



GREAT GRADS
CCNY
2021

The City College
of New York



Meet some of the remarkable people in The City College of New York's Class of 2021. In this era of COVID-19, the world has changed in unprecedented ways and City College's students have finished this academic year knowing that their experiences will be shared for generations to come.

The students chosen for this year's Great Grads excel in the classroom, inspire us with their personal stories, and illustrate the transformative power of the City experience. They were nominated by their CCNY mentors and represent all schools and divisions of the college.

Among them are graduates poised to make great contributions in fields as varied as structural engineering, early childhood education, law, medicine and design. They've faced and prevailed against challenges including healthcare disparities, foster care and developmental disorders on the path to becoming public servants, policy makers and teachers for change.

www.ccnycuny.edu/greatgrads2021 | Click [here](#) to hear from some of our 2021 Great Grads.



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PEACE ASUMADU

BS, BIOLOGY
DIVISION OF SCIENCE
SEEK SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Peace Asumadu grew up in a rural area in Ghana, where healthcare was largely inaccessible and expensive. This, along with the influence of her grandfather, a traditional physician, motivated her to study science and medicine as a way to provide healthcare to underserved communities.

When she arrived in the US in 2014, Asumadu enrolled in a nursing program at Curtis High School in Staten Island and eventually found employment as a licensed practical nurse. While enrolled at The City College of New York, she continued to work part time as a nurse and contributed her time to help other students as a tutor and mentor.

"I am particularly grateful to the SEEK program at CCNY for its influence on my professional development," she said. "As a SEEK tutor and peer mentor, I developed professional skills while working with the SEEK staff and faculty." She credits her internship

at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center for a growing interest in medical research. In addition to being a SEEK Scholar and a City College Academy for Professional Preparation Scholar, Asumadu was president of the HOPE Worldwide Club, an America Needs You Fellow, and a participant of the Student Leadership Academy. She also received many scholarships and grants.

"With existing ethnic disparities in healthcare, evident by the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on Black and Hispanic communities, it is my calling to help improve health outcomes for these groups through medical research," she said.

After graduation, she starts the SUNY Downstate Early Medical Education Program (EME), which grants her acceptance into the SUNY Downstate College of Medicine's entering class in the fall of 2022.



AISHA FUENZALIDA BUTT

BA, ANTHROPOLOGY
THE COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

A woman of color, raised by a single mother, and a first-generation college student, Aisha Fuenzalida Butt had never been on an airplane until she was 19 years old. Now, after traveling extensively as a City College student, she is the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship to teach English in Spain, as well as being the Colin Powell School's valedictorian.

"Navigating higher education was uncharted territory," she said. But her world opened up when she took an introductory class in anthropology, in which her exposure to works of literature by Black and Latinx authors ignited her passion for social, racial and environmental justice.

Commuting two hours a day to and from Staten Island, Butt never wavered in her commitment to her studies, and to her dedication to diversity and inclusion. After

studying abroad in Costa Rica, the Galapagos Islands and Australia as a Mellon Mays Fellow, she developed an interdisciplinary independent research project that investigated the effects of environmental protections on Costa Rican communities.

After she returns from Spain, Butt will embark on a PhD program in anthropology, researching conservation and sustainability, waste and plastic pollution.

"I will forever be indebted to my family and all the wonderful people at CCNY—particularly Professors Matthew Reilly and Stanley Thangaraj—who saw potential in me, and who invested so much of their time and energy in helping me succeed," she said. "Where I am today and where I will be in the future is a result of their kindness."

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STEFANIE CAMPOS

MS, PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT STUDIES
CUNY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Stefanie L. Campos had an epiphany when she saw her first ballet performance at age eight.

"How were these beautiful people able to move like that? What muscles and bones enabled such flexibility, elasticity, and grace?" she recalled. From then on, "the anatomy of the human body caught my eye and never let it go."

The first in her family to attend college, Campos's reasons for pursuing a career in medicine are multifold, such as her quest for knowledge and the gratitude she feels for her Portuguese immigrant parents, but prominent among them is her experience growing up with a family member with cerebral palsy.

"Understanding that there are many others like him, I would love nothing more than to dedicate my time helping others live life around their disabilities," she said.

During her studies, Campos volunteered in nursing homes, helping elderly people face their illnesses in a productive manner. During clinical rotations, she worked in hospitals that served the historically underserved and the disabled—all while maintaining a full course load and continuing to conduct research, achieve multiple certifications, graduate summa cum laude, and being named the 2021 CSOM Clinical Student of the Year. In her last semester, she worked 14 hours a day, seven days a week, at Federal Emergency Management Administration COVID-19 vaccination sites.

As she prepares to enter the workforce full time as an emergency room physician's assistant, she pledged to "continue to pay it forward and help as many people as possible."



"I dream of one day running my own lab...and even teaching students in similar positions to my current one, starting their own scientific journeys."

TZIPPORA CHWAT

BS, BIOLOGY
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE

One day in 2011, Tzipora Chwat's father walked into his kitchen to find the table covered in flatworms. It was part of the eighth grader's project for her school's upcoming science fair.

"I'm pretty sure he almost had a heart attack when he found it," said the Macaulay Honors College biology major with a near-perfect 3.99 GPA. "To be fair, I was also wary of them, but it was my first chance to conduct my own scientific research."

"Since then, I have known that I want to be a biologist," she said. "I love the process of gathering my own data and interpreting it, using my prior knowledge to discover something new."

Chwat's passions for life and research manifest themselves in

several ways. Conducting research in a lab throughout her time at City College, she is a recipient of the Sharon D. Cosloy Undergraduate Scholarship in Biology, as well as being a popular tutor. Outside of the lab, she is the president of CCNY Women in Science and the president of CCNY Hillel. She is also a Gift of Life campus ambassador and a member of the Division of Science Student Council.

Next year, Chwat will attend the Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences' BCMB Allied program (Biochemistry & Structural Biology, Cell & Developmental Biology and Molecular Biology).

"I dream of one day running my own lab," she said, "and even teaching students in similar positions to my current one, starting their own scientific journeys."



ESOSA EKHATOR

MS, EDUCATION
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Esosa Ekhatore's path to the teaching profession seems preordained. The daughter of a Nigerian mother who left her when she was young to take care of family back home, and the sister of a woman with special needs, her experiences propelled her to a life of helping others.

Ekhatore started her academic career as a biology major, partly to fulfill her mother's dream of her becoming a doctor. Already working in the public school system and as a lead engineering and robotics instructor for a private company, she switched to education for graduate school, only to lose her newly-returned mother to cancer after a short illness.

That devastating event strengthened

Ekhatore's resolve to be an educator. She currently works as a student teacher at P.S. 112 in the Wakefield section of the Bronx—a school in which many students and their families face social and economic challenges.

“The most rewarding part of my reality is that I am educating children who look like me, who come from the same neighborhood I grew up in, but have vastly different experiences,” she said. “That fact is what encourages me to speak up for my students, to never give up on them, to go above and beyond to embrace the most difficult and broken child while still never forgetting how similar we are beneath the surface.”

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“The City College of New York has taught me how to engage, mitigate and express differences...a campus like City College facilitates programs and activities with folks from different walks of life—the path of least resistance is empathy and communication.”

MOHAMMED GUEYE

B. ARCH, ARCHITECTURE THE BERNARD & ANNE SPITZER SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

Bronx native Mohammed Gueye was inspired by The Bernard & Anne Spitzer School of Architecture’s Solar RoofPod while attending The High School for Math, Science and Engineering at The City College of New York. His inspiration led him to study architecture at City College.

He became president and treasurer of the student club CCNY Green, a collaborative, design-built effort to generate food and educate the community on food and ecological issues.

“CCNY Green maintains the RoofPod as well as the adjacent rooftop garden,” said Gueye. “As I progressed through architecture school, I admired the RoofPod for being more than a space designed for workshops, lectures, gardening, cooking and simply hanging out. I admired it for facilitating change within those who entered it.”

Gueye is an active member of the CCNY chapter of the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), the Freedom by Design Program, the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students (NOMAS) and edits the revived Spitzer School student-run journal *informality*. He has also used his hand drawing and graphic design skills to design both issues of the journal.

“The City College of New York has taught me how to engage, mitigate and express differences,” he said. “A campus like City College facilitates programs and activities with folks from different walks of life—the path of least resistance is empathy and communication.”

After graduation, Gueye will continue at his job as a furniture designer, as well as work on his short film and publication.



“After learning about FGM/C, as one who had been spared from this practice, I developed an urgency and an obligation to use my voice and actions to fight against it.”

NONYA KHEDR

BA, INTERNATIONAL STUDIES THE COLIN POWELL SCHOOL FOR CIVIC AND GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Nonya Khedr always knew that she was interested in human rights, but a particular college course inspired her to focus on issues affecting women globally. At the Zahn Innovation Center at The City College of New York, that passion was realized with the creation of her non-profit foundation SheFFA, which helps prevent Female Genital Mutilation or Cutting (FGM/C) by conducting educational advocacy workshops.

“On a visit to Egypt when I was 17, my mom and I discussed a cultural practice—FGM/C—in our Egyptian community that attempts to reduce a woman’s sexual desire, and 87 percent of women in Egypt have undergone mutilation,” said Khedr, who graduated from the Lower Manhattan Arts Academy High School. “After learning about FGM/C, as one who had been spared from this practice, I developed an urgency and an obligation to use my voice and actions to fight against it.” Through her work advocating against FGM/C, she was recognized as a Forbes Under 30 Scholar and selected to be a Clinton Global University

Fellow, where she acquired leadership skills that helped build her non-profit organization. Her work as a Colin Powell Community Engagement Fellow taught her that ending cultural practices requires grassroots organizing, but also must be eradicated through implementing policy. This led her to join the Skadden Arps Honors Program in Legal Studies.

While at CCNY, she was also part of the Colin Powell Washington D.C. Program and the Edward T. Rogowsky Internship Program in Government and Public Affairs. Khedr was president of the United Nations Association Campus Chapter and a United Nations Association Emerging Leaders Fellow.

Khedr was selected for the United Nations Association of the National Capital Fellowship and hopes to continue growing SheFFA one day working with the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme to Eliminate Female Genital Mutilation. She still has an interest in pursuing a law degree someday and aspires to elevate the status of women and minorities.



"I was focused on finding venues that would expose me to technologies that would improve people's lives."

BENJAMIN REICHMANN

BE, COMPUTER ENGINEERING
GROVE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE

As a child, Belgian-born Benjamin Reichman was often reminded of some of the medical issues that overwhelmed his family. As he grew up, helping to improve how the diagnosis and treatment process interacts with both healthy and ill people became a life goal. Admitted to the Macauley Honors College on a full scholarship, he got the opportunity to pursue this full throttle at CCNY.

"I was focused on finding venues that would expose me to technologies that would improve people's lives," Reichman said of his City College experience. The computer engineering major was particularly fascinated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) for its myriad possibilities. "Advances in the understanding of AI have potential to provide massive downstream effects for medical technologies. These experiences and realizations impel me to pursue graduate

education and enter a research career," said Reichman. That, specifically, is a PhD in Artificial Intelligence and then to seek advances in computer aided systems for improved diagnosis and medical treatment.

The Manhattan resident is graduating with a 3.99 GPA and a bushel of honors. These include: the Barry Goldwater Scholarship; the Intelligence Community Centers for Academic Excellence Fellowship; the Haratunian Scholarship, awarded by the Society of American Military Engineers; the William E. Macaulay Scholarship; and an NSF Graduate Research Fellow Honorable Mention. Reichman also lent his talent and passion to the HackCCNY Club, serving as president and co-organizing two CUNY-wide Hackathons with more than 400 students in attendance at each.



“City College, and more specifically the Center for Worker Education, has been the first time in my entire educational career that educators have taken an interest in my success.”

GABRIELLE RODRIGUEZ

**BS, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
DIVISION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AT THE
CENTER FOR WORKER EDUCATION**

Growing up in the foster care system from the age of 16 with her two younger siblings inspired Gabrielle Rodriguez to study early childhood education at The City College of New York.

Prior to City College, Rodriguez attended an out-of-state college that lacked the support and resources she needed to thrive, but this did not deter her and fueled her dream of becoming a teacher advocating for change in the foster care and education systems.

“Unfortunately, only three percent of youth in foster care graduate with a bachelor’s degree,” said the 24-year-old graduate of Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Performing Arts. “Throughout my college career, I have carried this statistic with me knowing that one day I would join the three percent, while simultaneously engaging in opportunities to advocate for additional services for youth in care.”

While at CCNY, Rodriguez received the Elena Titakis Memorial Award, which is awarded to one graduating senior who has overcome adversity and plans to work in public service, and the Samuel Wallach ‘29 Award for Educators, which is awarded to a student committed to public education, progressive teacher unionism and education with the aim of achieving social justice.

“City College, and more specifically the Center for Worker Education, has been the first time in my entire educational career that educators have taken an interest in my success,” she said. “I feel that City College has prepared me for my future career in education by connecting me with supportive and knowledgeable professionals in my field.”

Rodriguez will graduate summa cum laude with a 4.0 GPA. After graduation, she will join the 2021 cohort of Teach for America.



MATTHEW ROMANO

BA, ENGLISH
DIVISION OF HUMANITIES & THE ARTS
HONORS COLLEGE
CLASS OF 2021 VALEDICTORIAN

After a year of largely remote instruction because of the pandemic, CCNY's pick for Class of 2021 Valedictorian exemplifies overcoming challenges and striving for brilliance. Matthew Romano, 22, is graduating summa cum laude with a 3.99 GPA. He will receive a BA degree in English with a minor in education. It's the latest milestone for the honors student who has overcome the stigma of autism to excel academically.

"It was only recently that I built up the courage to start undoing the straps of the straitjacket that's both cramped and cradled me for the first 22 years of my life. It's easy to lose sight of who you are when society only tells you who you're not," said the Bronx resident of Caribbean heritage.

Romano has defied these confines to shine in and out of the classroom.

Inside, his honors have included an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Grant, three departmental English awards for literary scholarship, and The Dean's List. Outside, the future educator has taught in some of the most diverse schools in the Bronx.

Specifically, Romano is a student teacher at the renowned Bronx High School of Science, where he co-teaches ninth and 10th grade English classes designed for remote instruction.

"As a future educator and proud alumnus, I wear CCNY's motto 'to serve the children of the whole people' both on my sleeve and near my heart to remind me of my ambition and purpose in becoming a teacher: to break barriers, extend access to excellence, instill radical change, and broaden the scope of 'the whole people,'" he summed up.

"As a future educator and proud alumni, I wear CCNY's motto 'to serve the children of the whole people' both on my sleeve and near my heart to remind me of my ambition and purpose in becoming a teacher."



“As a CCNY student, I understand how vibrant a space can become if we give others an opportunity. This is what I want to do with my legal career.”

SHILPA ANN SHAJU

BA, POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE
CLASS OF 2021 SALUTATORIAN

Shilpa Ann Shaju’s eureka moment, influencing her future goals, came in a political science class in her freshman year. Asked what word appears the most in the US constitution, Shaju said “equality.” Wrong. “Property,” her professor corrected her. “I had a naïve perspective of the law until that point. I did not recognize how studying the law is an analysis of what and who a society values,” said Shaju.

She has worked hard since then, expanding her legal perspective and charting a path that takes her to the University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco this fall. She recalled learning that most clients in the legal system feel voiceless and trapped in an unfamiliar process. “I would like to pursue a legal education so that

I can be a guide specifically for immigrants who feel this way in the legal system, and an advocate for changing the immigration process,” said Shaju, born in Queens of Indian immigrant parents.

In addition to her stellar academics that have earned her a BA degree with a double major in political science and international studies, a minor in legal studies, and Class of 2021 Salutatorian distinction, she has worked as a legal assistant, focusing on immigration cases, in the Manhattan law firm of Moumita Rahman.

“As a CCNY student, I understand how vibrant a space can become if we give others an opportunity. This is what I want to do with my legal career,” said the New Hyde Park resident.



“As a queer person, I never thought someone like myself could ever make it in the conservative STEM circles I was used to seeing, but the welcoming environment at CCNY proved me wrong rather quickly.”

AIDAN SUBRAHIMOVIC

BS, PHYSICS
DIVISION OF SCIENCE
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE

Aidan Subrahimovic found their calling at 13 years old when they were introduced to “Cosmos” by Carl Sagan, which opened up their curiosity for space and the universe.

After graduating from The College of Staten Island High School for International Studies, the Macaulay Honors College student enrolled at The City College of New York, majoring in physics.

At first, imposter syndrome and the lack of queer representation throughout the lecture halls took a toll, but the 21-year-old credits perseverance and the help of professors for continuing to pursue their dream honing mathematical skills and building an understanding of the physical world.

“Within the four years I have been at CCNY, the knowledge I have gained has formulated the basis of my understanding of the natural world and will inform me throughout my career as an astrophysicist,” they said. “Also, as a queer person, I never thought

someone like myself could ever make it in the conservative STEM circles I was used to seeing, but the welcoming environment at CCNY proved me wrong rather quickly.”

Throughout Subrahimovic’s journey at CCNY, they were president of the Physics Club, research intern at the American Museum of Natural History, and joined both the Brown Dwarfs in New York City (BDNYC) research group as well as the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) Faculty and Student Team (FAST) at CUNY, where the research focus was stellar streams and populations of the Milky Way’s halo.

They got to present at the American Museum of Natural History’s Summer Student Symposium and recently published their findings in the *Astrophysical Journal*. A recent recipient of the Michio Kaku Scholarship in Theoretical Physics, Subrahimovic will attend New York University this fall to pursue a doctorate in cosmology.



“CCNY has offered me the opportunity no one in my family was afforded. It gave me an education that will enable me to provide my mother with the better life she sought when she left everything behind in Ecuador.”

MICHAEL VERA

BE, CIVIL ENGINEERING
GROVE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

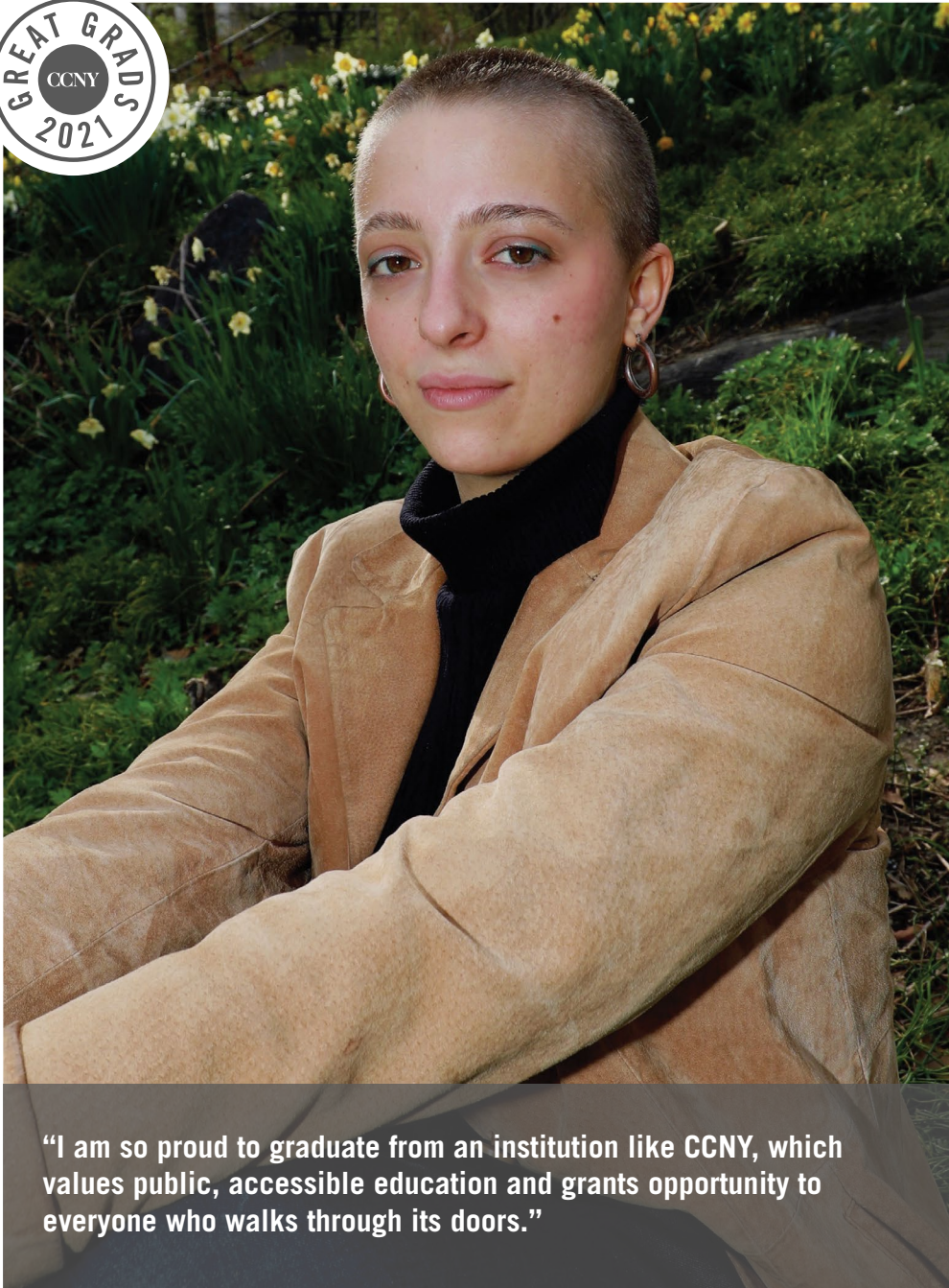
His story echoes that of generations of students—immigrants, economically disadvantaged, and the first in their family to earn a college education—who left a mark on City College. Driven by a desire to provide his single mother with the better life she sought when she left Ecuador, Michael Vera put in four years of rigorous studying while working more than 20 hours a week.

The outcome is described by Vera’s mentor, Associate Professor of Civil Engineering Naresh Devineni, as an “incredible journey defined by hard work and success.” Vera graduated magna cum laude from the Grove School with a BE in civil engineering, #1 in his class and with numerous honors. National accolades such as the National Association of Minority Contractors Scholarship and

the Deep Foundation Institute’s Educational Trust Scholarship have been punctuated by a coveted GEM Fellowship this spring.

Already accepted to several top graduate schools including Stanford and Columbia, the GEM Fellowship offers funding for a master’s program in structural engineering at NYU. In addition to his academic prowess, Vera has been lauded for giving back to CCNY. This includes tutoring SEEK students in math and engineering related courses.

“CCNY has offered me the opportunity no one in my family was afforded. It gave me an education that will enable me to provide my mother with the better life she sought when she left everything behind in Ecuador,” said the Queens resident.



LORETTA VIOLANTE

BA, STUDIO ARTS
DIVISION OF HUMANITIES & THE ARTS
MACAULAY HONORS COLLEGE

For Macaulay Honors graduate Loretta Violante, City College not only offered her access to the quality education it is renowned for, but also nearly six months of study abroad experience in South Korea as a sophomore on her path to a promising art career. Spending the summer of 2019 in Busan, studying Korean in an immersion program on a US Department of State Critical Language Scholarship, was the perfect segue to a fall semester spent at Hongik University in Seoul.

“My ability to communicate in Korean was essential for my artistic studies at Hongik University, which I conducted through a Connor Study Abroad Fellowship from the CCNY Art Department,” said Violante. While there, she studied

marble sculpture and traditional Korean woodcut techniques, among other studio art practices.

The Croton-on-Hudson resident, whose academic focus was printmaking and sculpture, also received the Connor Merit Award and the Provost’s Prize in Art. She minored in women’s studies, which dovetails with her passion for issues revolving around equity and justice.

“I am so proud to graduate from an institution like CCNY, which values public, accessible education and grants opportunity to everyone who walks through its doors,” said Violante. “As I graduate, I am confident that the connections that I have established here will remain with me for life.”

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