

## **Downstate Commencement speaker offers grads three gifts**

6/06/15

BROOKLYN, NY (June 6, 2015) Jill Eisenhard, founder and chief executive officer of the Red Hook Initiative in Brooklyn, offered three gifts to graduates of Alfred University's Downstate programs at the annual commencement ceremony, held at 11 a.m. Saturday at St. Francis College.

Eisenhard addressed the 51 graduates who received Master of Science degrees in Counseling and the 27 who received Master of Science degrees in Literacy Teaching.

"We mark important occasions with gifts," Eisenhard said, "so today I give you three gifts: a piece of advice, a confession and an assignment."

A native of Pavilion, NY, in Western New York, Eisenhard started her career as a health educator, working with women in the Red Hook District of Brooklyn. She quickly realized that the information she had to impart would be much more effective if she trained the women themselves to teach others. She took a blank piece of paper, and outlined what she thought would be a "better model" of the health education. She fleshed out concepts, goals, timelines and strategies, and had the makings of a grant application that, in turn, led to the funding for what became the Red Hook Initiative in 2002.

The program evolved from one that focused on health education for women to an antipoverty initiative that focused on teenagers and young adults, providing not just health education, but employment and training skills.

Today the Red Hook Initiative pumps over a million dollars a year into the economy of the district and employs 110 people in an area where unemployment rates hover about 60 percent. Seventy of the employees, who work year-round, are youth leaders who develop their own programs for reaching and teaching their peers.

The focus is on helping residents to help themselves, to "create their own change," Eisenhard said.

"So my first gift is a piece of advice: Don't help others," said Eisenhard, admitting it was a strange message to offer those who had just completed master's degrees in Counseling and Literacy Education.

"Every one, every person, has something to offer," Eisenhard explained. "Allow people to empower themselves to make their own changes, to become their own change agents."

Rather than using their new degrees to help people, she suggested, "Teach people" to help themselves.

Her second gift was a confession, of sorts. "Every single day, I am faced with the reality that I don't know how to do my job," she said. "Self-doubt is something we all face. Overcoming it is the key to getting something done. The antidote, when you admit you don't know it all, is to seek advice." For her, that advice comes from board members, her staff and other colleagues.

"Build your own networks," she advised. "Every one of your classmates is a resource for you."

Her final gift was an assignment. "In the next 24 hours, find a moment alone, take a blank sheet of paper, and write on it what you are choosing for your life, what would you do if you had no fear, no barriers.... Define your dream.... And believe it is possible. Choose your path with courage and hope, and choose it powerfully."

Robert K. Meltzer, an Alfred University alumnus and member of the AU Board of Trustees for 25 years, presented Eisenhard with the Presidential Order of Merit in recognition of her accomplishments.

Recipients of the Dougherty Award, given in memory of James Dougherty, a former director of the Center for Integrated Teacher Education, Alfred University's partner in the Downstate programs, is presented each year to those

students the faculty believe have achieved significant growth during the program, explained Dr. Jay Cerio, director of the Downstate programs for AU.

This year's recipients in the Counseling program are Kadisha Alie, Patrick Claire, Lazette Moore and Kristina Uy. The Literacy program recipient is Nicole Gaines.

The supervisor of the year award was presented to Nivia Rojas, a guidance counselor in Union City High School in Union City, NJ.

Recognized as top students in the Counseling program were: Emily Cardona, Courtney Price-Hudson, Sasha Gittens, Grace Addow-Langlais, Ebony Henriquez and Kristina Uy. Those recognized for top performance in the Literacy program were January 2015 graduates Farah Kamal, Francesca Regalbuto, Melissa Troman and Victoria Rodriguez and June graduates Carla Biggs, Alexandra DeLello, Heather Loughran, Richard Lozada and Shana Malleck.

Janine Doran spoke on behalf of the Literacy graduates and Grace Addow-Langlais spoke on behalf of the Counseling graduates.

Elizabeth Reina, second vice president of the Alfred University Alumni Council, and Alfred Mancuso, an AU alumnus and member of the Downstate program faculty, inducted the new graduates into the Alfred University Alumni Association.