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Newsroom: A 'Rising Tide' of Educational Opportunity 9/8/2016

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Newsroom

September 8, 2016

A 'Rising Tide' of Educational Opportunity

With a new campus and a revolutionary focus on Providence's neediest residents, RWU aims to reinvigorate the workforce – and maybe even the economy



PROVIDENCE, Sept. 8, 2016 – At a ribbon-cutting ceremony formally opening its new downtown campus, Roger Williams University showcased the school's growing impact on the city's social and economic fabric – from helping ex-convicts reintegrate into their communities, to delivering college credits to inner-city high school students, to keeping the lights on for poor families in medical distress.

"It's a new model – a private university with a public purpose," said RWU President Donald J. Farish.

"We're deliberately focusing on increasing the educational success of people less fortunately positioned in the income spectrum."

This approach, Farish said, involves providing a new kind of student – the sort often overlooked in the traditional model of leafy suburban residential campuses – with the skills necessary to obtain a well-paying job and contribute productively to the city and state economy.

A number of the school's success stories shared their experiences at Thursday's event:

- Despite a daunting array of personal obstacles, **Kelia Bravo** secured her future by earning a bachelor's degree in Community Development through RWU's School of Continuing Studies, and was awarded the President's Core Values Medallion for her inspiring efforts.
- **Kobi Dennis** is the founder of Unified Solutions, which is dedicated to getting urban youths off the streets and into classrooms. In collaboration with School of Continuing Studies, Unified has established an incubator program at Roger Williams' Providence campus, which will further expand RWU's ability to reach growing urban communities.
- **Curtis Pouliot-Alvarez**, an RWU Law grad and a staff attorney with the Rhode Island Center for Justice, recently brought a class-action lawsuit against National Grid for shutting off the utilities of customers with medical issues or life-sustaining medical equipment.
- Fifteen-year-old **Ruben Rodriguez** has already made a name for himself as a youth leader and community advocate in his Providence neighborhood. Now, as he enters his sophomore year at Juanita Sanchez High School, he's earning college credits through RWU's Community Development Program.
- **Samantha Slack** of the Rhode Island Public Defender's Office found her calling through working in RWU Law's Criminal Defense Clinic, which in turn influenced her decision to help the powerless by becoming a public defender, her ability to obtain a position in the field and her continuing in that role.
- **Justin Thomas** rose above a poor life decision that resulted in his serving three years of a six-year sentence for robbery. He did so through RWU's School of Continuing Studies and its new *Pivot the Hustle* program, a results-oriented educational initiative managed by RWU in partnership with the R.I. Department of Corrections.

"We're building the kind of university the world needs now," Farish said. "Too many people are being left at the starting gate, because education is not equally accessible to everyone -- and this is a huge problem, not just for Rhode Island but for our nation as a whole."

One vehicle for confronting the crisis is the variety of programs available through RWU's School of Continuing Studies, said Dean Jamie Scurry.

"We are all about meeting the students where they are – creating programs with dozens of urban and corporate partners developing customized education and training for Rhode Island's future workforce," Scurry said. "Our program provides services that students need – for example, enabling active-duty military to participate in classes online from any point around the world; or providing credits toward degree completion and certificate programs for inmates serving at the ACI."

The Providence facility is also home to RWU Law's Experiential Campus, housing clinics for the state's only law school and providing free services to those in need. Resources include the school's own Criminal Defense, Immigration, Business Start Up, Veteran's Benefits Appeal clinics, as well as organizations such as the Pro Bono Collaborative and the Rhode Island Center for Justice.

In addition, RWU will use its new space in Providence to cultivate its service mission, partnering with and housing a diverse cadre of non-profit organizations such as Grow Smart RI, the Latino Policy Institution, Housing Works RI and the Rhode Island Center for Justice to name a few, as well to serving as an incubator for community development programming models such as Unified Solutions.

The school's "new facilities really do speak to RWU's renewed commitment, both to the city and to the State of Rhode Island," said Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea, in the latest edition of *RWU Law Magazine*. "I think you've only hit the tip of the iceberg in terms of people's recognition and understanding of the value that RWU provides to this state as a whole. Having you here in the capital city, being seen in the various governmental agencies, having the community be able to access you more easily – I'm very excited about it."