Graduate Profiles

JACQUELINE VELEZ
2015 Graduate, Holyoke, MA
Writer and Criminal Justice Reform Advocate

“I’d never written like that until I took my first Clemente Course. It opened my eyes to this whole world, this whole canon of writers. It also opened up something in me that might have died or never fully come alive.”

In 2020, along with graduating from the Bard Microcollege and working on the reelection campaign of Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey, Jacqueline Velez saw her essay published in O, The Oprah Magazine. It was the realization of a dream for Jacqueline, who had been filling notebooks her whole life. She began the essay in her Clemente Course, responding to a reading by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Titled “I Survived 20 Days in Solitary Confinement: Here’s How I Got Through,” the piece resonated for readers who were considering their own experiences of isolation at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. For Jacqueline, it captured an experience that had changed her life and led her to become an advocate for criminal justice reform. Next up for Jacqueline: earning her bachelor’s, starting a nonprofit, and writing a memoir.

LAMONT SMITH
1997 Graduate, New York, NY
Clemente Board Member and Emmy Award-Winning Video Editor

“Clemente was the opposite of the experience I had in public school. Everyone was there on purpose and excited to learn. These were real college professors giving us college-level work, not dumbing it down. They respected our intelligence and advanced it.”

Joining the Clemente Board of Directors in 2021, Lamont Smith felt he had come full circle. Lamont was a student in Clemente’s second ever class, discovering the program after he had completed a GED and found himself entering a workforce training program. For someone with a huge intellectual curiosity but limited opportunities, it was exactly the right fit. Soon he was reading Nietzsche and Plato and attending his graduation with New York City Mayor David Dinkins. After Clemente, Lamont pursued a bachelor’s degree and caught the “television bug.” Today he’s a video editor with NBC Sports in a job that has brought him to four continents, a dozen countries, and five Olympic Games. He says that Clemente unlocked his potential as it has for countless other adult students, and that once that happened, it took him around the world.
**SARAH BREGLER**  
2019 Graduate, Providence, RI  
U.S. Marine Corps Combat Veteran, Clemente Veterans’ Initiative (CVI) Discussion Facilitator  

“CVI opens the door for veterans to contribute in a new way that validates their experience and harnesses their skills. It affirms that you still have a purpose.”

Before she enrolled in CVI, Sarah Bregler wasn’t sure if she could succeed in a formal educational setting. She had left the Marines in 2016 after the Humvee she was riding in hit an IED and she was seriously injured. She spent almost a year in recovery and had to relearn simple tasks like tying her shoes. But in the CVI classroom she discovered that her perspective was not only welcome, but necessary, and that changed how she thought about herself. She thrived in the program and returned to the following year as a discussion facilitator, leading conversations on topics as wide ranging as Tim O’Brien’s short stories, consequentialism, and Plato’s Cave. She even traveled to Washington to advocate for congressional support for the humanities. Now she sees how her military experience offers her a different way to serve, one that creates new opportunities for her fellow veterans.

**CARL CHANDLER**  
2015 Graduate, Boston, MA  
Producer and Film Subject, *A Reckoning in Boston*  

“One you eliminate doubt you realize ‘I’m capable.’ That’s the gift Clemente gives you. Once you realize you’re capable, you want to be as capable as you can be.”

When the documentary film *A Reckoning in Boston* airs on PBS in 2022, viewers will get to know Carl Chandler as a deep thinker, a grandfather, and a student at Harvard. But first they’ll see him as a Clemente participant. Carl came to the class as a lifelong reader and found a place where his intellectual curiosity was honored and fed. Along with Kafi Dixon, he is one of two Boston Clemente students profiled in the film, as well as one of the producers. As it has screened around the U.S., Kafi and Carl have entered discussions about educational inequities, institutional racism, and the power of the humanities. While viewers may revel in hearing him read from poet Amiri Baraka, Carl prefers to fly under the radar. But he knows that telling his story can be important for helping others to realize, “If he can do it, I can do it too.”

For more information about the Clemente Course in the Humanities or to find out how you can help Clemente transform lives, contact:  

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