

# ENVOY

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ASSOCIATION



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# THHS UPDATES

- Jupiter Grades will be the new THHS gradebook. The PTA raised funds to be able to provide teachers and students with accounts, which will be used throughout the spring term.
- Multiple teachers and administrators worked throughout late December and January to rate admissions essays and videos for prospective students. The new class should learn of the results later this semester.
- Parent Advocate Jennifer Choi testified at the City Council about admissions to high school for students with IEPs and the Townsend Harris Instructional Support program as a model for the city in her testimony.
- The Girls Varsity Basketball team is currently undefeated, and the Boys team is also racking up wins this season. Both look to make it to the playoffs in February. The Girls Table Tennis team has also made it to the playoffs.
- On January 6, students hosted the Asian Culture Festival, a celebration of the diverse Asian cultures from around the school. Students hope to make it an annual event.

# ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: ELIZABETH IRIZARRY

## Tell me a little about yourself.

So obviously I was born and raised in Queens. I made my way to Townsend Harris High School because my parents, who were both educators, were very keen on our living in a good school district. From Townsend Harris, I ended up going to Brown University where, despite my humanities upbringing and the strong culture of Townsend Harris, I opted for a major that most people at that time wouldn't have considered, which was computer science. It is very, very popular these days, but I'm going to tell you back then, nobody was talking about it. I'm [from] the generation that existed before everybody had their own computers, or their own [cell] phones. We did not have Google; we didn't have a lot of things. I was just kind of curious about them. I had no business wanting to do a computer science major but the movie Toy Story came out and the animations were super cool. I was like "Wow, computers and movies; that's cool." It was a very simple idea in the mind of a high schooler that sent me off to try to learn this. And fun fact, I went to my very first computer science class, got absolutely terrified, and dropped it within a week. I took college chemistry instead...not that much easier. A lot of my friends were taking it too because they were pre-med, but I couldn't give up on the idea of wanting to learn about computers. I was very confused, but I just really wanted to try it again.

[Next] semester they had [an] easier entry [course] into computer science and so I went that route. I still didn't really know what was going on, but I was a little bit more intrigued by it, always being into math and science. It turned out that I could take another corollary course that would get me on track to be a computer science major; it took a lot of work. My parents were like, "we can't help you. What did you do? You know we're humanities



Elizabeth Irizarry  
THHS Class of '96

people!" But it was fascinating, and I liked it. And so, I ended up getting through it, all the way. I was one of eight women and at the time there were no people of color for years that were doing that. I was part of the Latino community at Brown. But Lord knows, none of them were taking these courses either. I ended up looking to my peers and what they were doing and a lot of them didn't have the same kind of you-can-only-go-three-hours-away-from-home upbringing. So they were heading off to California to get jobs and I just always assumed I would go back to New York. But in New York what awaited me was working in a suit at Goldman Sachs-- which was cool. But if I could, I'd prefer to be in jeans and my best black T-shirt in San Francisco at a fun company, you know, that had a slide, that literally had a slide, inside. So I took off and became part of Silicon Valley 1.0, which is a time that most people that are in tech right now don't even know about. It's so long ago, but it was really fascinating.

I spent four years living in San Francisco and working at this tech company and it turns out that one of the other women from my university ended up joining the same company. So technically I was the first woman on the team--and the youngest woman on the team--and then a month later she joined me. And it was just the two of us, but we ended up spending quite a long time working on a piece of software called Flash that most people today either don't know or make fun of. But at the time it was revolutionizing the internet. It was a really big deal before it became a punchline. We worked on that for a very long time.

So, with that [beginning], I've proceeded to have this whole life in tech, moving from different kind of company to different kind of company. I worked as an engineer for many, many, many, many, many years, but I always had this feeling that I was meant to be in tech because nobody [there] looks like me and [nobody] sounds like me. Initiatives started to crop up which were helping underrepresented groups see themselves in tech. I had always been that [person] without it being called something and I always felt the desire to try to make other people, who looked and sounded like me or just felt like they didn't fit in, feel more comfortable, because I was like, well, I can do it, [so] you can do it.

**What year did you graduate? Where has life taken you since Townsend Harris?**

I am a member of the Class of 1996. One of the beautiful, unexpected things about that little choice of mine is that it's given me a lot of opportunities, not only to travel--which is a big passion of mine--but also to live abroad. Tech is universal; it's everywhere now. I always wanted to live abroad [but] my father was not the kind of man who was going to let me do that in university, but I said, "[the opportunity is] gonna come back. It's not going away." And

so you know, I decided, you know, a few years back that I really had a desire to try to live abroad and see what that felt like. My name is technically Spanish, you know, although my family is from Puerto Rico. So, I was like oh, let's see what this is about. According to 23 and Me, 65% of my genetics is from here [Spain], so let's check it out.

So, I moved here, two years ago in December 2020.[This] was an odd time because it was during COVID, but I spent two 2 1/2 years working for a Spanish company that's headquartered here in Barcelona. I'm working as an engineering manager and it's very different because as opposed to what we consider to be diversity in the US, diversity here is that we are from nine different countries, working across four different time zones, you know? And it's a very interesting and different kind of space. I'm one of six Americans that work at this company.Talk about underrepresented!

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

I think at Townsend Harris I was able to really stretch myself in ways that I didn't anticipate. I guess one might think that any student who's getting into Townsend Harris is probably coming with an overly ambitious, overachiever kind of mindset. But you know, having that mindset and then acting on it are kind of two different things, and I really kind of found a space to branch out in different ways and challenge myself. I was a part of student government, [a club], and I was captain of the volleyball team! So it was like a really great place to be more than a student, if you so choose. You could really do more and I like that because I think that that's a way of challenging yourself and not just going with the tide. I think in many ways that has helped me figure out navigating other spaces. Ordinarily, you're like, "well I don't know if this place is for me." But for me, it's like "No, I'll just put myself out there to see if it'll work!" And I think being able to do that in high school, although it's kind of a small pond, is a great testing ground.

#### **Is there any teacher that greatly influenced you during your time at Townsend Harris?**

I remember many of them so fondly. But I will tell you, without question, I don't even know where this has gone inside of me--maybe it's because I went into the world of tech I lost [sight of] it--but I had a love of poetry and that love of poetry was entirely fostered by Ms Rizzuto, and I will never forget her. Despite the fact that I did study computer science, when I went to college, I also [took] poetry seminars while I was there, and I was still writing poetry. I like[d] having a side by side of the analog writing versus the digital stuff that I was doing...[I] freaking love that Lady.

Hold on, hold on hold. Am I allowed to do a twofer though? I don't know if Ms Nix reads this and if she doesn't see her name there--she was my coach on the volleyball team--she would kill me! So, also, Ms Nix. Let me talk about her for a second. Especially as my coach, [Ms. Nix] taught me about what it means to be on a team and [what to do] when you need to improve and [how to] make yourself better and focus. They were two very fierce and awesome women. So without question, those two teachers.

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

I grew up with a bunch of movies where they say you make your dearest friends in college, but I made some of my dearest friends at Townsend Harris. We are just like the United Nations Church Group of Friends because literally everybody is from a different background. We have all have gone on to do different things, and we're all from immigrant families, whatever. But they've known me for more half of my life. I've known them longer than I've not known them at this point. We're still all very close and in touch and we've taken trips all together. So, for sure, what I miss really is just the days in home room, you know, when you were just alphabetically defined to be with a group of humans that end up being your life!

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

That's a fun one. This might sound like a hallmark card -- tell me if it sounds terrible -- but it's either one of these two things: happiness is not a destination or who [you are now] is not a destination. Basically it's the notion that there will be various twists and turns and ups and downs and trials and tribulations that will come your way; [there will be] things that will challenge you more than you ever imagined, things that you think will be insurmountable. Some you will overcome and some you won't. When you overcome some, you'll detour into happiness and when you don't, you'll detour into a place of not-happiness. But all of it together will make you a whole entity that goes through this life picking up all the pieces of the good and the bad and you just continue to boldly explore who you will be in the future. Never just stay rooted in what you think you are right now.

### **How have you implemented the sentiment of the Ephebic Oath into your life since graduating?**

I feel like I was probably not unlike a lot of the students at Townsend Harris, bright-eyed, with big notions of maybe how I could do something for the world. Many times, I have fallen into some kind of state of sadness or despair at the thought of how I could really help. The world is so big and there're so many people who need so much. I know that it's very easy to just give up and to feel this paralysis set in because you have that What-can-I-really-do

feeling. I think that when I started doing this work in tech, I just realized that maybe I could have a smaller calling. I could have something more accessible, something that was very doable, not being some grand savior of society and the world but instead in some small corner of a community that I was part of.

That's why I will always make time for students and people who reach out to me. Some of that has made me feel more gratified than some of the biggest technical challenges that I've achieved.

I have found opportunities to try to volunteer. I worked with Girls Who Code at a school up in Harlem for young women. [When] I worked at Instagram, there were different groups ...like they have Women At, Latin At, all these different groups. But for the Black At group there were so few people as allies in the New York office, they were like "Elizabeth, will you come to this open mic?" And I was happy to be a part of it; being a part of those spaces are some of the most gratifying moments that I've had. Building tech is cool, seeing someone use your app is super cool, but seeing some of the people that I've met with over the years find their way and take on leadership positions and really help to change the face of tech-- not by [doing] anything other than being themselves is the thing that makes me most excited.

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

We just talked about this but, you know, it had really been a lifelong dream of mine to be able to move abroad, and I think a part of that is that I was just full of wanderlust after college. [Now] I have my paychecks and I can use them and go to these places. Sometimes you go to places and it's so romanticized. [Y]ou're there for a few days, it's so beautiful, you have the best pastry, and then you leave. But I was always kind of curious about living in those places. [I was always curious] about picking up and leaving your family and your close set of high school friends, who also live very close to each other, and now you're the only one who doesn't, and maybe taking a slightly different step in your career than others would. US tech is really an incredible place of opportunity but acknowledging who [I am] and what I value and knowing that the experience of living abroad is so valuable to me that I would be willing to sacrifice some other things along the way--and the feeling that [I'm] not too old to do it [is powerful] ! I thought about this for a very long time and I easily could've fallen into the trap that there's just a certain age at which it's just not practical. I decided to push back all those voices inside me that were questioning whether or not it made sense. And then, of course, never mind the global pandemic. But I decided to do it. It was bumpy

to start; you don't know anybody in a brand-new city; it's kind of hard. But I'm really happy now and I'm really proud of myself.

**Is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to share?**

I would say this, for what it's worth, especially because I know that part of this is really about highlighting diversity. My whole worldview, I'd say, is shaped from the fact that I'm from Queens, NY which is one of the most diverse places you can find. Also going to [Townsend Harris] which was a microcosm of that led me to have this, like I said, United Nations group of friends. One day we were having breakfast in San Francisco and somebody literally asked us if we were a church group because I don't think they could fathom that many colors, shapes and everything else could be all sitting there together having pancakes! But Townsend Harris has set an incredibly high bar for the company that I want to keep in my life. And [that is] the challenge that I find going just about anywhere, even here. It is very interesting to work with people from other nations. But knowing the history of interactions of different groups, ethnic nationalities, racial groups in the US, and that you [Townsend Harris students and alums] know that a group of people can come together with so much love, and all of those people can go on to be so successful, and that there's ever any place that somebody would question that, is just so impossible for me to even understand because I think they're the best people I know. And so it makes it really challenging for me because it's really hard to find anywhere else. And to me, that's a gift that Townsend Harris gave me that I never would've realized you could get in high school.

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

Yes, LinkedIn is totally fine. Like is that what people do? Is that like super antiseptic? I don't know. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/elizirizarry/>





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