look back on your time at Roger, what are you most proud of?

One of things that I really enjoyed while I was here was the relationship I had with the late President Farish. It's not all too often that a student gets to have a really positive, close relationship with the president. We planned events together. We advocated for things on campus. Whenever I was in a meeting with him or on a search committee, he'd always ask me my opinion and make sure my voice was being heard in the room.

When I first came out as trans during my freshmen year, the systems to support trans students were kind of in their infancy. I was the first student to use the preferred name policy during my freshman year and the first student to change their legal name and gender on campus during my junior year. I think it's really hard to forge that path but at the same time it's really amazing to see how far these systems have come. Now I'm in a mentoring position and supporting younger trans students. A lot of them call me, "Mom," which is really cute. They come to me and they're like, "this thing won't work." I'm like, "Honey. It didn't even exist before. But we'll get it fixed."

So, I'm proud of how much I've had a hand in shaping and improving these systems and making campus life better for the people who have come out after me. I think that makes the work worth it.