

Roger Williams University

DOCS@RWU

---

Featured News Story

The Week at Roger

---

5-13-2021

## Student Commencement Speaker Wants to Celebrate Resilience of Class of '21

Anna Cohen

Follow this and additional works at: [https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger\\_featured\\_news](https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news)



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

BRISTOL, R.I. – We spoke with 2021 Student Commencement Speaker Shannon DeFranza '21, an Architecture major from Oceanside, N.Y., while she was painting a watercolor of one of her favorite RWU memories: the sunrise as seen from the Sailing Center.

“The tiny little moments that don’t seem that significant are probably the moments I will remember most after I graduate,” said DeFranza. “All those little things, like going to the Sailing Center to see the sunrise with your friends after you’ve worked all night.”

DeFranza’s small, meaningful moments added up to a robust college experience, full of connection and involvement.

DeFranza recently posted an installation in the COVID testing center supporting imprisoned scholar Ahmadreza Djalai as part of her participation in [Scholars In Prison RWU](#), a collaboration between the RWU Advocacy Seminar and [Scholars at Risk](#) on behalf of imprisoned or detained scholars worldwide. She used architectural design principles to place tickers and posters about Djalai in the space, considering how people use the space and where they are most likely to look.

“We've had more people follow our [Instagram](#) to keep up with what we've been doing to support imprisoned scholars now that the installation is up,” said DeFranza.

She participated in the [Hawkettes Dance Team](#) and [Dance Club](#) since her first year at RWU, finding the support of a team and an outlet for her passion for dance. She was one of the student coordinators for the Sustainability Capstone Class at the [2021 Student Academics and Honors Showcase](#), and contributed to strategic planning for sustainability on campus.

After graduation, DeFranza will continue her involvement with the [American Institute of Architecture Students](#) (AIAS,) which she joined as a freshman. While at RWU, DeFranza sat on the Board of Directors for the AIAS as the Northeast Quadrant Director, and was elected to be the next National Vice President of the nonprofit. She will travel to Washington, D.C., to carry out this role.

“I would really like to thank my family, my friends, and my professors for believing in me, especially when I didn't believe in myself,” she said.

Defranza shared her thoughts on her time at RWU and her role as the Student Commencement Speaker.

How does it feel to be chosen as the Student Commencement Speaker?

It was honestly very unexpected. John King called me and did a little fake-out. He said, “Oh, well, unfortunately, there’s only one person who can get it, and we had some really great people, but the good news is, it’s you!”

It is quite an honor. I really value having this experience and I’m happy that I was chosen to share some of the messages I have for the class.

What made you want to apply for the role?

I wouldn’t have applied if I didn’t feel I had something to say. I think the experiences that our class has gone through and the resiliency of our class really needs to be highlighted, as well as a lot of the challenges our class will face going into the future.

Our class deserves to be celebrated. We are very resilient. We have grown and learned how to communicate and band together as a community. We followed testing and social distancing guidelines to allow us to have our senior year, either in-person or online. I wanted to really celebrate what we’ve gone through, and motivate us to face what is coming next.

How do you feel about having a COVID-conscious graduation?

I can't even describe how amazing it felt to see the email that two guests can come to Commencement and be with us. Those guests that each of us are bringing are probably the reason why we even got to this point.

The fact that the school made that possible is really awesome. Everybody wears their mask and goes to the testing center. I think if that wasn't agreed upon, it would be a much more anxiety-inducing environment on campus. I'm really glad that we don't have that situation at Roger.

What was your creative process for writing your speech?

I started off with a bunch of ideas and experiences at Roger that made me who I am, and then I started crafting and weaving them all together in a way that made sense. After my first round, I got feedback and was able to really work on the message. My mom is a writing teacher, so she proofread my speech, which was a really nice bonding moment for the two of us. Now, I'm working with my professors on clarity and delivery. I am always supported here and they want me to do my best on this.

I'm recording the speech ... It's a little weird that I'm not able to give it in person to the class of 2021, but I'm so glad for the opportunity to do all of this.

How did RWU help you grow?

A Liberal Arts education teaches you how to think, not what to think. The critical inquiry that I've learned has helped me know how to progress to the next steps in my career. Roger helped me learn how to question the world around me and not just take things at face value, and showed me there is always room for improvement and ways to evolve.

I have great relationships with my professors and I know after graduating I'll have a strong network to turn to. The pandemic made professors go through a lot, but they jumped into virtual learning with us last spring and made sure we were supported. That support is something significant that Roger has, and I saw it even as a freshman. I didn't know we would have a pandemic, but the support that I saw available here was really great, and I knew I wanted that in my college career. I can't thank my professors enough.