

ENVOY

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In This Issue:

THHS Updates

01

Alumni Spotlight: Rodney Lopez

02

Alumni Association Updates

08

THHS UPDATES

- Over the fall semester, the Equity & Action team created a Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education CRSE Scorecard. Starting in January THHS teachers will be using NYU Metro Center's Scorecard as a tool to self-evaluate their unit plans. Teachers will use this scorecard to reflect on their unit plans and ensure that they: validate students' experiences and values, disrupt power dynamics that privilege dominant groups, and empower students.
- Modeled on the work of Chris Emdin, School Counselor Jessica Graf ran a Professional Development Opportunity (PLO) for our Equity & Access team on Cogenerative Dialogues. A few of our E&A staff members volunteered to pilot Cogenerative Dialogues and share their learnings with us next month. Teachers will run Cogenerative Dialogues with 4-6 students from their classes, to address the issues and concerns students experience in the classroom and better reflect student identities and needs in instruction.
- With the goal of breaking down barriers, the THHS faculty has started a "Get To Know Us Project". As a result of being virtual, we are creating a virtual introduction to all staff members, virtual lockers, and slide shows. Each department will put together a slideshow to share with the school community, sharing fun interesting bits of information.
- Our Student Union x Diverse Network of Action x Black Excellence Club x Student Wellness x Equity and Access clubs all came together to create a forum for us to come together as a community to discuss the tragic events that happened at our capitol. They facilitated conversations where everyone felt seen and heard through this difficult time. We discussed, analyzed, engaged, educated, and engaged in meaningful dialogue to reflect on our democracy, justice, anti-racism, and freedom.
- Thanks to fine budget work by Principal Brian Condon and his team, the school was able to maintain the Bridge Year Program for the 2020-2021 academic year.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: RODNEY LOPEZ

Tell me a little about yourself.

After graduating from New York University, I began a career in public relations doing public affairs work for a hospital in Harlem. I heard the siren song of corporate America and wanted to try that, so I wound up going to work for a couple of corporate public relations firms. While all of that was happening, I was learning how to dance salsa in the evenings, and so I started to fall in love with salsa dancing. One, because it was fun, and two, because as a Puerto Rican and Nuyorican it gave me an opportunity to connect with and affirm my culture in an embodied way. I realized that I had a knack for teaching and so I got the opportunity to teach dance and I started by teaching salsa to adults, then high school students, and then I got the opportunity to be a teaching artist for this wonderful organization called Dancing Classrooms. And what I thought was going to be a six-month break from my PR work wound up becoming a 20-year career. I became a full-time teaching artist, joined the program staff, was the national program director, and then eventually became executive director of Dancing Classrooms. And along that path there were some very difficult times. I had really hard times with debt and money and also with the shame that's associated with having debt and money problems, starting a young family, and feeling like you can't talk about that with anybody. And so through a series of really fortuitous steps I reconnected in the faith community—which I thought I had given up on—and also rediscovered this fascination I had with giving and generosity. That led me down a ten-year path of learning about what it means to give, to practice generosity, and to take on a giving practice. I created an online course and wrote a book called *The Generosity Solution*.



Rodney Lopez
THHS Class of '91

And so, I'm someone who kind of lives at the intersection of faith, giving, and dance as community building and healing--all through a sort of a racial and cultural lens. It's been a non-linear career for me but an extremely satisfying one that an education at a school like Townsend Harris and a school like NYU if not specifically prepares you for, certainly intellectually prepares you for. I'm very blessed and very thankful.

How did you end up at Townsend Harris?

It found Townsend Harris not exactly by accident, but I certainly wasn't looking for it. I don't know if they still do this in NYC, but when I was in junior high you used to get a book with all the high schools in it. Of course, you have your zoned high school--which I wasn't excited about--and then there were these other schools you knew about. So, you're like, "Ok I'll apply there, I'll apply there." I applied to Bronx High School of Science and to LaGuardia. I was just flipping, and I saw humanities and I was like, "What's that all about?" And you see Townsend Harris specializing in this thing called humanities. I had never heard that term before, and when I read the description I was like, "I don't know what this is, but this sounds like something I'd be interested in." It said Townsend Harris High School at Queens College and I thought, "Oh there's a college component." I was interested in the academic piece of that. But honestly the biggest thing was that it was probably the farthest place you could go from where I lived, other than going to Far Rockaway, Queens or the Flatlands in Brooklyn...Flushing! From where I lived in the Northwest Bronx it was like another place and I'm just like, "I get to leave the Bronx!" So, I wound up going one day on my own to check it out and I got on the subways and the bus and I made my way there. I was looking for a big school and it was this little shoebox of a school. I went in and spoke with someone, I said, "Hi I'm looking at this school thinking of applying, can you tell me about it?" They got a couple of students to give me a tour. I remember they were so surprised that I was a boy because apparently THHS historically had this strange ratio of boys to girls. There was something about the school that I fell in love with immediately. I wound up going and I'm glad that I did. It was always a trek--an hour and 45 minutes each way--but I went from the Fall of 1988 and graduated in 1991. It was just three of the best years of my life. It's just a special school with an incredible program and all these years later it is a personal point of pride to see that Townsend Harris remains academically respected and continues to show up number one in the best schools in the city and of the country. So it means a lot to me that THHS has maintained that excellent tradition.

What is the greatest lesson you learned at THHS??

Townsend Harris, immediately in the first year, taught me humility because, I came from a junior high school where academically, I was a big fish in a small pond. I was killing it academically; I always had good report cards, good grades. And then I got to THHS and I realized, I'm in a school where everybody is like that. Everybody is smart. Everybody is killing it academically. And I'm in a school with—although it was a public school—private - school-caliber work, faculty, teachers and expectations. And so, I was in school with kids who were better resourced than I was, some kids who had privileges that I didn't have. It was the first time that I was in a predominately white space. Growing up I had gone to school with plenty of white kids, but I was in predominantly black and brown neighborhoods and schools, so then I was in school with predominantly white and Asian kids and so culturally it was different, academically it was different, and it was the first time I had to learn to swim in a bigger pond. And for a NYC kid, that's a huge education. It took me all of my sophomore year to understand that and to be okay with that until I found my stride. I graduated from junior high school in the ninth grade, so I entered Townsend Harris as a tenth grader, not a ninth grader. So, it took me that whole sophomore year to get my bearings. My GPA dropped and all of that, but eventually I kind of found my way. I think that was probably the biggest lesson because then, when you make that next jump to college, that's an even bigger pond. Especially when you go to a school like NYU where it's world-class and there are people from all over the world, that first experience in high school very much prepared me for that in a way that I would not have been if I had gone to my neighborhood school. The other thing is just this sense that you're expected to be excellent. You're expected to work hard, you're expected to do your best, and everyone around you is doing it. Everyone around you is succeeding and has high standards—both teachers and students. And that was the first time that I had ever experienced that in my young life. It was my first real lesson in, you know, "If you're gonna compete, if you're gonna swim at this level and play at this level, you've gotta work at it a little bit." So that has been a lifelong lesson, as well.

Is there any teacher that greatly influenced you while at THHS? How?

My time at Townsend Harris was very much defined by the theater arts. That was the thing that helped me find my people. For some people that's the athletics team or the math team; for me it was the play, SING!, and the Shakespearean oratory competition. I was nerdy—well everybody at THHS is a nerd—but I was a drama nerd. That was where

where I spent almost all of my extracurricular time. So, in that sense, I would say the two teachers that were most influential in that were Ms. Blechman and Mr. Boulanger. I think another teacher who I only had for one semester—but it was very meaningful for me—was Mr. Brown, who was a math teacher. And the reason I pick him out is I had him for my spring semester of sophomore year, and I was kind of shell shocked with how I was performing in math, because up until that point I had been a good math student. It was never my strongest subject, but I always overperformed. And so, when I got to that sequential one, that geometry, whatever they call it, I was struggling. I was getting 70s and 60s and I was really like, "Oh my god. Do I not know how to do math anymore? Is this too hard for me? Did I make a mistake coming here?" I was really struggling, and so those grades in that first semester were awful, but then in the spring I had Mr. Brown. He had a quirky sense of humor and he had just this skill at teaching math that allowed me to get it. And my grades just shot up for the rest of that year. And I wound up in a regents exam getting a grade that was much higher than I thought I was going to get and that was just solely, 100% due to his teaching and the way I was able to get it. And even though I wound up sucking at math again the next year, it just was a pivot point for me because I got to see the power of good teaching in a way that I hadn't needed to until that point.

What do you miss most about THHS?

I miss the friends and the camaraderie and all of that, it was a special time. What I miss is senior year in particular was this very special year, because you may have had one or two classes at the high school building, but you spent most of your time on the Queens College campus where we had humanities seminar, we had whatever college classes we were taking, and senior meeting. There was this one year where you had this freedom in your schedule that was a preview of what college was going to be like. And so, you would be like, "I'll meet you at the high school building" or "I'll meet you at the quad" or "I'll meet you at the library." There was this year where you were a senior, so you were the big person on campus, but you were not quite yet a college student. So, there was this lovely hybrid moment where you're coming into your own as an adolescent, you've got more freedom than you've ever had in your life, you're with your friends, and no one's telling you can't do anything as long as you're in class

There was just something about that year that was very special. I miss afternoons on the quad at QC and all of that. I think other than that I just miss the activity. I miss all the wonderful learning and enrichment that we had at Townsend Harris.

What is a recent accomplishment that is meaningful to you?

I have two sons who are 16 and 17 and one of them is graduating from high school this year and is looking at colleges. I just feel my most important accomplishment is that me and their mother have been able to raise healthy, happy, spiritually and emotionally centered boys. I think being a parent is--when you are a parent or when you choose to become a parent--one of the most important roles you ever play. I think raising two boys, I'm not finished with raising them, but to this point, I feel very proud of the work that I've done as a parent. Outside of that, I am proud of the thousands of young people's lives I've been able to touch through dance both personally and through the teaching artists that I've trained and through the dancing classrooms affiliates that I've supported over the years. I feel that I was a really successful steward of Pierre Dulaine's vision for bringing dance into the world and to young people. And I think that what I told my staff when I left, because I left at the end of 2019, is that what was meaningful for me personally is that in an artform that has historically been very white, I am a man of color who models excellence in that space for both kids of color and for white kids; It's just as important for white kids to see somebody like me doing that work as it is for children of color to see somebody like me. I think that to have been able to create a career in the arts models for somebody else that this is possible. Because I had my father tell me, "What are you doing? That's not what I sent you to college for. We didn't spend all this money and do all of this so that you can go dance." And that's a real thing, you know. Especially when your parents didn't go to college or whatever. It's a real risk you take to pursue a career in the arts. and there's no guarantee you're going to be able to support your family doing that, but you actually can if you're wise about it, if you're strategic about it. I think I'm just proud of being able to fashion a career in the arts education. That has been probably just the most meaningful thing to me.

How have you implemented the sentiment of the Ephebic Oath into your life since your time at THHS?

I've forgotten most of it except the most important part which is something like, "I will leave my city better and greater than I found it," and I have tried to live that, and I've never

forgotten it. I mean, I really do take that oath seriously and I have tried with every single job that I've done to leave my city better and greater than I found it. And I have to say, I think it was that year or so in corporate America where it was the only time in my career where I felt I wasn't doing that. I felt like I was just existing to make a business be more successful and make more money. And I'm not saying that a corporate career is a bad thing, or that you can't serve your city doing that. But for my particular path, I always felt like my career was of service whether I was working at a hospital [or] when I was at the empowerment zone --even though there was controversy around that job, that organization--I still felt like we were trying to better the economic fortunes of the people in Harlem and Washington Heights. And then after that, the career in dance helping young people and supporting people in their artistic endeavors. I have tried to fashion a career or other activities like working around generosity in such a way that makes a contribution to the community that I'm in. And I'm proud of that and I'm still trying, like it's not over yet. I'm still trying to continue to do that today. So that Ephebic Oath sometimes feels like a thing you just have to recite, but if you actually take it to heart, it can stay with you forever.

How can other alumni and current THHS students connect with you? Do you have a LinkedIn or website you are willing to share?

Absolutely! So my website is rodneyericlopez.com, that's probably just the easiest way. And the email address there is info@rodneyericlopez.com. My socials are on there, my facebook and my linkedin and all that stuff are on the website as well.

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION UPDATES

- **Mentorship** – In collaboration with the Student Union, the Alumni Association is working to leverage the experiences and resources within the alumni group to benefit our diverse student body. Alumni volunteers are essential for supporting and guiding the next generation of Harrisites. We are looking for individuals interested in the First-Generation program, the Equity and Access Program, social and emotional wellness, supporting the LGBTQ+ youth, and sexual harassment education. If interested, please fill out the volunteer form here:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdH0VzLiHIPtZJqdl3pAGwBNVb0QaYuZDDB0Rqg-GxA-9isTg/viewform?](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdH0VzLiHIPtZJqdl3pAGwBNVb0QaYuZDDB0Rqg-GxA-9isTg/viewform?gxids=7628&fbclid=IwAR2NwqDNhh9UtEfiBpxomoX_2N0Gh9bAAtpiUm2DizeUG4jxPpd5INlsyeo)

[gxids=7628&fbclid=IwAR2NwqDNhh9UtEfiBpxomoX_2N0Gh9bAAtpiUm2DizeUG4jxPpd5INlsyeo](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdH0VzLiHIPtZJqdl3pAGwBNVb0QaYuZDDB0Rqg-GxA-9isTg/viewform?gxids=7628&fbclid=IwAR2NwqDNhh9UtEfiBpxomoX_2N0Gh9bAAtpiUm2DizeUG4jxPpd5INlsyeo)

- **Wall of Fame** – The current Wall of Fame which is in the school's lobby reflects the "old" Townsend Harris HS. The current Townsend Harris re-opened as a co-ed high school with more diversity. Therefore, the Alumni Association is working with the Student Union to update and enhance the Wall of Fame. The current proposals range from building a second showcase on the opposite wall to creating a digital display. The Alumni Association has allocated \$5,000 to this project.

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION UPDATES

- **Equity and Access Speaker Series** – Together with the Townsend Harris HS Equity and Access Team, we have created a speaker series. Throughout the year, we will be inviting guest speakers who are leaders in their field to present to our school community, with the goal of supporting our school-wide initiatives to become a more inclusive and antiracist Townsend Harris HS. For the recordings of previous speakers, please check out the Townsend Harris YouTube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw62Z5p1EriTWmK0Fe9qkFA>.
- **Sexual Harassment** – To help support the students in the school recognize the different forms of sexual harassment and to create a culture of reporting such acts, the Alumni Association has signed up for additional resources from the Know Your IX website.
- **Professional Development** - The Alumni Association Executive Committee approved funding for Assistant Principal Brandeis's attendance at a Teachers of Color fair to hire ISS teachers in order to diversify the THHS staff. Due to the change in funding for the bridge year program, the school wasn't able to hire as many teachers as they originally planned to. But here are some articles related to the new staff members:
 - https://www.thhsclassic.com/2020/10/16/stem-department-grows-with-addition-of-four-new-teachers/?fbclid=IwAR374-cArb_DNYpqUuQlu95-q4DOoEcUbyj7dWGtZwnlbi_ZZ1bvSSxxow

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION UPDATES

- https://www.thhsclassic.com/2020/10/19/new-para-teachers-for-the-2020-2021-school-year/?fbclid=IwAR2-SCp60eXRnHj4IT7DeL3Q1uYOViyWOeQOAifOB-LOY_H-zjn-Zo8t6jl
- **Alumni Spotlight** – To increase communication efforts, the Alumni Association will be interviewing alumni for an Alumni Spotlight. This section will be featured in the newsletter.
- **Library Books** – The Alumni Association is working with the school librarian to identify and purchase electronic books written by authors of color. While many books are indeed available physically in the school library, the school building has been closed due to COVID-19. Investing in electronic books will be beneficial to the students now as well as years to come given the accessible nature of the books
- **THAA Do Better Together Committee** – The committee will be holding an open event on February 17th at 6:30 PM. Keep an eye out for the announcement and Zoom registration link via email or Facebook.



THAA Communications Committee

Jillissa Drayton

Selina Lee

Debra Michlewitz

Craig Slutzkin