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Michelle Choate

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Law School News

‘To Empower and Amplify LGBTQ+ Voices’

While studying at RWU Law, 3L Dalton Maldonado has had many eye-opening experiences—not least the distinction of creating a new holiday: “Friendsgiving”.

September 16, 2022 | Michelle Choate



Congressman David Cicilline (D-R.I.) joined Dalton Maldonado and other RWU Law students for Friendsgiving 2021.

As president of the Alliance, RWU Law’s LGBTQ+ student organization, 3L Dalton Maldonado had the distinction of creating a new holiday of sorts. “Friendsgiving”, as it’s known, is a Thanksgiving feast that provides a place of acceptance and belonging for LGBTQ+ law students who are not able to go home for the holiday—especially those who have been rejected by their families after coming out.

“Friendsgiving is now an annual event organized by the Alliance,” Maldonado said. “The school gave us the support and resources to come together for a wonderful meal and to build a chosen family.”

Maldonado’s deep commitment to improving life for all members of the LGBTQ+ community is what brought him to law school in the first place—and to RWU Law specifically.

The school’s social justice focus and its fostering of diversity was exactly what I was looking for,” he said. “I grew up in rural Kentucky, where there was no LGBTQ+ representation and I felt like I did not have a voice. I wanted to make sure that no one had to feel like that again, and I decided to go to law school to help empower and amplify other LGBTQ+ voices.”



Dalton Maldonado '22

His work with the LGBTQ Alliance is just one of the ways in which Maldonado is using his law school education to achieve those goals. He also interns with the Rhode Island Center for Justice on The Queer Project, which works on a range of issues at the intersection of LGBTQ+ and criminal justice in Rhode Island. As an intern, Maldonado conducts legal research and does writing in support of LGBTQ+ individuals, advocating for criminal justice reform and improved access to housing and social support outside of prison, as well as improved conditions of confinement inside. In addition, he participated in alternative winter and spring breaks, where he worked with the West Palm Beach Public Defenders Office and the Brooklyn Legal Aid Office, respectively, followed by an internship with the Rhode Island Center for Justice.

Presently at work in RWU Law's Criminal Law Clinic, Maldonado said he is "learning a lot about the court system here in Rhode Island under the supervision of Professor Andy Horwitz." A member of the Moot Court Board last semester, he is also "mentoring a student who is participating this semester."

Hands-on, real world experiences like these are among the things Maldonado appreciates most about his time at RWU Law.

"It's not just learning in the classroom," he explained. "I was given all of these opportunities to explore areas that are of great personal importance to me and figure out what my optimal career path is."

Through his own experiences and what he has learned throughout law school, Maldonado is determined to focus his work on younger people in the LGBTQ+ community, because they are often disenfranchised, lacking the power, understanding, and support they need to gain independence and have access to fair treatment in the justice system. He also believes that change has to start by combating the internal homophobia many LGBTQ+ youth develop as a result of parental rejection and bullying.

"I think focusing on young people will help prevent them from developing a sense of shame and powerlessness, Maldonado explained. "After coming out, I felt what it was like not to have the support of people around me; however, I made it through college and am finishing law school. I want to be that representation that I needed to show LGBTQ young people they have an example of someone to look up to and be an example of what is possible, to prove to them that it gets better."

When he graduates in December 2022, Maldonado plans to go into criminal defense, while remaining as an active advocate for underrepresented minorities, indigenous peoples, and the LGBTQ+ community.

"Whether it's with a firm or as a public defender, I want to be able to help people who other people might not understand in the way I can," he said. "I feel that's a way to give back, and to be an active advocate on the law side."