

# ENVOY

A PUBLICATION OF THE TOWNSEND HARRIS ALUMNI  
ASSOCIATION



## **In This Issue:**

THHS Updates

01

Alumni Spotlight: Giovanni Barcenos

02

# THHS UPDATES

- Spirit week was a huge success culminating in the first Career Day in 4 years. THHS Alumni of all ages returned to the school to talk to students about their career options. Interested in participating next year? Make sure your email is on file with the THAA so you receive our notifications!
- The Nightingale Theatre Company, formerly known as The Townsend Players, performed Into The Woods as this year's Spring musical.
- Two alumni from the class of 2017, Sumaita Hassan and Mehrose Ahmad, have established a scholarship for journalists of The Classic. Each year one student will receive \$1000 for college costs and also receive mentoring during the application process.
- Principal Brian Condon recently unveiled The Townsend Harris Writers Academy: a four-year sequence that allows students to "major" in one of three Humanities tracks: creative writing, journalism, or theater writing. While no new courses were added to the curriculum it standardized existing courses into a four-year track.

# ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: GIOVANNI BARCENES

## **Tell me a bit about yourself.**

So, of course, my name is Giovanni, but people call me Gio. I was born and raised in Queens, New York City—I'm still living here now. I was born in Jamaica, Queens [and] I grew up in Queens Village. My parents are both from El Salvador, so both parents are immigrants from Central America who came to the US and New York in the 1980s. So, growing up Spanish was my first language; I got to be part of two worlds! It actually wasn't until Townsend Harris that I felt like I started really seeing life outside that [immigrant] bubble in some ways. But yeah, I've been in Queens my whole life and I see myself as a lifelong New Yorker. I'm that guy who goes, "Ohh! New Jersey...." I can't see myself really living anywhere else.

I'm now in Forest Hills, so I've kind of moved-on-up in some ways. Growing up in Queens Village, it was very far from the train and just kind of far from the city. And so now I'm a little bit closer to the neighborhood that I really love and I've always wanted to live here. So it's a dream come true.

## **How did you end up at Townsend Harris?**

I heard about it through a friend from church. He went to Townsend Harris before me and mentioned it to me at church and I was like, "I have no idea. What's that school's about?" But essentially, he was a really smart guy. So I was like, ok, he must know what he's talking about. And so we overlapped one year; he graduated class of 2007 and I graduated class of 2010.

So, I heard about it through him and I honestly didn't know it was such a selective competitive process. I remember in middle school, my teacher was kind of shocked. I was shocked. We were all just kind of shocked. But that's how I heard about it.



Giovanni Barcenes  
THHS Class of '10

**What is the greatest lesson you learned during your time at Townsend Harris?**

Townsend Harris taught me to be open to new worlds. I think growing up in a small town—well not a small town, New York City is huge. But [growing up] I was in my family bubble. I was in my church bubble. My family had a restaurant growing up, so I was always in the restaurant and that's what I knew: how to sell food and how to clean tables.

But then when I got to Townsend Harris, I learned about Ancient Rome, and I took a class on Russian literature and I took Japanese. And so, I feel like Townsend Harris taught me that the world is huge and that there's always so much to learn. It taught me to stay curious.

**Is there any teacher that you can remember that influenced you during your time at the school?**

Yeah, I mean, I never had her as a teacher but my favorite teacher was Ms. Fee. She's the assistant principal and she was teaching math or pre-calc or calc, and I never took those classes. But I got to know her really well because she was the advisor for Seekers, which is the Christian faith club at Townsend Harris. So I really got to know her. I spent time in her office and then it helped that my senior year, I was the guy who did the morning announcements and the Pledge of Allegiance and that gets done in Fee's office, too! So I would go there in the morning, [and] say hi. I think she had a fish in her office and she had a cool backless chair and I would sit on the chair and spend time there...and we're still connected to this day. I respect her and [since I graduated] I have gotten to know her [better] and her husband, her family. So [she's] my favorite non-academic teacher.

My favorite academic teacher I would probably say is my Japanese teacher [Dr. Sato] because I took Japanese for four years and I took AP Japanese my senior year and I got to really, you know, have fun in that class. The way she taught us Japanese, a lot of it was practicing with each other. But I got to do this thing where at the beginning of the class, [I'd] volunteer to go the front, have everyone stand, bow and then sit. And that was one of my favorite activities, to go to the front and... you would say *kiritsu*, which is stand. But you'd have to say it with gusto, with authority. It's really loud. And so I really enjoyed saying that. And then bow which is *rei*, and then sit down, *chakuseki*. So just saying those three words in class was really fun for me those four years.

I think she also taught music theory. I had her my freshman year! I actually learned to play the keyboard with her. She had us all print out paper keyboards and we'd practice our notes on the paper keyboards. She was really quirky and I really enjoyed getting to know her and being in her class. I think she also ran Festival of Nations at the time. So we did a whole Japanese [performance] for FON that year.

### **What do you miss most about Townsend Harris?**

What I miss most about Townsend Harris is just not having to worry so much about what we were there for.

It was very focused, obviously, with grades. But then friendships, extracurriculars and sports [were also a part of the experience]. It was a bubble that we lived in. Even though I talked about leaving bubbles, Townsend Harris was a bubble in many ways. I don't want to say [it was] carefree because people were stressed out about grades and stuff like that, but, it was just a time where we got to really focus on learning as a student. In college we're obviously learning, but a lot of that happens independently. Whatever effort we put in, we get out. But in high school, the environment is just so conducive for learning. So I really appreciated being in that space where everyone kind of has that hunger for knowledge, which is really, really unique and special now that I think about it.

### **Tell me a little bit about your life after graduation.**

So after Townsend Harris I went to NYU for undergrad, where I studied politics at the College of Arts and Sciences with the minor in Latino Studies, which was cool because I got to hone in on my interest in learning more about the Latin America and the diaspora and learning more about my roots, and the roots of Latinos in this country.

But the politics part, it's a little bit connected to the experience that I had at Townsend Harris where we had to do volunteer political hours and I got to help my local council member with his campaign. That kick started my interest in reaching out and trying to help folks. It was my first real exposure to how local government meets the community and based on that I knew I had a passion—or a knack—for government and community. So that's why I studied politics, and after undergrad, I went to work at the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs because I wanted to put a lot of what I studied into action. I wanted to go and help the people, and I really enjoyed my time at the mayor's office. The people were young, [and] there was so much energy. It was the start of the De Blasio administration so there was just a lot of energy and excitement. And since then, I've worked in local government.

Then I went back to NYU for my master's degree in public administration in 2018 because a lot of the people that I work with in government have master's degrees and so I kind of went [the route] that I thought would get me to my goals faster and was not going to cripple me financially. You know, school is expensive! And so, NYU was generous and gave me a scholarship which made my decision easy. For both undergrad and grad school,

[NYU has] been looking out for me...with financial aid, career advisement and all the resources they provided to help me navigate the post-college world.

So most recently, I actually shifted to the nonprofit sector. After grad school I worked on AOC's re-election because I've always wanted campaign experience and so I helped her get elected again and after that I went back to the mayor's office. I worked there as a policy analyst and now I'm taking all of the experience from the government that I learned the past 10 years and applying it in the nonprofit sector, [at] City Year. City Year is an educational equity nonprofit, and we hire young adults to come and work in public schools through AmeriCorps. My role is Senior Director for External and Government Affairs. I do a lot of their government work and partnership work to help increase the number of young people that work in schools and support the program we're doing in schools whether that's through legislation, policy funding, and all that stuff.

**How does the sentiment of the Ephebic Oath tie into your work today?**

I think about that last line in the Ephebic Oath often because I feel like we live in such a self-centered world. Like, everyone's kind of in it for themselves in many ways and—especially living in a capitalist society— it's all about how can I make more money? How can I get the next job? I want a nicer house, I want a bigger this, [or] a bigger that. We make it so much about me-me-me that we forget about the greater community, the greater purpose and mission. It's not about me, but it's about "we," or us. And so I feel like whenever I enter a space as a public servant I'm always like, "Remember, this is not about you or me; it's about us, the people, and making things better for our city, our state, our country, our world." We are all just citizens of something greater than ourselves and learning about that and the Ephebic Oath being instilled in me at a younger age [made it so] everything I do is through the lens of "how is this helping someone else?" Especially the people at the margins and people who belong to marginalized communities; LGBTQ, POC, or BIPOC folks are the ones that need it the most. Who's thinking about them and who is helping bring their voice to the table?

That's something that is definitely part of the way I'm wired, but also the Ephebic Oath has helped me kind of put words to that feeling.

**What's a recent accomplishment that you're proud of?**

I'm trying to think if I should use a work example or a school example or personal example...Ok, fine I'll talk about this. My friend is getting married in Hawaii this week and we actually graduated from Townsend Harris together. And when she asked me to officiate the

wedding, I was honored because she's a writer. So I wanted to make sure to write a speech or a message that's going to resonate with her and her future husband. And so I waited 'til the last minute, as per usual, and I sent it to her and she said, like, "This is perfect. I love what you wrote and I'm so excited for this." And for me, getting props from a writer, that made me feel like I wrote something that I'm excited to deliver and share with everyone. It's not about me, it's about them and it was a proud moment for me to be able to do this for them and honor them.

### **What advice would you give to current students?**

I would tell current students at Townsend Harris to try different things and to step out of their comfort zone. I remember one thing that I did in my junior year that was really fun was join the Trivia & Knowledge Club, which was exactly what it sounds like. We played games that were just about trivial things, but it was a lot of fun and random students came together to just enjoy it together. I never thought I would be in the Trivia Knowledge Club, but that ended up being one of my favorite clubs and experiences. Dr. Colakis was the advisor and she made the best lemon bars...and I would never have known that had I never joined the club. So, put yourself into different spaces that interest you and you never know who you're going to meet, or what you're going to eat, or what you're going to get out of it! Just try something that's always interested you but maybe you never had the courage to do. Putting yourself out there is sometimes the most rewarding experience.

### **How can alumni connect with you?**

I'm most active on LinkedIn and Instagram!

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/gbarcenes/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CrbcMb0ujaN/>

Or you can email me at [gbarcenes@nyu.edu](mailto:gbarcenes@nyu.edu)



**THAA Communications Committee**

Jillissa Drayton

Selina Lee

Debra Michlewitz

Craig Slutzkin