

Roger Williams University

DOCS@RWU

Featured News Story

The Week at Roger

5-22-2021

RWU Graduates Urged to Create Equity, Welcome Challenges and Dream Big

Jill Rodrigues

Roger Williams University

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rodrigues, Jill, "RWU Graduates Urged to Create Equity, Welcome Challenges and Dream Big" (2021).
Featured News Story. 682.

https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news/682

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Week at Roger at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Featured News Story by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.

With graduating students ready to make their mark on the world, Narragansett author and educator Lorén Spears called on the Class of 2021 to confront injustice and effect change as they follow their passions and dreams.

When commencing the next part of their journey, Spears encouraged Roger Williams University graduates to ask themselves: “Have you ensured equity and justice for others? How can you be a bridge or catalyst for positive change? Can you be a mentor, role model, or create a pathway for those in our country or world that have been oppressed? ... How can you ensure the health, well-being, equity, and justice for all through the contributions you bring to the world?”

Spears, the executive director of Tomaquag Museum, was one of two local Indigenous leaders to co-deliver the keynote address, as Roger Williams celebrated a combined Commencement weekend on May 21 and 22, conferring approximately 993 bachelor degrees, 182 master’s degrees, 152 law degrees, one master of law studies degree, 28 associate's degrees, and 14 certificates for 2021 graduates, while also welcoming back the Class of 2020 for a Commencement celebration and one-year reunion on May 23.

“Be the change,” said Spears, urging the graduates “to bring forth beauty into the world” through their careers and lives.

Sagamore William Guy, the principal chief of the Pokanoket Nation and ninth-generation great-grandson of Po Metacom, the Pokanoket leader known to the English as King Philip, also co-delivered the keynote address. He reminded graduates that they may face adversity and setbacks in reaching their goals; but, he emphasized, “Do not ever give up on your dreams.”

“Do not let fear weaken your resolve. Challenge yourself and set goals a little higher than you think you can accomplish,” said Guy, who told graduates that ever since he became Pokanoket

Sachem he has worked relentlessly to create better lives for his tribal citizens. “If you do not like your chosen profession, do not be afraid to change. Every single one of you is unique, and you can do anything that you put your mind to. Dream big, welcome challenges, face fear, and embrace change.”

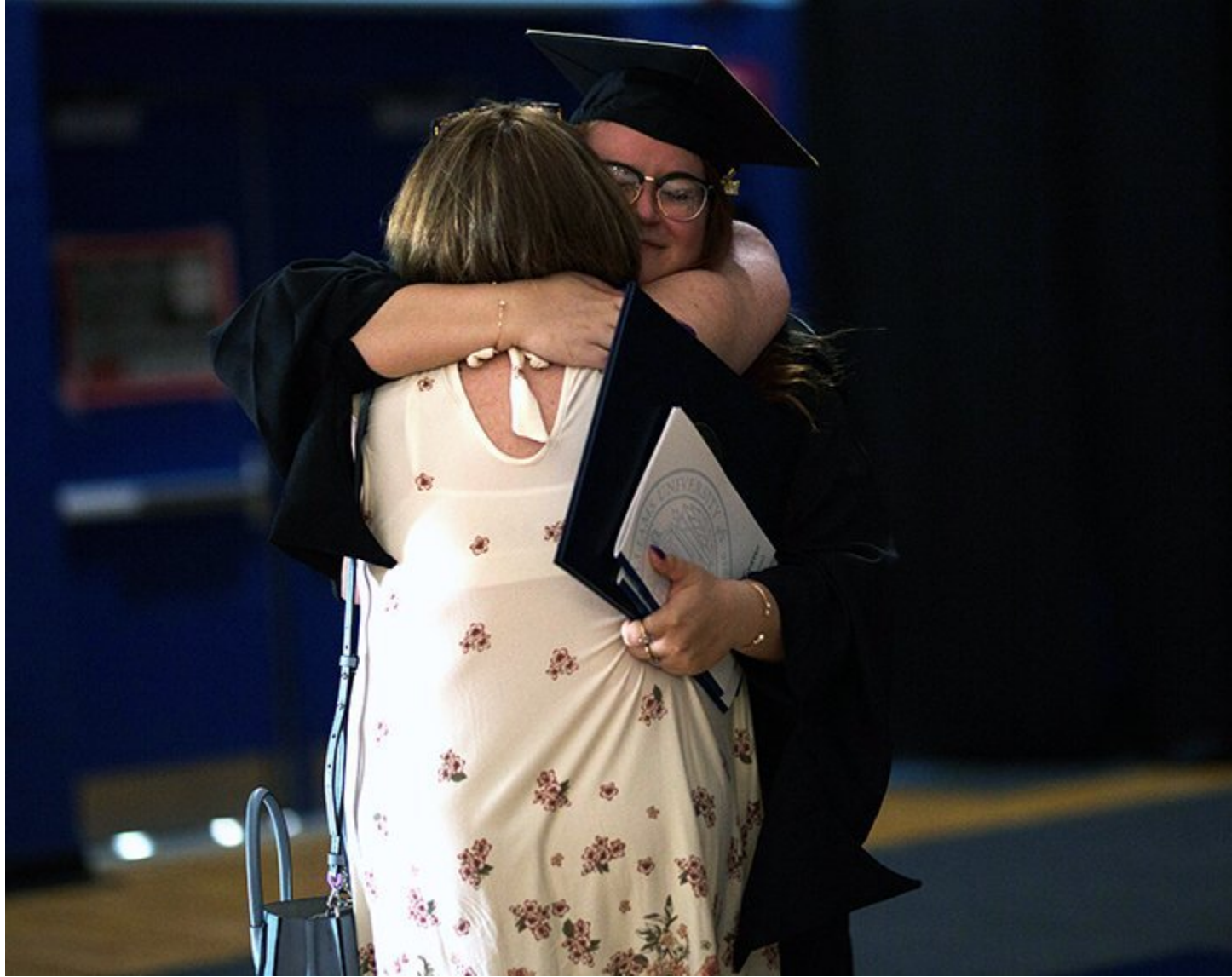
The Class of 2021 is no stranger to adversity or rising to the challenge. While they conducted innovative research and worked on projects that made a meaningful impact in our communities, they have also navigated a global pandemic with amazing care for each other and advocated for environmental justice, racial equity and accountability.

“Through a year full of personal struggles and sacrifice, you have never stopped considering the impact that your actions have on those around you. From day one, you all embraced the idea of being in this all together,” said RWU President Ioannis Miaoulis.

That is the kind of leadership, compassion and commitment needed to solve society’s complex problems and make the world a better place – and what their time at Roger Williams has instilled in them, President Miaoulis said.

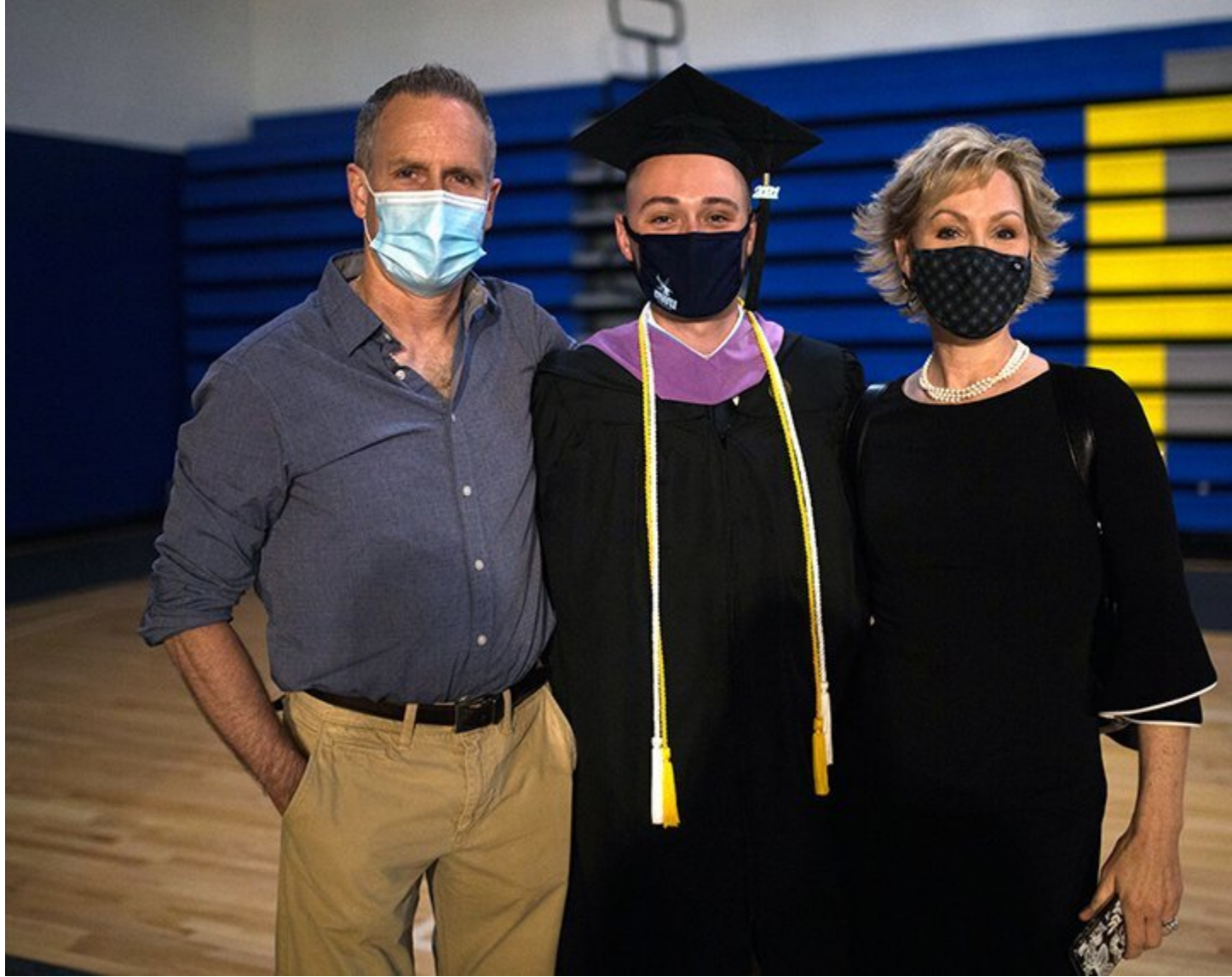
“The world needs you to think beyond yourself. A Roger Williams education is a call to do this. We need you to think about the impact of your actions on others, the impacts of a business decision on the environment, the impact of a policy on marginalized individuals,” he said. “Each choice carries significant responsibility, but you can handle it. Asking anything less of you is to diminish the importance of the roles you will play. Graduates of the Roger Williams University Class of 2021, now is your time to go forth into the world with confidence and resolve and make your mark on the world.”

Commencement 2021





























On to the
NEXT
STORY



I
CHOSE
THE
PSYCHO
PATH













































[Next](#)
[Previous](#)









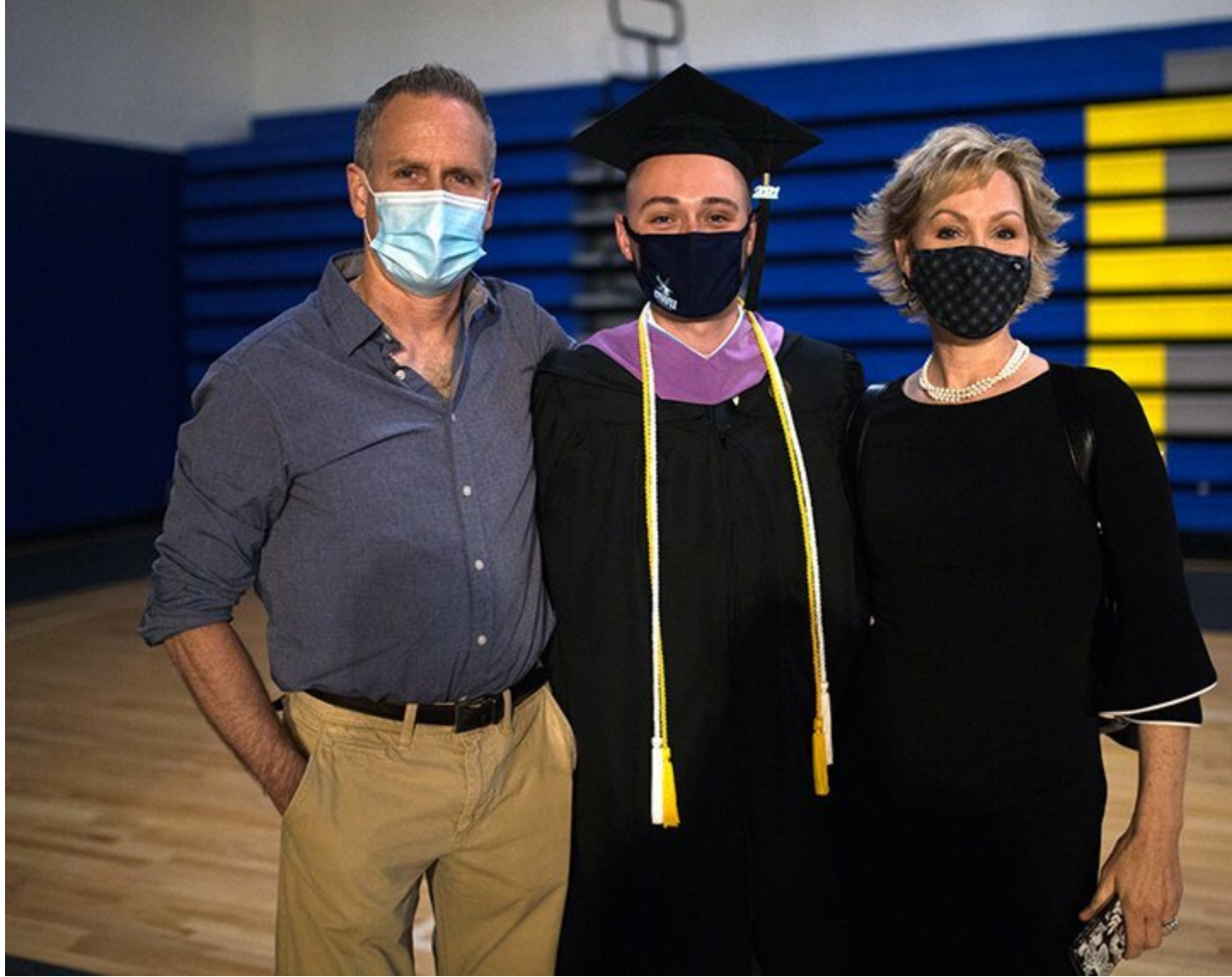
































On to the
NEXT
STORY



I
CHOSE
THE
PSYCHO
PATH



































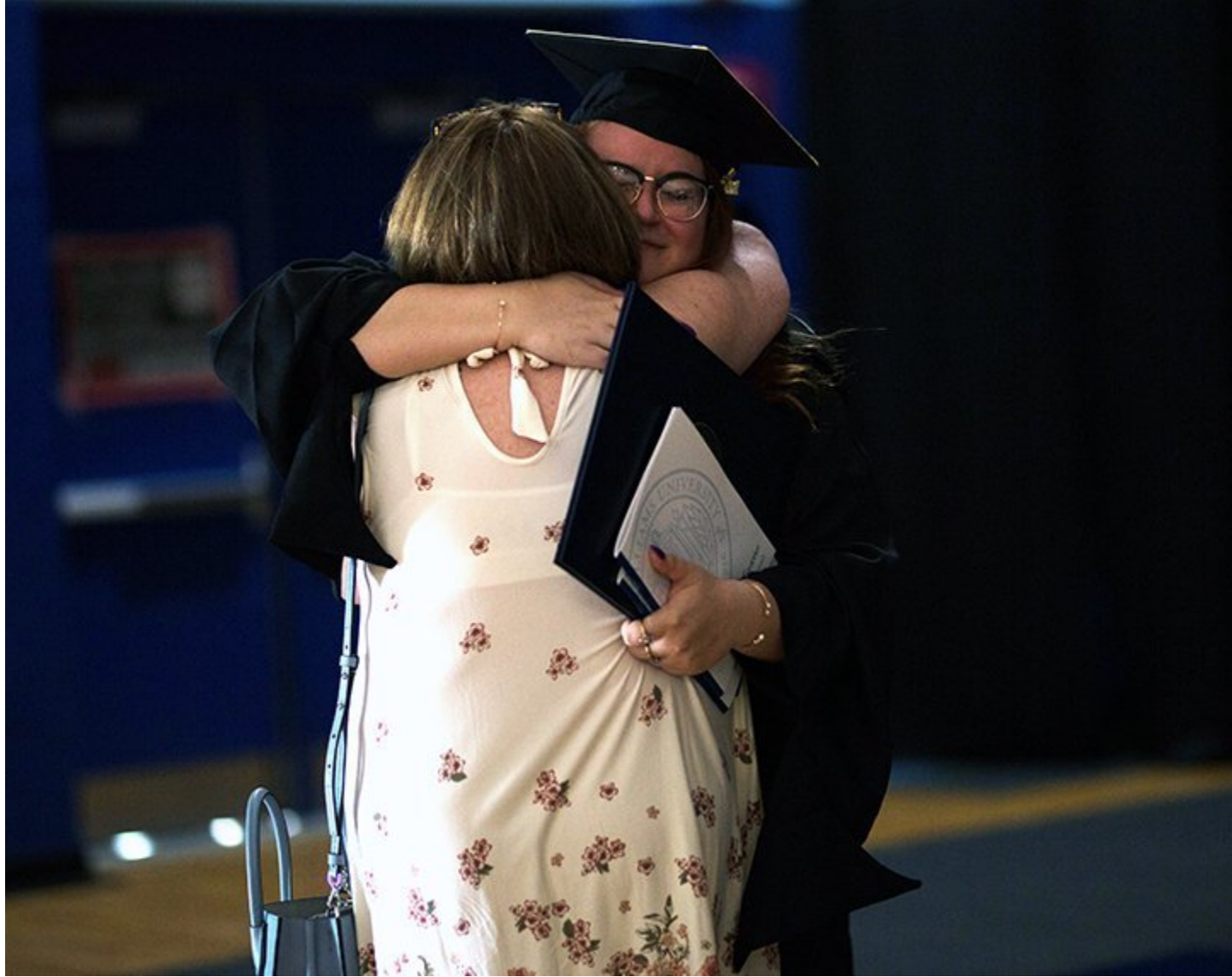






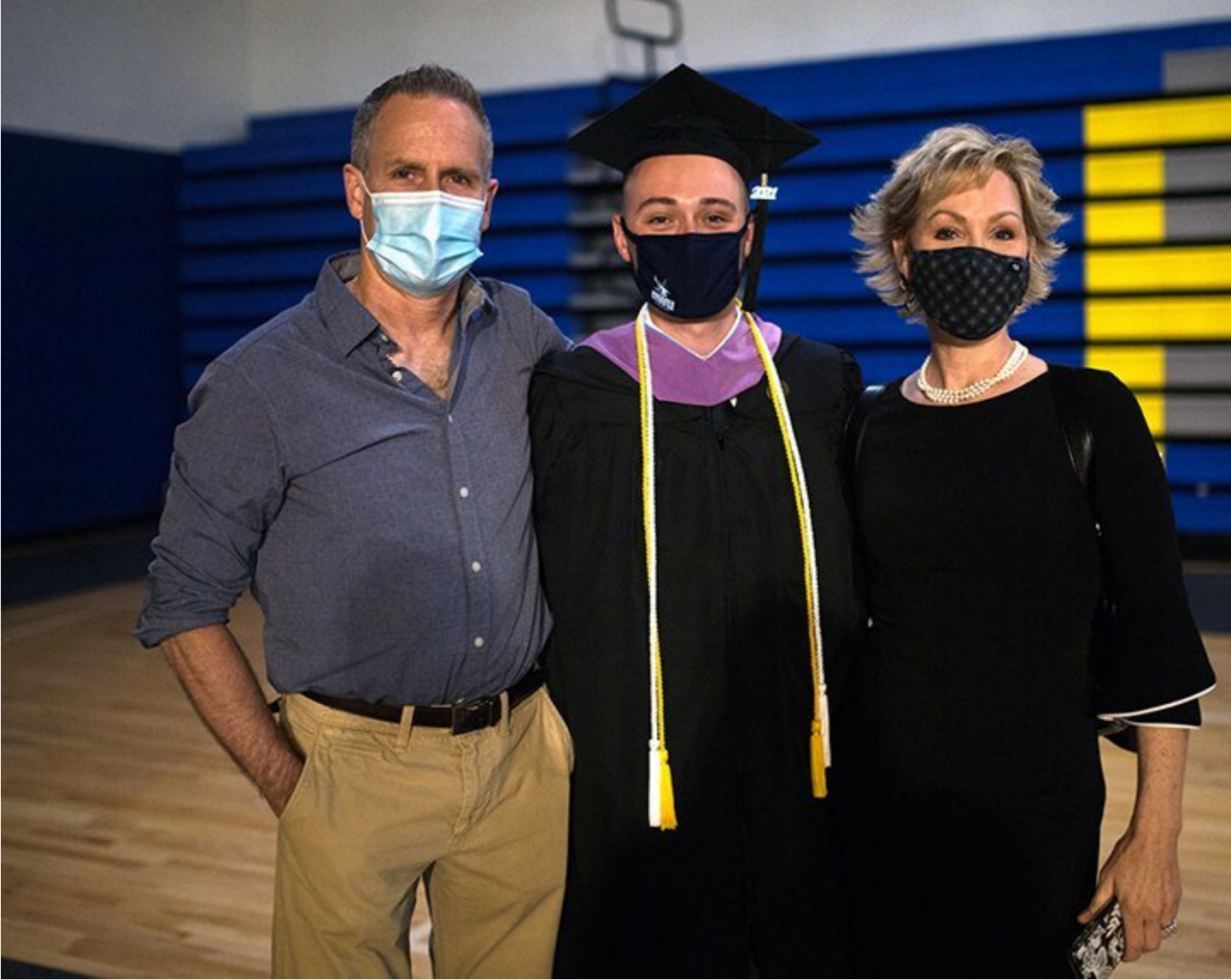
















Next

With a well-rounded and interdisciplinary liberal arts education and guided by RWU's core values of "engagement, experience, inclusivity, innovation and transformation," the graduates are well equipped to become the leaders the world needs, according to student commencement speaker [Shannon DeFranza '21](#), an architecture major from Oceanside, N.Y.

"Roger has transformed me into the leader I am today. I had the opportunity to lead my Sustainability Capstone Class, working with the administration to make the campus more sustainable for

future generations, and I have worked in the larger community of architecture schools with the American Institute of Architecture Students to advocate for changes in the profession,” said DeFranza. “I, like many of us sitting here today, have been inspired by my time here at RWU to leave every place better than I found it, because we have learned how to foster our own community here.”

The Class of 2021 is marked by the resilience and growth they have experienced these last few years, DeFranza said. Their opportunities to continue to create change and to make a difference will shape their futures and the lives of others around the world. At RWU, DeFranza has advocated for international human rights through [Scholars in Prison RWU](#) and contributed to strategic planning for sustainability on campus, and will continue her involvement in creating a more equitable and inclusive profession as she serves as National Vice President Elect of the [American Institute of Architecture Students](#).

“Roger has equipped us to challenge what we think we know. However, the core values we have learned here mean nothing if we cannot follow through on them. The changes we need to make – towards sustainability, equality for all, and universal human rights – are global problems. But the power of change lies within each and every one of us, and the relationships we build together,” DeFranza urged graduates. “Leaving here today, we have the responsibility to be the people that the world needs now.

“So let us make a promise,” she continued, “to do a better job than the day before, committing to a lifelong process of learning, challenging what we think we know, and what is right. There is always room to evolve; but from now, our lives and the world we’ll help build, depend on it.”

The entire graduating Class of 2021 totaled 1,227, including undergraduate students, graduate students, and students graduating with bachelor and associate degrees and certificates from University College at RWU's Providence campus. Graduates participated in an in-person Grad Walk, processing in socially distanced groups with two guests each to receive their diplomas.

During the virtual ceremony, the University presented honorary degrees to Spears and Guy, for their lifelong work to preserve and celebrate the Indigenous heritage of Rhode Island. An honorary degree was also presented to Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott, who has served as Rhode Island Director of Health since 2015, guiding the safety and well-being of our community during the state's public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic and dedicating her career to advancing health equity for all while building more healthful and resilient communities.

One day earlier, 153 students of the [Class of 2021](#) graduated from the Roger Williams University School of Law, while also celebrating RWU Law's Class of 2020. The Honorable Edward C. Clifton – a pioneering jurist who served as an Associate Justice on the Rhode Island Superior Court for more than 20 years, before retiring in 2015– received an honorary degree and delivered the keynote address, telling graduates to “advocate for causes that you firmly believe in” and “educate where you can make a difference.”

“You may find yourself in the midst of a controversy that causes you a dilemma – your ethical concerns versus other considerations,” Clifton said. “Continue to be mindful of maintaining your good character. Take on the challenges [where] your career takes you. Advocate for causes that you firmly believe in. Defend individuals, businesses or causes that you determine are entitled to your professionalism. Educate where you conclude

that you can make a difference. Do all of this work, but remember: how you do it will determine your fate.”

During the celebration, the law school also presented an honorary degree to Lynette Labinger, a highly regarded constitutional and civil rights attorney based in Providence.

On Sunday, May 23, RWU will celebrate the 1,100 graduates of the Class of 2020 during Commencement weekend. As their one-year reunion, the alumni will be welcomed back with a reception with President Miaoulis, academic leaders and faculty, and have their own in-person Grad Walk and virtual Commencement celebration.