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The Week at Roger

4-22-2021

Local Indigenous Leaders to Co-Deliver Commencement Address at RWU, Judge Clifton to Address RWU Law Graduates

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BRISTOL, R.I. – Sagamore William Guy, chief of the Pokanoket Nation, and Lorén Spears, executive director of the Tomaquag Indigenous Museum, will jointly deliver the commencement address for the Roger Williams University Class of 2020 and Class of 2021 during a weekend of safely designed celebrations on Saturday, May 22 and Sunday, May 23. On May 21, RWU Law graduates will hear from the Hon. Edward C. Clifton.

Over these three days, RWU will confer degrees to 1,200 students in the Class of 2021, along with 168 masters, one Master of Studies in law, and 152 law candidates, and also celebrate the 1,100 graduates of the Class of 2020.

Specially designed ceremonies will feature a livestream Grad Walk, during which each student will be honored individually and have their name read as they process across the stage. Each graduate will be allowed to bring no more than two guests to campus to view their processional across the stage. Graduates will process in small groups, spaced apart and with timing spread throughout the day to ensure a safely designed ceremony; graduates and their guests will be directed to depart campus in a timely way after their individual processional.

In addition to delivering the keynote address to the Class of 2020 and the Class of 2021, Guy and Spears

will also be presented with honorary degrees. Guy, whose Pokanoket name is Po Wauipi Neimpaug (“Winds of Thunder”), is the principal chief of the Pokanoket Nation, the confederation of native peoples who first greeted the Pilgrims when they arrived in New England in 1620. He is the ninth-generation great-grandson of Po Metacom, the Pokanoket leader known to the English as King Philip. Spears is the executive director of Tomaquag Museum, an award-winning Narragansett author and artist who shares her cultural knowledge with the public through museum programs. She has written curriculum, poetry, and narratives for numerous publications.

“William Guy and Lorén Spears are doing the vital work of helping the public acknowledge and reconcile the untold stories of our past, while preserving and celebrating the Indigenous heritage of Rhode Island,” said RWU President Ioannis Miaoulis. “It is important to honor our local Indigenous leaders who reflect our institutional mission of ‘strengthening society’ through their commitment and life’s work to making Rhode Island a better place.”

Over this past year, RWU has collaborated more closely with local Indigenous leaders to honor and center the voices and history of Rhode Island’s native communities, while deepening the

university's connection to the land and its original inhabitants. To mark the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival and the signing of the first treaty between the Pokanoket Nation and the colonists last October, the university invited Guy and Spears to speak at "Indigenous in Rhode Island: Reflections on Courage and Community," an opportunity to celebrate our region's Indigenous communities, gain critical perspective on the legacies of colonialism, and appreciate the enduring vitality of the original peoples of these lands.

Recently, RWU also established the Wutche Wame Living Culture Collaborative at RWU and the American Indian Law Students Association at RWU Law, and the university is collaborating with Indigenous leaders to commemorate the "Pokanoket Shell Path" on the Bristol campus, to honor and acknowledge the Pokanoket Tribe as the first people of the East Bay. Other university events, such as last Saturday's 5th Annual International Indigenous Peoples Cultural Conference and more to be offered in the future, continue to explore and celebrate the culture and history of native communities locally and globally.



Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott

Additionally, as part of the Class of 2021 ceremony, RWU will present an honorary degree to Rhode Island Department of Health Director, Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott, who has executed the state's public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic and kept the public calm and well-informed. Dr. Alexander-Scott, who has served as the state's Director of Health since 2015, provided critical COVID testing support to institutions across Rhode Island and guided university reopening efforts, meeting regularly with all higher education leaders and partners to navigate health and safety for campus and surrounding communities during a constantly shifting situation.

Prior to RIDOH, Dr. Alexander-Scott has worked in infectious diseases for children and adults, and as an associate professor of pediatrics, medicine, and public health. She holds an M.D. from SUNY Upstate Medical University, an M.P.H. from Brown University, and B.S. in human development and family studies

from Cornell University. She completed a combined internal medicine-pediatrics residency at SUNY Stony Brook University Hospital and a four-year combined fellowship in adult and pediatric infectious diseases at Brown University. Dr. Alexander-Scott is board-certified in Pediatrics, Internal Medicine, Pediatric Infectious Diseases, and Adult Infectious Diseases.



Lynette Labinger (left) will receive an honorary degree and Judge Edward Clifton will deliver the commencement address and receive an honorary degree as part of the RWU Law Commencement ceremony.

A day earlier, on Friday, May 21, the RWU School of Law will hold an in-person Grad Walk and virtual commencement ceremony for 153 students of the Class of 2021, as well as celebrate the graduates of the Class of 2020. The Honorable Edward C. Clifton, retired Associate Justice of the Rhode Island

Superior Court, will deliver the commencement address and receive an honorary degree. A civil rights and employment law attorney, Lynette Labinger, will also receive an honorary degree from the law school.

Throughout his over 20-year tenure on the Rhode Island Superior Court, Judge Clifton presided over both civil and criminal trials and various calendar assignments in all counties in Rhode Island. In addition to presiding over his regular trial calendar, he was assigned to preside over the “Adult Drug Court” in Providence County, the first adult drug court for the state of Rhode Island. He retired from the Superior Court in June 2015.

Following his active-duty service from 1966-1968 in the United States Army, Judge Clifton began his career as an attorney in Providence, appointed as a Reginald Heber Smith Fellow at Rhode Island Legal Services, Inc. He has also been appointed as staff attorney to the Rhode Island Public Defender’s office and as City Solicitor for the City of Providence, in addition to entering the private practice of law. He has served as a member of the Rhode Island Supreme Court’s Permanent Committee on Women & Minorities and as chairman of the Employment Subcommittee. He currently serves as a volunteer mediator for the Supreme Court Appellate Mediation Program and as a member of the Committee on

Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Rhode Island Courts.

Judge Clifton was a Distinguished Jurist in Residence faculty member at Roger Williams University School of Law from September 2015 until 2018.

Lynette Labinger has led a distinguished career championing constitutional and civil rights litigation throughout her many years of private practice and, since 2018, limiting her practice to cases sponsored by the ACLU. She has served as trial and appellate counsel in a wide range of high-profile civil rights cases involving discrimination based on race, gender, age, and disability, reproductive rights and First Amendment rights. Notably, she represented the plaintiff class in the landmark Title IX sex discrimination case challenging the treatment of women athletes at Brown University (*Cohen v. Brown University*). From 2004 to 2019, she served first as an Associate and later as Chief Judge of the Housing Court of the City of Providence. She has received numerous honors for her civil rights advocacy, including recognition in 2019 by the Roger Williams University Law Review as “Gender Equity Champion.”

“Judge Clifton and Lynette Labinger have dedicated their careers to working to promoting justice and fairness for all people in Rhode Island, especially

those most in need of support and assistance,” said RWU School of Law Dean Gregory Bowman. “They have made an enormous difference for so many people, and we are very proud to honor them at commencement this year.”

RWU will be presenting in-person Grad Walks with virtual ceremonies for each of the commencement ceremonies. The Grad Walks will be livestreamed during the day of the ceremonies. Graduates will be allowed to bring no more than two guests to watch their processional, and then will immediately depart campus.

Due to Covid restrictions, RWU’s commencement ceremonies will not be open to the public and media will not be allowed on campus.

Each ceremony and livestream Grad Walk will be available for viewing on the university’s Commencement website at <https://www.rwu.edu/academics/commencement>

The RWU Class of 2021 commencement ceremony will include a livestream of their Grad Walk on Saturday, May 22, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The RWU Class of 2020 commencement ceremony will include a livestream of their Grad Walk, starting at 9 a.m. on Sunday, May 23.

RWU Law will present a livestream Grad Walk, starting at 12:30 p.m. on Friday, May 21. A virtual commencement ceremony will be held later that day at 5 p.m.