



GRACE ACADEMY

A Star of Hope in Hartford

Summer Newsletter 2021

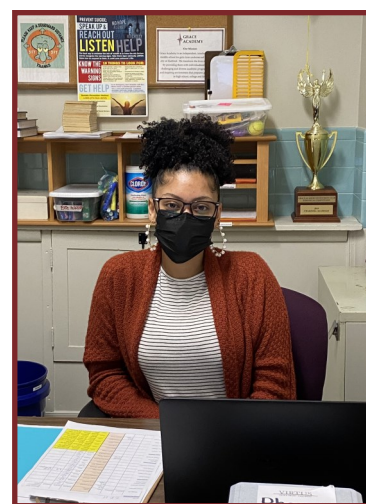
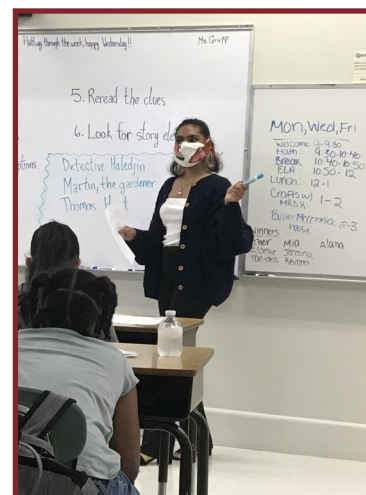
12 Years in the Making: Grace Celebrates First College Graduates

"Grace Academy will never be successful unless one of you returns to work here" is a common pronouncement that students would hear on a regular basis during our morning assembly in the early years after we opened in 2010. That same message was said often by the founder of the original Nativity school (which opened on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1971) and is repeated at many of the 70+ *NativityMiguel* model schools across the U.S. and Canada.

In June of 2013, Grace Academy sent its first class of eighth grade graduates, the Maria Sanchez class, off to high school. After actively monitoring and supporting the graduates on their journey through high school and college, we witnessed the dream we have for all of them – college graduation. Now, as Grace Academy concludes its eleventh year, our longstanding refrain of success has become a reality. This year, Grace Academy hired four graduates: two as administrative assistants when we resumed in-person classes and two as teaching assistants for the Summer Extension program. Another graduate plans to join us as an AmeriCorp VISTA this fall.

The trailblazing young women of our first few classes exemplify Grace Academy's mission in action and serve as inspiration for the students that follow in their footsteps. Learn more about the Maria Sanchez Class of 2013 and the alumnae who have come full circle to work at Grace Academy inside!

Pictured top to bottom: Jessica Hariprasad '13 teaching students during the Summer Extension Program; Ximena Franco '13 joined her fellow classmate as a teaching assistant this summer; Genesis Rodriguez '15 is one of two alumnae who have been working at the school's front desk.





Jessica Hariprasad '13, graduated from Hobart and William Smith Colleges with a BA in Education with a concentration in the Arts and Creativity -- a concentration which she developed herself with her professors. She also holds a Minor in Spanish and Hispanic Studies. Jessica was ebullient about her education at Hobart, "Oh my gosh, I learned so much!" she exclaimed, "and I was able to choose the classes I had a passion for and the professors encouraged me to branch out while supporting me the whole time." Jessica found that the small college

allowed her to make close connections with faculty and she had many opportunities to be creative with her interest in the arts while also working on service and community outreach activities. In her junior year, she studied abroad in Seville, Spain. This summer, Jessica worked at Grace Academy as a teaching assistant in the Rising Star program, preparing the rising fifth graders for their four years at Grace. In the year ahead, Jessica intends to pursue her interest in the arts by creating portraits in watercolor and colored pencil. She then plans to earn a Master's degree with a teaching certificate where she can return to the classroom to teach elementary or middle school students.

Ximena Franco '13, holds a BA in Education from Providence College (PC), where she plans to continue her education and earn a graduate degree in Global Education and TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language) and serve as a graduate assistant. Ximena, who attended PC on a nearly full scholarship, also explored business and education as potential degrees. As part of her discernment process, she did a summer internship at Stanley Black & Decker. While she enjoyed her work experience, she found the social and relational aspect of teaching to be her true passion. During her time at PC, she had direct practicum experiences in the classroom beginning in freshman year. Her coursework covered: lesson planning, pedagogy, classroom management, and much more. She brought this expertise with her when she joined Grace Academy in May to co-teach math to fifth graders through the end of the school year and then through the Summer Extension Program. Long-term, Ximena plans to return to Connecticut after her graduate studies to teach for a few years before hopefully travelling to Spain or Italy to teach overseas.





Kayla Walton '13, graduated with a BA in English from UConn where she made the Dean's List and was selected as a recipient of the Dr. Arnold T Ozra Scholarship by the UConn Hartford Scholarship Committee. Prior to her enrollment at UConn, Kayla attended Northwest Catholic where she took the advanced creative writing course and was a member of honors ACTS (A Chance to Serve). Kayla hopes to use her creativity to write a book of short stories and use her artistic talents to combine her writing with illustrations. She hopes to start selling her art and even take some commissions. Kayla tentatively plans to join Grace Academy as an AmeriCorps VISTA this fall.

More Highlights from the Class of 2013:

Ceanna Diaz is an Assistant Teacher at KinderCare. She is working to complete her Child Development Associate Certification.

Zaire Edwards started a job at Educational Playcare in West Hartford and will soon be trained in CPR.

Joeliz Gonzalez graduated from CCSU. She is employed by LEARN Regional Educational Service Center and works as the receptionist at her high school, CT River Academy. She loves the job and looks forward to becoming a teacher.

ThiRi Soe returned to UConn after a short break and is taking courses in biology and physics. She looks forward to graduating within the next two years.



Genesis Rodriguez attends Tunxis Community College and plans to graduate in 2023 with a degree in Social Work.

She was inspired by the social workers at her high school, the CREC Academy of Science and Innovation, and was motivated to choose a career path which would allow her to help many students.

She prepares the weekly parent newsletter, monitors and tracks attendance, serves as a school nurse for minor ailments, and uses her coursework to gently assist students when they need some guidance.



Kyoe Paw attends Springfield College and plans to graduate with a double major in Healthcare Management and Business in 2023.

After working the front desk at Grace Academy this spring, she accepted a summer internship at the Physical Therapy and Sports Medicine Center in West Hartford.

Summer Extension (*continued from back cover*)

Students attended our four week Summer Extension program with morning academics and afternoon activities. This year's program which ran from June 14 through July 9, was led by Shantel Hanniford, a Trinity College graduate who taught at Grace Academy for four years before moving on to teach at Achievement First and then onto Indian Mountain School in Lakeville, CT, where she teaches and serves as the Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

Shantel provided a curriculum based on a United Nations structure where world leaders from different countries and interests come together to debate, negotiate, and create an action plan for the future. Entitled *Planting Seeds: Doing what it takes to maintain Democracy*, students were divided into three academic research groups—**Access to Education, Climate Change, and Wealth Disparity**. "I intentionally incorporated a school wide Global Summit to help foster community and stretch the students' thinking on major issues facing their generation," said Shantel. They devoted three hours of Math and ELA instruction each day researching subject material related to their topic. As a capstone to their work, each team delivered oral presentations before their classmates and a team of judges on July 8. "The students blew me away with their attention to detail, willingness to engage throughout the process, collaboration with others, and their ability to take on a new persona as representatives of a reputable organization," exclaimed Shantel.

Interactive activities filled in the afternoons with guest speakers: Maria Horn, CT State Representative for the 64th District, and leaders from the Hartford Courant, NPR Thinkalong, and Hartford Girl's Achieve. Fun activities, too, included music and dancing led by RapOetry and trips to Winding Trails, the CT Science Center, and Berlin Batting Cages.



Bonding at the summer barbeque (top), Lindsey McPhee assisting with the Arts & Crafts workshop (center), team building at Winding Trails (bottom), displaying their handmade inspirational T-Shirts at the RapOetry workshop (left).

Incoming Students Get to Know Grace Academy

Rising Star, the summer preparation program for new incoming 5th and 6th graders was another success! Twenty students joined us for two weeks of in-person learning with academic instruction and fun activities. There were younger sisters, step sisters, and cousins of current Grace students, as well as many new families. The Rising Star program gives our staff a chance to meet and assess incoming students and gives the girls a chance to meet each other and learn.

In the morning, students attended Math and ELA classes, reviewing old concepts and learning new ones, played educational games, worked with partners, and completed an assessment in each subject.

Following lunch and recess, the Rising Star students enjoyed fun activities that engage the creative and physical aspects of their being. Students were introduced to circusing (juggling, spinning plates, flower sticks, tumbling) led by ARTFARM and martial arts led by the owner of United Tae Kwon Do in East Hartford. The second week included arts and crafts with students creating sunglasses using different mediums and techniques with Practically Picasso, and interactive history lessons at the historic Butler McCook House museum, a colonial home built in 1782.



Helen Keller Class of 2021 Celebrates Graduation



On June 9th we hosted our ninth graduation ceremony at Central Baptist Church. Families, staff, and a small group of Board members and supporters celebrated the Helen Keller Class of 2021 in a lovely ceremony marking the end of a one-of-a-kind school year. Over the years, these 14 students have enlivened our halls and online classrooms with their laughter, resilience, and creativity, and now they have earned their Grace Academy diploma. Grace Academy is a better place because of this group of students. The *Helen Keller Class of 2021* will attend:

Joelyhanis Davila	Northwest Catholic High School
Paw Law Eh	Suffield Academy
Gabriela Freiman	Glastonbury Agriscience
Avalese Gallard	Concord Academy
Samantha Hernandez	Watkinson School
May Htoo	Glastonbury Agriscience
Tessa Nelson	University HS of Science and Engineering
Romina Padilla	Glastonbury Agriscience
Anayaliz Rivera	Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy
Jenessie Rivera	Norwich Free Academy
Hser Paw Shee	Northwest Catholic
Eaden Stephen	Ethel Walker School
Nagima Williams	Loomis Chaffee
Shilon Williams	East Catholic High School



Rosa Parks Class of 2017: College Bound!

The *Rosa Parks* Class of 2017 graduated from high school this year and are moving into the next chapter of their lives. On July 12th the Graduate Support team hosted a small celebration for the recent graduates which included a tour of our new location and a chance to reconnect over dinner at Bear's Smokehouse on Front Street. Each girl left with a small care package filled with dorm and school supplies. The Graduate Support team will continue to mentor and support these students as they navigate college and work life.

Eden-Grace Bailey	UConn, Storrs
Neveah Bland	Central CT State University
Luciante Dulaire	Southern CT State University (TBD)
Brianna Collazo	Manchester Community College
Genesis Del Valle	University of Saint Joseph
Michelle Garcia	Asuntuck Community College
Maria Janer	Manchester Community College
Nary Oo	Boston College
Ester Paw	College of the Holy Cross
Moo Ket Po	Considering a career as a firefighter
Shui Se Phoe	Trinity College
Ivania Quintuna	Bridgewater State University
Taina Rodriguez	Emerson College
Graciela Santos	Boise State University
Eh Blut Soe	Gap Year, plans to work
Kaitlee Tellez	Gap Year; Quinnipiac or UConn in 2022-2023
Paw Say Wah	Gap Year, Plans to work



Nary Oo, a graduate of Watkinson School, will attend Boston College.



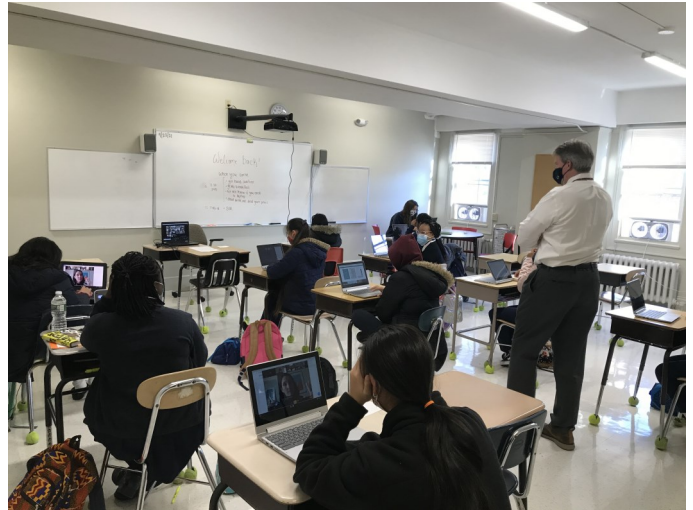
Neveah Bland, a graduate of Mercy High School, will attend Central Connecticut State University.



Teaching (and Learning) During a Pandemic

As Governor Lamont issued an executive order for all school buildings to close in an effort to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, Grace Academy quickly transitioned into fully virtual instruction for the remainder of 2020 and into 2021. This shift required our teachers and faculty to reimagine not only the classroom as we know it, but also how we provide services such as counseling, music and art lessons, and support to our graduates. Most importantly, it required us to learn how to teach, and learn, through a computer screen.

Teaching and learning via Zoom is an acquired skill. Moving in that uncharted direction required teachers, parents, and students to radically change expectations. Class sessions were shortened (one can only endure so many zoom sessions in a given day!) and verbal instructions minimized to accommodate "lagging computers," weak Wifi, and competition with household noise. Teachers also had to find ways to engage students struggling with social isolation and pandemic fears using zoom "chatroom" and "break-out session" applications as well as google classroom "stream" updates and email blasts.



English teachers came to rely upon online novels and materials (e.g. the entire 7th grade reading curriculum is now online) and discovered that "google docs" enabled them to coach and comment on student writing in real time with astonishing effectiveness. Math teachers learned to communicate vexingly detailed instructions using visual and auditory stimuli while continually reinforcing material to make sure that students did not "slip through the cracks" and "Google Slides" were used to visually direct classes and were then easily archived in google classroom for later review. Zoom also enabled the seamless introduction of YouTube clips and other online resources.

Although it was terrific to see so many students "live," a significant number remained home because of COVID concerns. Thus, teachers had to conduct "live" classes while also keeping virtual learners engaged. Live instruction was hamstrung by socially-distanced desks and mandatory face masks which made it difficult to hear, especially when classes were held in the cavernous gym or expansive cafeteria. Thankfully, these challenges were each met due, in no small part, to the heroic efforts of our AmeriCorps staff who stepped-in as "assistant teachers" corralling the virtual learnings while helping to enforce a daunting array of COVID-19 protocols for "live" students.

In April 2021 "virtual classes" were finally replaced with "all live classes" five days a week. Students still wore face masks and socially-distanced. They sat in "cohorts" that moved about during the day with frequent handwashing, mask breaks, and much needed "walks outside." Still, a sense of "normalcy" seems to have returned. With hard work and patience, the Grace Academy community met the daunting challenges of on-line learning with thoughtfulness and remarkable resilience.

Dr. James Keane leading a Socratic seminar in his seventh grade class.

By James Keane, PhD

Grace Academy Welcomes New Board Members

The Grace Academy Board of Directors recently announced the appointment of three new members. The talent and expertise of these new members and their demonstrated commitment to the mission of Grace Academy will enhance our Board. Their leadership will ensure that the educational needs of the girls whom we serve will be met for years to come.



Hillary Rockwell Cahn leads the marketing and communications department at Suffield Academy, the very institution from which she graduated. Hillary studied Environmental Science and Studio Art at the University of New Hampshire where she was also a Division 1 skier. Currently, she oversees Suffield Academy's digital and print communications and serves as the school's photographer. She also established a program and helped raise funds for a facility dedicated to mental health and mindfulness while overseeing all special events and serving as Head Coach of Suffield's league-champion alpine ski team.



Yvette Highsmith Francis has worked in the health care/social service field since 1990 and is currently a Regional Vice President at Community Health Center, Inc. (CHCI), a statewide federally qualified health center in Connecticut. Yvette has worked with CHCI for 26 years in a variety of capacities. A Martin Luther King Scholar at Long Island University, Yvette received her Master's Degree in Management from Cambridge College. She is also a graduate of the UCLA/Johnson & Johnson Health Care Executive program as well as the Connecticut Health Foundation's 2009 Health Leadership Fellows Program. She is the mother of four children and serves as Associate Faculty for the Weitzman Institute and is on the Ministerial staff at The First Cathedral in Bloomfield, CT.



Lori Groth has been with Stanley Black & Decker for over fifteen years. She is currently a divisional CIO, a position that drives global technology solutions for corporate Finance, Human Resources, Procurement, Communications and Shared Services. A Connecticut resident for her adult life, Lori holds dual BS degrees from Quinnipiac University for Computer Science and Accounting and an MS in Information Systems from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She lives in Southington with her husband and two children.

Proof of “The Power of Grace” in a pandemic

As it became clear that we would once again need to celebrate *The Power of Grace* without an in person event, the creative and caring minds of this year’s *The Power of Grace* committee, led once again by Shea Kinney, were determined to find a way to connect with our donors and supporters in an exciting and meaningful way. We enlisted the help of TJ Noel Sullivan, a Hartford-raised filmographer (who recently worked on the set of the movie *Call Jane* being filmed in the area this spring), who guided the group towards creating a series of videos highlighting the things that make Grace Academy truly powerful and unique.

The first video, “Grace-a-licious”, featured videos taken “from the vault” and featured a fun music video of students singing about what makes Grace Academy special to the tune of “Fergalicious” by Fergie. The second and third videos featured Grace Academy alumnae and highlight the impact we have on our students long after they leave middle school. Finally, we ended the campaign with a virtual tour of the new school building hosted by current students Julia Agyeman and Portia Ntem-Mensah.

Board Chair, Michael Bergin, set the example for on-line giving by inspiring his, and his wife’s, personal contacts to respond to the weekly campaign videos. Thanks to the Bergins and others who followed their lead, 155 gifts totaling \$91,572 were received from donors who did not make a gift last year. And, 113 of the 155 donors made their first gift ever to Grace Academy. The event raised over \$400,000, a major success thanks to all of Grace Academy’s constituents who responded to the campaign.



2021 *The Power of Grace* Committee

*Shea Kinney, Chair
Hope Bash
Kathy Binder
Lynne Charette
Madeline Denoncourt
Ruslana Frenkel*

*Debra Herr
Marcia Herrera
Megan Mayo
Lindsey McPhee
Gigi Moran
Marge Morrissey*

*Kristen Palombizio
Beth Papermaster
Betsey Rebello
Julie Sanderson
Heidi Steir
Gina Watson*

Grace Remains Committed to DEI Work

Grace Academy's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Leadership Team, led by teachers who care deeply about the work, has been making a difference at Grace since its founding last August. Over the course of the year, they have led heritage celebrations, such as for Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, and Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. The Black History Month celebration included a fashion show and poetry readings. The group also worked to support teacher initiatives, addressed issues that emerged, and advertise events, such as a Hartford Public Library celebration for Pride Month and a virtual New York Times interview with youth activists. The team also organized events, such as the CT Independent Middle School Student of Color Summit and our MLK Day celebration, which featured a panel with youth activists and a workshop with Connecticut House Representative, Tammy Exum.



The DEI Leadership Team also provides support and mentoring for our Student DEI Club. This work has included the facilitation of conversations around religion and inclusion (led by 7th graders for the 5th graders), the creation of a diverse book list to be added to our library, presentations at our heritage month celebrations, and the creation of a week of service around Martin Luther King, Jr. day. Julia Desmarais, a teacher and co-advisor for the Student DEI Club, said, "Seeing the students in the DEI club suggest projects they were passionate about, speak confidently in front of large groups on Zoom, and grow into their leadership skills over the course of the year was so wonderful! Not only did they develop their own skills, but they brought wonderful opportunities to their peers."

Grace Academy's faculty also started a DEI Book Club to encourage deeper learning and understanding on topics related to race in America. Books read and discussed by the group include: *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Caste*, by Isabel Wilkerson and *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique Morris.

Grace Academy board members, Christine Jean-Louis (top photo) and Jodi Hill Lilly (below) led DEI faculty workshops this year.

Grace Academy's Board of Directors and Staff remain committed to better understanding the lived experiences of our students, graduates, and their families in order to provide an inclusive and respectful learning environment for all students.

Grace Academy Board of Directors

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James Shea
Janel Simpson
Thomas M. Sliney, CFA
Matthew Fitzsimons, Ex Officio

Respect • Leadership • Courage • Hospitality • Joy • Grace

Summer Extension Program Mixes Fun and Learning



While we are proud of our success in creating a robust virtual learning program with a lot of contact with students and opportunities for more one-on-one attention this school year, we know that online learning does not deliver the academic results of in-class instruction. Our school's success is due in large part to our extended-day, -week, and -year schedule which mandates daily study hall and time for participation in clubs and sports; Saturday field trips each month; and required participation in the Summer Extension: a four-week program that combines academic instruction to combat summer learning loss and activities outside of the classroom to address the physical, emotional, and social needs of our students. Given the challenges we've faced this year, we were determined to make this year's Summer Extension program as academically and socially robust as possible in order to help students make up for lost classroom and after-school time. *Turn to page 4 to learn more about this unique program and see some highlights from this year's activities.*