

Meet Alumni President Melinda Ayala

Melinda Ayala considers her recent election as President of the Union County College Alumni Association to be one of the proudest moments of her life. It's right up there with giving birth to two children. Right behind motherhood is her academic achievements—being the first in her family to earn a high-school diploma and a college degree.



Alumni President Melinda Ayala

the 10th grade and became a mom. I always knew I wanted to go back to school someday, but having a child with a disability and also having to keep a full-time job to make ends meet made it difficult to go back. I eventually began studying an old GED (high-school equivalency test) prep book and went to Union County College and took the GED. I passed it on the first try.

Q: And that made you the first in your family ever to get a high-school diploma, even though you were the youngest of seven children.

A: Well, yes. But when my siblings saw I could do it, I guess it woke them up. Three of them also went back for their GED. And my oldest sister got her bachelor's degree this year (2015), just like me.

Q: And then you went to Union County College.

A: Yes, and I won't lie. Going to college wasn't easy. I tested into remedial classes and I needed a lot of help with my math and writing. After failing several quizzes, I started going to the (Academic Learning Center) for

tutoring help. It was really hectic as a single parent, dropping my kids off and picking them up. Once I began taking regular classes, I did really well. Being in (the Educational Opportunity Fund) cohort gave me incredible support. I started getting good grades, and in my last year I became president of the Chi Alpha Epsilon Honor Society. I received awards from Governor Christie and Senator Lesniak. I was also involved with the Women's Leadership Club, which prepares women for the working world. Before I joined that group, I was uncomfortable talking in front of large groups of people. I also was able to brush up on my interview skills and learned about dressing for success. In fact, I'll never leave home without having an extra pair of stockings in my bag.



Union gave me the courage to continue my education..."

Q: But you graduated from Union with honors and your good grades got you into Rutgers, and this past May, you graduated with a bachelor's degree.

A: My whole family was very proud and told me how proud they were, including my mother and father, and my older brother. For Commencement, my relatives came from as far away as Puerto Rico and Pennsylvania because they said "they wouldn't miss it" and "it's a great achievement for the family. You're a great role model for the rest of us."

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Union's Vice President of Student Development Helen Brewer leading a Dec. 9 information session on the College's "Close the Gap" initiatives.

Introducing "Close the Gap"

Lost in the fanfare over Union County College's record setting 15.7 percent graduation rate is the overall graduation rate for Union's African American students, which is a far less palatable rate of 8.6 percent.

Over the past year, the Student Development Department has spearheaded a number of new initiatives to address the "achievement gap." A program called SWAAG—"Students Who Achieve Academic Greatness"—provides intrusive advising and group activities to foster retention and

completion among African-American and Hispanic students. A program titled "Males to Men"—in which SWAAG advisors team up with EOF staff—specifically targets African-American male students. A Women's Leadership Group meets regularly to support African-American female students.

The Union County College Foundation is looking to help by creating a "Project Achievement Gap" Fund that will help close the achievement gap. As Executive Director Doug Rouse says, "The Fund will financially support the efforts of the

Union County College Achievement Gap Program and fund specific scholarships designed to help African American students complete their degrees. The Fund will be managed by the Foundation office with advisement from faculty, staff, and key volunteers.

The Fund will support completion scholarships, on-campus employment, academic Boot Camps, advisement and mentoring, transfer support, and leadership training.

For the "Project Achievement Gap" Fund to be fully endowed, the College will need to raise \$50,000. Having a March 31 target date will help ensure that African-American students will begin receiving this support during the 2017 academic year.

For more information about the "Project Achievement Gap" Fund, contact Doug Rouse at (908) 709-7113.



The Union County College Alumni Association wishes you a happy and healthy New Year.

A suggestion for a great New Year's resolution. Rekindle the real magic in your life. Regain the groove. Catch up with the people and the place that helped launch you to greatness. This year, make your resolution to be to join Union's Alumni Association.

Newly Endowed Alumni Scholarship

The Alumni Association has recently endowed a scholarship in the memory of Winifred Weislogel, Union County College, Class of 1947. The new endowed scholarship is called the Alumni Scholarship for Degree Completion and will help current students reach their graduation goal.

Since it is endowed (with a principal value of at least \$25,000), the Scholarship is guaranteed to generate 5 percent (or \$1,250 at the minimum level) every year, forever, to help students in need.

You can help raise the annual support even further by contributing to the Scholarship Fund. Visit the Foundation at www.uccfoundation.org and click "Donate." Or use the attached envelope to mail in your contribution. Or call Doug Rouse at (908) 709-7505.

Notes from the Graduating Class of...



Former Union County College student John Donnadio (at the podium) is the executive director of the New Jersey Association of Counties.

He leads a group that represents the interests of all 21 county governments in the State House in Trenton. Born in Newark, Donnadio grew up in Scotch Plains and attended Union to help him transfer to NYC's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where he earned a bachelor's degree. He has a juris doctor from New York Law School and a master's in business administration from Saint Peter's University in Jersey City.

1973

Robert O'Holla is a veteran in the medical supplies industry and is currently the Operating Partner for New York City-based Endeavour Medtech Growth Fund. He previously served in

Discover the Fountain of Youth

Any graduate or former student with 30 credits or more may join the Union County College Alumni Association.

Dues are only \$15 for three years, or a Lifetime Membership for \$125. Be a member of this dedicated group who value the education they received at Union. Membership includes:

- Discount at College Book Stores
- Fitness Center Membership for only \$25 per semester.
- Free library privileges at all three campuses.
- Invitation to join trips, events, and other projects

To join, use the attached envelope.

executive positions for Nfocus Neuromedical, Johnson & Johnson, and Ethicon. After graduating from Union with an associate degree in biology, he earned a bachelor's degree from Upsala College, and a master's in business administration from Fairleigh Dickinson University.

1976

Antoinette Gega is a Financial Services Representative at the MetLife Premier Client Group of New Jersey. Prior positions include serving in a similar role for the Creative Financial Group of NJ, as a supervisor for the Robert Plan, and as a no-fault claims examiner for Hanover Insurance. After graduating from Union, she received a bachelor's in business from Kean University.



Antoinette Gega of the Class of '76 ("That's the Spirit!")

1983

Francisco Melendez, Sr. is the Vice President of Operations for NJ-based Netta Architects. As such, he oversees the operation of the firm, assigns resources to meet deadlines, and addresses clients' problems and contracts. His previous employers include USA Architects, Planners + Interior Designers, Ronald Schmidt & Associates, and EI Associates. After earning an associate of arts in engineering at Union, he received a bachelor's degree in architecture from the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

1995

John Parella is an Employee Relations Specialist for Canoga Park, Cal.-based ABM Security. His chief responsibilities include investigating and responding to employee complaints regarding harassment, discrimination, payroll issues, and fraud. After graduating from Union with an associate of arts in business administration, he earned a bachelor's degree from Kean University and a master's in labor and employment relations from Rutgers.

1998

Javier Rivero is the President for Miami/Fort Lauderdale-based Brickell Global Markets Inc., which specializes in wealth management. His previous employers include Merrill Lynch, Wells Fargo, and Wachovia. After graduating from Union with an associate degree in business, Javier earned a bachelor's in business and finance from Kean University in 1998.



Javier Rivero of the Class of '98



One of our newest Alumni: Class of '15 graduate Ryan Nealis.

2015

Ryan Nealis began classes at Union County College in the summer of 2014. By taking more than 15 credits a semester, and in some cases up to 22, he earned an associate degree in 10 months. In

January, he will begin classes for his bachelor's degree at Kean University, which he hopes to complete in three semesters.

Union Re-Union

This is an official publication of Union County College: Dr. Margaret M. McMenamin, President; Dr. Maris Lown, Chief Academic Officer; Mrs. Helen Brewer, Vice President, Student Development; Tammy Smith, Dean of College Life; and Rebecca May, Assistant Dean of College Life.

The newsletter is produced quarterly by the College Relations Department, Ellen Dotto, Executive Director; Sara Bontempo, Graphic Designer.

Alumni Board of Directors: Melinda Ayala '11, President; Nancy Benz '73, Vice President; Suzanne Covine '58, Treasurer; Susan Lordi '13, Secretary. Trustees: Bonnie Bendlin '68, Jeff Chait, '94, Camille Cormier '81, Marion Curka '50, Donna Herran '85, Jean Kellogg '01, Linda Ives Kurdilla '89, Deborah Fonteix '75, and Marion Menzer '47.



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Q: And you completed your bachelor's degree this year. So what's next?

A: For my studies, I plan to go back to Rutgers for a master's degree and a doctorate in Psychology. For my career, I'm planning on working in the Meadowlands. And I'll continue to do volunteer work for teenagers—coaching basketball and as a mentor in the Boys and Girls Club. More long-term, my goal is to someday open a center for children that provides counseling services, homework assistance, and a recreational place—a safe place for children.

Q: And this summer you were also elected as President of the Union County College Alumni Association.

A: I'm very excited and honored.

When I first started attending Union, I never imagined that I would be holding this title as Alumni President. Graduating from Union gave me a great opportunity to develop my talents and Union gave me the courage to continue my education at Rutgers.

Q: So what specifically do you envision for the Alumni Association?

A: I see the Alumni Association capitalizing on its greatest strength, which are the people who volunteer their time, talent, and treasure to support the College. The Alumni Board is made up of Union graduates who have shown me their commitment to the College in so many ways. Some are members of the Heritage Society (in naming Union

County College in their will). Some have donated "leaves" (gifts of \$250 or more) to the Tree of Education or have created endowed scholarships for students. They participate in commencement ceremonies, and in scholarship fundraisers like the golf outing and the gala, including the Board's treasurer, Suzanne Covine, who has chaired the gala for the past two years. I look forward to working with the Board and hearing from Alumni on how to improve the Association. I am sure I will have an exciting tenure as President.

Alumni President Melinda Ayala would like to hear from you. Please share your questions, concerns, and ideas with her by emailing her at Prieta9@verizon.net

The Sundial is crumbling

The Sundial (right side of photo) is crumbling. If you've ever attended an astronomy class in the Sperry Observatory on the Cranford campus—or a "stargazing" event that the Amateur Astronomers Inc. hosts at Sperry most Friday nights—you know about the wonderful sundial located on the terrace. The Sundial was a gift to the College from the Cranford Kiwanis in 1972 and is registered as one of the nation's preeminent sundials. Even so, the 40-year legend is in such serious disrepair that it has become a safety hazard. Unless the College receives \$80,000 in funding support to effect repairs, Union will need to remove the sundial—with a May 30, 2016, deadline looming.

The Cranford Kiwanis are leading a campaign to raise the necessary repair funds that the College's Foundation collects and administered. For more information, you may



write to Uccsundialproject@mail.com or call Stephen Nacco at 908-709-7005. If you wish to make a cash or check contribution, you may use the attached envelope. For credit cards, you may make an online donation via the Foundation's Web site at www.uccfoundation.org. Just click "Donate" on the bottom right of the page and then for "Other" please type in "Sundial."