

Commencement 2023
May 16, 2023

Welcome to our superb 2023 graduates, your adoring families and friends, and of course our devoted Rutgers-Newark family -- our faculty, staff, university leaders, and community partners – all of whom have mattered and continue to matter in your success. My dear graduates, we all bring you heartfelt congratulations for you have succeeded here and you will continue to shine as you go out and change this world for the better.

Educational excellence at Rutgers-Newark is built on the diverse lived experiences you all bring to our collective table, and we never want you or us to forget that foundation. To say it simply, Rutgers-Newark graduates, you know where you come from, where you began the journey, and as you build on that strength, never miss the opportunity to circle back both to re-energize your personal path forward and to pay homage, back at home.

That mix of forward-thinking and rootedness is in your DNA. Just listen to some snippets of the lived experiences and lives going forward of some of you here today, and hear in your stories how personal growth simultaneously changed you and yet kept you linked to home, even as home itself may shift in substantive ways, and new homes are born again in new geographies.

Listen first to Giovanna (Gia) Bialoglowka describe her journey:

“Born in Brasil, my family emigrated when I was a toddler. I moved around as a child and finally settled in Newark in 2010. My life as an immigrant woman has been marked by challenges and they each pushed me to pursue a career blending advocacy, social work, education, and agriculture.”

Gia is a member of our BOLD Women’s Leadership Network, and bold she is, moving between worlds from a very young age, she clearly knows how to take journeys, travelling with our Global Initiatives and Experiential Learning colleagues to Krocka farms in the dead of a New Hampshire wilderness winter, and then, as we see so often and so upliftingly here at Rutgers-Newark, circling back home to work, in Gia’s case, at the Urban Agriculture Cooperative, because, in her own words: “sustaining local agriculture is so powerful in fortifying our communities.” And, in my words, education is about new directions fortifying oneself, one’s home, and all of us, as Gia is and will be doing going forward.

I want to pause on the notion of fortifying spaces and communities, as so many of the stories of our graduates here today revolve around their willingness and courage to create safe spaces that fortify them to venture forward. That is just what Tenille Grant did right as she started here at RBS in the summer of 2020, when, as she described: “we faced a wave of civil unrest as innocent Black men and women were murdered for all the world to see.” Not content to be alone in that moment, Tenille says: “I felt the need to create a safe place where my friends, classmates, and I could have conversations. Our first conversation was only to be an hour over Zoom; however, my friends and I were on fire.” “These conversations, even though they were incredibly serious, made me smile. I felt like I had a place to embrace my thoughts while being surrounded by beautiful minds that supported one another.”

Tenille’s experience reverberates as we consider the words of Rakesh (Rocky) Manghani, who started the “Rutgers Gaming Club” in 2019, now the second largest student organization on campus: he says of this space he invented: “Creating a sense of community has been my proudest moment at RU-N... It wasn’t about the games we played it was about the bonds we formed.” Rutgers Newark, he says: “is not only a place, but a mindset... The mindset of Rutgers-Newark is a sense of embrace and pride within ourselves and each other.”

Wonderfully, our faculty also strive to create those spaces of embrace – as Lydia Rentas-Santiago described: “Through my highs and lows as a single mom of four young boys, an experience I will never forget is how incredible professors allowed my boys to sit in class. That not only helped me succeed, it afforded my boys opportunity to see their mother working toward a lifelong goal and to envision a future where they will be at the head of the classroom.”

And that inter-generational embrace is a theme repeated in the words and stories of our graduates here today. Consider the path of Adebisi Ibitoye an Honors Living Learning Community member, who was mentored at West Side High School by HLLC students in our RISE Program, and then turned herself to mentor new West Side graduates, even as she herself pursued the strenuous path of our accelerated Bachelor of Arts/Juris Doctor Program, and is walking here today as a Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society inductee and Bachelor Degree holder, while having finished her first year of Law School!

Following multiple pathways at once, as Adebisi has done, is actually a signature feature of so many of our 2023 graduates’ experiences; ones that speak so clearly to the rugged strength and resilience they bring to this educational

community. We have 50 Veterans or active duty military graduating today, amongst them is Lavar Brown, a first-generation college student, born in St. Catherine Parish, Jamaica, who emigrated to the United States, graduated from Plainfield High School, then enlisted in the US Army Reserve. Lavar enrolled here after getting that military career started, but jumped right in, maintaining a 3.966 GPA while serving as treasurer of the Rutgers Student Veteran Organization and President of Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, before being called on deployment overseas in 2020. He then returned to complete a rigorous accounting degree program, and is on his way to a full-time position as an audit associate at KPMG later this summer. Yes, that is what we mean by perseverance and building a journey that intertwines lived experience with educational progress.

Needless to say, our world doesn't make it easy to follow a straight and narrow and linear path to educational progress, and we see that nowhere better exemplified than in the lives of those that have been justice-impacted, as our NJSTEP graduates can testify today, and as they relentlessly remind the world in their advocacy for others travelling similar pathways.

In this room today, amongst others, are Ron Pierce, a veteran of the US Marines who served 30 years in prison, where he began his college career, graduating here first in 2018 with a BA in Justice Studies, now today with an MA in Criminal Justice, ready, as he has consistently been doing already, to work for his peers by joining the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson in a leadership role – and lead all of us, he will!

Or look to a fellow School of Criminal Justice graduate today, Samuel (Sammy) Quiles, who also served a 30-year prison sentence, worked upon re-entry here in our Disabilities Studies Program, finished his degree all the while living in a halfway house, and now a proud Newark resident, will graduate to a job as bilingual case manager in Newark's Office of Victim Assistance and Trauma Recovery.

They are joined here today by other fellow justice-impacted graduates, including Shannon Smith, who wants to start her own counselling practice, "The Fresh Start Program," and whose words sum it all up so beautifully. Shannon says: "If my story can just help one individual, it was worth living, even in the tremendously difficult times."

What more can we possibly imagine to inspire us all to work to spread opportunity more equitably and fairly to all of the talent right in our own backyard.

Yes, all the graduates of the class of 2023, you inspire us all to be better people, to use our education and our expertise to build better communities, and to pay it forward, as our mission at Rutgers-Newark asks us all to do.

As the late Toni Morrison intoned in a 1981 speech to the Ohio Arts Council, “If there’s a book you really want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.” Dear graduates, I so look forward to the books you will write that we so need written. Congratulations to you all and we could not be prouder of you and where you all have been, where you have come, and where you will go. Onward!

And, now, it is my honor and true pleasure to introduce an inspirational leader, a true friend, and a consummate partner who makes it possible, day in and day out, for Rutgers-Newark to live in to our commitment as an anchor institution, in and of this great city of Newark, the Honorable Ras J. Baraka, loyal son of Newark and always an educator at heart. Mayor Baraka lives and leads by building on his grounded, lived experiences, and simultaneously moves us all forward. Indeed, Newark is constantly moving forward, following his lead. Mayor Baraka...

Thank you so much, Mayor Baraka. Now it is again my true pleasure to introduce another forward-looking leader – our leader – an eminent historian who knows that there is no progress to be made without recognition of where we have come from; a scholar and president whose leadership reminds us all to remember and to forge ahead. Please join me in welcoming the guiding spirit of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, President Jonathan Holloway.