



The Roger Lehecka Double Discovery Center

Getting community youth to, through, and beyond college



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DDC Alumni and Volunteer Reflections from 1965 to 2016!

DDC recently asked its alumni and former volunteers to share how their time at DDC changed their lives and what the Center means for them today. Here are a few of their

answers:

DDC is:

“Empowerment” – Nancy L., DDC’87

“A bridge to the future” – Tamara S., DDC’95

“Transformative” – Carla L., DDC’12

“Life-enriching” – Daniel F. CC’66, DDC volunteer during summers ‘65 & ‘66

“One of the best experiences I have ever had” – Tahmid Z., DDC’16

What difference did DDC make in your life?

- *DDC was a major reason I was able to go to college and I am now a college professor. I was born and raised in NYC public housing. I graduated from a de facto segregated high school with one college advisor for 4,000 students and a 30% graduation rate (of those only 1% graduated with a Regents diploma and there was no advanced placement in my high school). I was mentored and eventually became a DDC mentor while I was a Columbia College student. DDC equity lift transforms lives. Thank you!*
Nancy L., DDC’87
- *DDC impacted my life in so many ways, it’s actually quite hard to write down. However, I do know that the Center creates lasting relationships, fosters community and family, all the while instilling in students the tools they need to succeed no matter what career path they choose. DDC and their hard-working counselors ensured that the students who partook in the program were ready for the road ahead, letting them know that higher education was and will always be attainable if you work hard. They equipped us with the tools necessary to be ourselves, people who would grow, flourish and touch the sky!*
Raven B., DDC’09
- *At the time, I did not believe in either my ability to make friends or my prospects to attend college. Spending two years in the program definitely changed the trajectory of my life.*
Ramon P., DDC’07

We are so grateful for these reflections! Since 1965, DDC has leveraged the human and intellectual resources across the campus and within the community to mitigate the challenges of unrelenting poverty that grips our neighborhoods. The Center has made significant inroads in increasing college access and success for low-income and first-generation community youth, but the gaps in educational and economic outcomes persist. We continue to strengthen our program activities to empower more local students as they pursue greater academic attainments and a fulfilling and civically engaged adulthood.

DDC Career Explorations: Engineering and Entertainment Industries

Research shows that first-generation college students also need access to experiences that will broaden their career awareness and networks so that they are better positioned to make strategic decisions about their career pursuits and pathways. In addition to providing our students with robust activities to build their college awareness and readiness, DDC offers young people a wide range of experiences – internships with corporate partners (Macquarie LEADS), arts-integrated digital media classes with mentoring by industry professionals

(Young Audiences New York/YANY LinkNYC), resume writing & mock interviewing workshops – to introduce them to professions they are not familiar with and to support their career readiness.

In December, DDC organized two career exploration activities that exposed students to two growing sectors: entertainment and engineering.

On December 7, DDC partnered with The Bridge Lab to provide 20 students with a free, private screening of the film "Harriet" at the *Lenfest Center for the Arts* on Columbia's Manhattanville campus in Harlem. The Bridge Lab is a nonprofit organization that facilitates equitable access in the film and television industries by offering educational opportunities, employment entry points, and career development advocacy to underrepresented communities.

The movie "Harriet" tells the story of Harriet Tubman who was born into slavery in 1820 and fled to Pennsylvania in 1849. She joined the Abolitionist Movement in Philadelphia and spent the rest of her life helping some 300 former slaves get to freedom through the Underground Railroad. Called the "Moses of her people," she also served as a soldier and nurse for the Union Army during the Civil War.

Students were fully prepared for the event. DDC held special sessions and disseminated information to students that included critical highlights in the life of Harriet Tubman; explained key words such as "Underground Railroad" and "Abolitionist"; and suggested networking questions to maximize students' takeaways. After the screening, students participated in two activities specifically tailored to deepen their understanding of the array of careers within the film industry. The first activity was a panel discussion with industry professionals who worked on the film. The panelists – Kasi Lemmons, Director, Writer, Producer; Vondie Curtis Hall, Actor; Daniela Taplin Lundberg, Producer; and Belinda Anderson, Hair/makeup – shared their reflective insights on what it was like to work on the film. Once the panel discussion concluded, students were organized into four small groups for breakout discussion sessions with each of the four panelists. During those sessions, students learned more about the different career pathways and job opportunities within the entertainment industry.

This event was very powerful because DDC works to not only support students "to and through" college but "beyond" as well, which requires career exploration and immersion activities. Through this partnership, we introduced students to a myriad of careers within the creative arts by connecting them with professionals in the field.

On December 11, the Society of Women Engineers Community Outreach Committee led DDC students on a tour of the Columbia campus and the engineering labs at the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science at Columbia University. The event started with a visit to the class of Professor Vallancourt who teaches courses in electrical engineering. A master of digital sound, Professor Vallancourt has received a dozen patents for his previous work at Bell Lab, Texas Instruments. After attending Professor Vallancourt's class and completing the tours, DDC students participated in a Q&A session with a panel of women engineering students. During the discussion, they shared their insights about STEM/Engineering and college life with the DDC students. According to students, the exchanges that most resonated with them include:

Is it more difficult for a woman to attend an engineering school?

Sometimes it can be intimidating, but it's important to focus on your own goals and seek mentors to guide you through the process.

What factors should we consider when choosing a college?

Location; diversity; campus size/number of students; academic program; financial aid

What if you choose a major and you change your mind later on?

It's usually easy to switch into a different program during the first couple years of college. Most people choose their major based on the subjects they enjoy and what careers they're interested in long-term.

DDC's collaboration with a wide range of departments across Columbia University enables us to offer our students rare opportunities to be introduced to the classes, labs, faculty, and students of some of the best research departments in the world. It also allows them to build personal connections with Columbia students who are generous with their time as they share thoughtful advice on how to explore and take advantage of different options and opportunities.

DDC Spotlight - Darlene Reyes

- 2019 DDC Instructor - *Pero like... Contemporary movements and cultural identity in the United States*

- 2020 Fulbright Research Fellow

Darlene is a Northwestern University alumna '15 with a double-major in Linguistics and International Studies with a focus on Latin America. Before joining DDC as an instructor, Darlene was a City Year AmeriCorps member from 2015 to 2016, working full time in schools in underserved communities. She helped to create environments where students could overcome obstacles, thrive and stay on track academically. A first-generation Salvadoran-American, Darlene has an amazing ability to build personal connections with her students, quickly establishing the expectations she has for them and the expectations they should have for her.

This year, Darlene received a Fulbright Research Fellowship, one of the most widely recognized and prestigious fellowships in the world. Her research topic is on the Imposter Syndrome (IS) experiences among students and professors in Brazil, a country with demographics similar to the United States. IS is defined as chronic self-doubt coupled with a sense of intellectual dishonesty that override any objective proof of competence. It can have devastating consequences, including dropping out of school.

My passion is educational equity - where all students receive the resources they need to graduate prepared for success after high school. Pero like... Contemporary movements and cultural identity in the United States, the course that I developed and taught at DDC, provided students with an opportunity to explore the social conditions that can undermine equity for different cultural groups. My three core goals for the class was to help students:

- *Strengthen their opinions with the use of evidence and gain the courage to ask difficult questions;*
- *Understand their community - where they come from, why they do the things they do and why they need to see experiences through others' perspectives – I believe that if we want to have productive discussions and move forward, we have to address how we identify and how society sees us; and*
- *Internalize a sense of social responsibility so they can then explore what their own responsibility to community issues is today if any, regardless of whether the issues do or do not directly affect them.*

The class was very rigorous and we discussed themes that are relevant to students' lives as well as constantly in the news. Some of the topics included: the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, the concept of racial binary, the issue of Identity Politics and the effect of the media's use of terminology in their coverage of immigration.

Through the class discussions and excursions to local cultural institutions, we unpacked commonly used terms that characterize a person's cultural identity: Spanish – people from Spain; Hispanic – people from countries that were colonized by Spain and therefore speak Spanish; Latino/na – men and women who are from or who have ancestry in Latin American countries; Latinx – gender neutral word for people who identify with Latin American culture. We also defined the concept of identity politics – political engagement based on issues relevant to specific social groups – so that students could develop a deeper contextual understanding of our society's sociocultural challenges. Students engaged with difficult texts and sources of information, which helped to hone important college ready skills such as analysis of nonfiction text and ability to parse them out, make critical conclusions and discuss the implications.

I think we achieved every goal! This was my first class at DDC and I was so impressed with the students. They all came from different schools, different levels, but they were very invested in the class. They showed up every Saturday morning! At first, students were cautious about asking clarifying questions but they soon facilitated conversations on their own, asking pertinent questions and providing thoughtful responses. The material became very real for them. We watched a documentary about children held at a border detention center and rounded up in a room with an instructor who was teaching them... the pledge of allegiance!!! The discussion in our class became really animated very quickly! "Why teach them the pledge of allegiance while they are in detention because they are in America? How do you explain to a child that you came to this country to find more opportunities and you end up being treated so badly?" I loved watching them express themselves with such passion and critical insights.

Their final project is one of my favorite memories. Students had to interview two people about their perspectives on immigration. This is when students began to realize the importance of the terminology that we had defined early in the semester. Through their projects, they learned that they sometimes assumed their neighbors' views of immigrants were the same as theirs, when they were not. In one of our short response papers for the class, one student reflected and wrote: "My responsibility with this information is to spread awareness... I am 17 years old, after learning more on immigration, I know there is a lot I can do... I think the Supreme Court should keep DACA because it gives undocumented immigrants the opportunity to work in the U.S." As intended, this class raised students' awareness of a significant contemporary social issue and they have the tools to further develop their understandings as well as to take action as an informed member of society.

This DDC class was a wonderful experience for me. I love teaching and I learned a lot working with the students. It truly has been a double discovery in that I learned just as much as my students did. I so appreciated this opportunity to teach at DDC that I am now thinking of a career as a professor. But first, I'm headed to Brazil as a recipient of a Fulbright Research Fellowship on Imposter Syndrome. This research will build on many of my own struggles through high school and higher education.

At Northwestern University, I was one of the many students with IS. I did not have a family who could introduce me to the do's and don'ts of the campus culture. In college, social networks play a big role in navigating everyday challenges. Being a first-generation college student and coming from a very different socioeconomic background made me feel uncomfortable in certain spaces at Northwestern. I did not have the same access to resources as my professors and Deans assumed I did in relation to my peers, it took me a bit longer to feel comfortable to ask questions and ask for support. It made me second guess my potential and at times feel unworthy of occupying spaces and I knew I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Eventually, I gained a support system that reminded me that I am worthy of being in those spaces just like everyone else.

I know that this research and my insights from my own experiences with IS will be a resource for my DDC students because they too have experienced feelings of IS. I look forward to what the journey ahead will be!

**Calling all DDC Alumni and Former Volunteers!
We want to hear from you!**

Click on this link to reconnect:

<https://ddc.college.columbia.edu/ddc-alumni-and-former-volunteers>

Partner with us to offer the gift of education! To help fund our programs and expand our outreach, click here: “[Change a Life](#)”

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Photo Credit: Natalia Dorogi SEAS'21/Society of Women Engineers Community Outreach Committee

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