

Alfred University-NYC programs graduate speaks at SEIU training fund recognition ceremony
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Garfield Thomas, M.S. ◆18
speaks at the 1199 SEIU
recognition ceremony July 28
in New York City.

NEW YORK, NY – Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1199 recently held a ceremony celebrating the achievements of its members, made possible through SEIU’s Training and Employment Funds (TEF). One of the noted speakers at the event honoring TEF graduates was Garfield Thomas, who in June received a master’s degree from Alfred University through its New York City-based programs.

The June 28 ceremony at the New York Hilton in Midtown Manhattan recognized TEF graduates for their accomplishments, which include earning college undergraduate and graduate degrees; completing continuing education and certificate programs; learning new skills in the healthcare field; and achieving U.S. citizenship. SEIU’s Training and Employment Fund provides financial assistance to its members to pursue these endeavors.

Thomas, who last month received his master’s degree in mental health counseling from Alfred University, was one of just four graduates, from among 20 candidates, chosen to speak at the TEF recognition ceremony and during his speech thanked Alfred University and 1199 SEIU for the role they played in helping him pursue his educational and career goals.

Thomas studied physical education and exercise science at Brooklyn College and after graduation set a goal to pursue a graduate degree. He found work as an environmental aide at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, eventually applied for a mental health worker position, and was transferred to Zucker Hillside Hospital, where he was assigned to the geriatrics unit. “I enjoyed helping people and realized I was touching people’s lives in a powerful way,” he said.

Still wanting to further his education, Thomas learned from a colleague about the mental health counseling degree program offered through the AU-NY programs.

“I looked into it and found it was a training fund-supported master’s degree program. It was the opportunity I was looking for,” he said. “The program is hard work, but I know I have found my path. I’m excited to begin this new phase of my career.”

Thomas received his master’s in mental health counseling during commencement exercises held June 1 in Brooklyn for graduates of AU-NY programs. He thanked Alfred University and 1199 SEIU “for creating this program and giving me the opportunity of a lifetime.”

Alfred University has partnered with 1199 SEIU since the spring of 2016, developing cohorts of adult learners in master’s degree programs in mental health counseling and education counseling, and also in post-baccalaureate certificate program in patient care management.

Viviana Abreu-Hernandez, director of Research and Development Programs, Training and Upgrading Fund, for 1199 SEIU Training and Employment Funds, said 125 union members have either completed training or are currently enrolled in AU-NY programs.

Thirty-three have completed the certificate program in patient care management and 20 more are currently enrolled in the same program. There are 53 enrolled in the Master of Science program in mental health counseling. The first cohort of 32 enrolled in September 2016 and is scheduled to complete its studies this September; the other cohort of 20 will finish in September 2019. An additional 19 are enrolled in the Master of Science in education counseling program, and are expected to complete their studies in August.

“This is the best partnership we (1199 SEIU) have had with an institution,” Abreu-Hernandez said. “In the last two years, we have put over 125 adult learners on career pathways in healthcare professions and occupations. The ability to work with an institution as committed as Alfred University to supporting underserved and underrepresented people in higher education in high quality programs of study makes my job significantly easier. I’m profoundly grateful for this partnership and know that we will do more interesting things for the benefit of workers and New York City communities. “

Sandi Vito, executive director of the SEIU 1199 Training and Employment Fund, expressed her appreciation to Alfred University president Mark Zupan and the University during her opening remarks at the June 28 ceremony. More than 1,000 people were in attendance and some, like Thomas, were graduates of the AU-NY programs.

Courses in Alfred University’s New York City-based programs are made available through a partnership with the Center for Integrated Teacher Education (CITE). The 2018 graduating class of 170 was the largest in the 11-year history of the “downstate” program. Graduates earned masters’ degrees in public administration and counseling, as well as certificates of advanced study in patient care management and in advanced mental health counseling. Since the program began 11 years ago, nearly 1,200 degrees have been conferred.