

## 2016 NYCHA-CUNY Scholars Bios

### **Bassit Malam** **Clason Point Gardens, the Bronx**



*“I am inspired by my father. He didn’t have much parental support or much education. His ambition was to do better for his family. He traveled through many countries from Togo, in Africa, to find his way here, then brought our family out of adversity.”*

The son of African immigrants, **Bassit Malam** always knew that he wanted to attend college to make a better life for his family. He discovered his professional goals at Clason Point Gardens, where he got to know an elderly neighbor affected by dementia. Bassit became curious about the neurological disorder, eventually deciding to major in psychology, with a pre-med emphasis in neurology. CCNY provided the opportunity not only for an affordable education, but to volunteer in a research laboratory where he learned to carry out scientific experiments. Bassit now aspires to conduct research while working as a physician specializing in brain surgery.

### **Amanda Rueda** **Marcy Houses, Brooklyn**



*“I’m not afraid of things because that limits you. As long as I’m trying, I’m not failing. Failing only comes from giving up. I am inspired by Gandhi’s quote, ‘Be the change that you want to see in the world.’”*

Seeing many young adults in her Bedford-Stuyvesant community not go to college only pushed **Amanda Rueda**, harder to pursue her goals in higher education. Now in her final year, the pre-med student at City College of New York (CCNY) feels completely comfortable in CCNY’s dynamic academic environment. Amanda also appreciates the strong sense of community at

Marcy Houses, which contrasts the sense of anonymity in other places. At CCNY, Amanda enjoys a diverse community of friends. She works as a chemistry teacher's assistant and a statistics tutor.

**Clara Pena**  
**Butler Houses, the Bronx**



*“I love learning about biology, getting to know different kinds of people and interacting with my professors. There are many student resources, like advising and tutoring that support me here. It’s a great feeling knowing that you’re not alone.”*

When **Clara Pena**'s family moved into NYCHA's Butler Houses in the Bronx, the family felt more secure and Clara finally had a place to study at home, instead of staying late at school. Now in her junior year as biology major at City College of New York, the Dominican Republic native enjoys the variety of clubs, the diverse student body, and support resources like student advising that create a strong bond between students and staff. With affordable rent and tuition, Clara will be able to pursue her professional goals of becoming a doctor, instead of feeling pressured to get a job as soon as she graduates.

**Sobina Siddique**  
**Wagner Houses, Manhattan**



*“My 3-year-old daughter is the reason I’m continuing with my education. My dad worked hard for us and I want to do the same for my daughter.”*

Being a member of both the NYCHA and CUNY communities has enabled **Sobina Siddique** to pursue her interest in the demanding field of civil engineering. The studying required by her heavy work load make holding a part-time job impossible while attending school full time. And

as the mother of a 3 ½- year-old daughter, Sobina has additional responsibilities. However, concentrating on her studies and taking advantage of the many research opportunities at CCNY will prepare Sobina for the many career opportunities that the city holds for graduates of the well-respected CCNY engineering program.

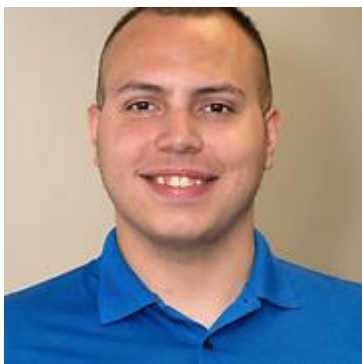
**Cristian Alvarado**  
**Williamsburg Houses, Brooklyn**



*“NYCHA provides an opportunity to move forward and advance in your life and I love the people and sense of community. In Williamsburg Houses, where I live, every Sunday from around noon to 4 p.m., people of all different ages all come together to play basketball.”*

Growing up in Williamsburg Houses, **Cristian Alvarado** appreciated the safety and affordability of public housing but wanted to use those advantages as a pathway to advancement. While the prospect of being the first in his family to attend college was daunting, Cristian took an interest in CUNY because its mission to provide opportunities for low-and moderate-income families closely resembled NYCHA’s. Cristian’s professional goals include working with inner-city youth to help them build bright futures, too.

**Elvis Rivera**  
**Vladeck Houses, Manhattan**



*“I want to go into theology next. I want to be a chaplain for the military. I want to serve those who serve us. Twenty-two veterans commit suicide every day—if I can save one, then I’ve done my job.”*

When Elvis Rivera's mother suggested that he apply to the affordable Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) where she worked, Elvis realized a way to continue achieving higher education without the high cost of tuition that he was experiencing at another college. As a criminal justice major, Elvis applied his passion for uniformed service with his compassion for helping others. After graduating BMCC next semester, he will be admitted to CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice in preparation to join the NYPD. But Elvis's plans don't end there. He wants to attend seminary to become a chaplain in the military, where he will help the uniformed force he admires, to deal with personal and service-related issues and concerns.

**Geneva Hidalgo**  
**Taft Houses, Manhattan**



*"I'm part of the RISE program at City College and I do research in ADHD and cognition lab. I love working with participants and learning how we can understand IQs and mental disabilities."*

Thanks to the safe haven of NYCHA's Taft Houses, where her mother has lived since the age of five, and CUNY's City College of New York, Geneva Hidalgo feels she has "a fighting chance at success." With a twin sister attending college at the same time, even the low NYCHA rent wasn't enough to make private college affordable. Fortunately, the modest CUNY tuition -- along with the financial help, academic support, and specialized training -- made attending college and pursuing her career possible. Now, as a third-year student majoring in psychology, Geneva feels that she can succeed in behavioral research and achieve her goal to help others. Through the RISE program that assists underprivileged, minority students pursue research careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), Geneva is already working in an ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) cognition laboratory studying the consequences on adults of various childhood ADHD treatments.

**Jesenia Rodriguez**  
**Baruch Houses, Manhattan**



*“My favorite part of college is being there and learning. I love to explore the community of people my age and older. I love the environment where I can learn not just from my professors and teachers, but also the people around me.”*

Jesenia Rodriguez is looking forward to graduating from Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and attending John Jay College of Criminal Justice next fall to pursue a degree in forensic accounting. Growing up in a difficult neighborhood and dealing with her family’s financial struggles created obstacles which have only made Jesenia more determined to reach her goals. Jesenia has received support from BMCC’s SEEK program, guidance counselors, and tutoring, and developed leadership skills as treasurer of the Accounting Club. Jesenia credits her NYCHA-CUNY Resident Scholarship not only for providing financial support but the encouragement she needed to be “an inspiration for [her] family and the community.”

**Ka Ho Lo**  
**Whitman Houses, Brooklyn**



*“I am studying civil engineering to give back to society by working on engineering projects—to help NYCHA communities by building houses and improving their living conditions.”*

As a NYCHA resident, Ka Ho Lo recognizes the importance of a comfortable and affordable living environment, which is why he’s studying civil engineering at the City College of New York. Becoming a civil engineer will allow Ka Ho to contribute to society by improving the

living environment through various engineering projects. In addition to its low tuition, Ka Ho appreciates CUNY for opportunities to broaden his horizon by working with diverse groups of people at the American Museum of Natural History as a member of the CUNY Service Corps. Communicating well with people is “the first step to being able to improve their environment as an engineer,” he says. Working as an engineering intern at the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation this summer also gave Ka Ho a chance to serve the community and advance his goals as an engineer.

**Maria Rodriguez**  
**Drew Hamilton Houses, Manhattan**



*“Helping the kids from my community, giving them the best education possible and guiding them through the right track are only a few ways I’d give back to my community.”*

Maria Rodriguez, a junior at City College of New York, calls CUNY “the bridge between our present and our future.” After moving into Drew Hamilton Houses while in high school, Maria discovered that NYCHA would financially enable her to be the first in her family to attend college. Concerned that speaking English as a second language would hold her back in college, Maria turned that challenge into an asset by majoring in bilingual childhood education. Maria soon learned that NYCHA “is what you make it” and that CUNY is “a facilitator to help you overcome your difficulties and to reach your goals.”

**Shawntae Burgess**  
**Jefferson Houses, Manhattan**



*“I want to be an artist, so I am constantly being inspired. I want to write stories and books. I want to make a children’s book to help support them.”*

As a black woman born in East Harlem, and a lifelong resident of Jefferson Houses, Shawntae Burgess felt her prospects in life were limited. With few role models to inspire her and college seemingly too expensive to consider, she thought her “destiny was already pre-determined.” Nonetheless, Shawntae worked hard in high school to get accepted into City College of New York, and thanks to its affordable tuition, financial aid, and scholarships, the cost of her higher education is nominal. Attending college means so much more for Shawntae, she says, because it’s a dream that she could hardly imagine.

**Stephanie Lu**  
**Riis Houses, Manhattan**



*“I was a part of Henry Street Settlement and it shaped a lot of who I am today. I want to give youth the opportunity to learn about going to college, and taking college trips and tours.”*

Traveling two hours each way from NYCHA’s Riis Houses in Manhattan to attend the CUNY College of Staten Island hasn’t diminished the enthusiasm or accomplishments of Stephanie Lu, who transferred to CUNY after attending a private university upstate. Stephanie’s family moved three or four times when she was age 10 before finding the stability that public housing provided. From the perspective of a third-year undergraduate, Stephanie now feels that the interest in people and community that she developed from close relationships at Riis Houses led to her



focusing on sociology and anthropology as her major. After interning with Healthy CUNY, Stephanie now plans to continue her education at the graduate level in social work and public health.

**William White**

**Throggs Neck Houses, the Bronx**



*“The drive to improve my life is to have the opportunities to improve the lives of others.”*

Throggs Neck Houses resident William White calls NYCHA and CUNY “the twin pillars of my salvation.” Dropping out of high school before gaining basic skills, he first attended CUNY’s Borough of Manhattan Community College which provided a “desperately needed second chance.” He then transferred to Hunter College, where the political science major has an almost perfect grade point average. William was dealt another blow with the passing of his mother which, without the support of NYCHA, could have left him homeless. Remaining in his mother’s apartment, William was able to continue his studies knowing that at least the place he called home would remain unchanged. He now plans to attend law school and is well aware that “the staggering price tag associated with law school would have been a devastating road block if not for the CUNY system.”



**Yanisleidy Lewis Magan**  
**Van Dyke Houses, Brooklyn**



*“There are so many programs available and opportunities at NYCHA. You give people who have their GEDs opportunities; or if they don’t have their GEDs, you encourage them to go get them. I think that’s really cool.”*

Learning to live in New York was not easy for Yanisleidy and her single mother, who immigrated from Panama when Yanisleidy was nine years old. But it would have been a lot harder without NYCHA which allowed them to live independently in a place of their own. Yanisleidy soon learned English well enough to score near the top of her class, just as she had in her native country. Accepted at her first-choice, Brooklyn College, she is receiving a top notch education, with wonderful professors, eager students and available staff, while pursuing double major in early childhood education and children youth studies.

**Not pictured**

**Jennefer Abdullah**  
**Seward Park Extension, Manhattan**

Growing up in public housing, Jennefer Abdullah at first attributed her academic success to the lack of obstacles, even feeling her family was well off. But after a reduction to her family’s income, Jennefer came to understand her family’s vulnerability -- and to appreciate the difference that NYCHA made in her family’s life. Foregoing the chance to attend a prestigious private university to spare her family the financial burden, Jennefer decided to attend CUNY’s Baruch College. The appropriateness of her decision was confirmed when the future business major performed a “cost-benefit analysis” that took into account graduating debt-free with an accredited business degree from Baruch vs. attending a private college. That decision is already paying off for Jennefer, who is thriving academically at Baruch without spiraling into debt.

**Leon Jon**  
**Carver Houses, Manhattan**

Leon Jon would have looked for work to support his family directly after graduating high school if not for the “affordability and security of NYCHA.” Instead, he’s in the honors program at Baruch College and preparing to reach his goal of becoming a consultant. Leon credits NYCHA and CUNY for the opportunity to focus the majority of his time on advancing his career. In addition to Baruch’s affordability, Leon appreciates the many career resources, including practice job interviews, resume workshops, and networking events. In addition, Leon is looking forward to expanding his horizons by studying abroad in China next summer, with a stipend from the honors program. Feeling blessed by NYCHA’s and CUNY’s support, Leon tries to be a “blessing to those around [him]” by volunteering in programs for children’s education and food security.

### **Ayesha Khan**

#### **Mariner’s Harbor, Staten Island**

Raised by a single mother who inspires her to achieve, Ayesha Khan dreams of becoming a pediatrician. She credits NYCHA’s affordable housing with allowing her family to save some money for college; and as a two-time recipient of a NYCHA-CUNY Resident Scholarship, Ayesha has used the scholarship funds to help pay for preparation courses for the medical college admissions test. “The generous support of institutions like CUNY and NYCHA,” Ayesha says, has made it possible for her to become “a dedicated and striving student...confident that [she] will work toward being selected for medical school.”