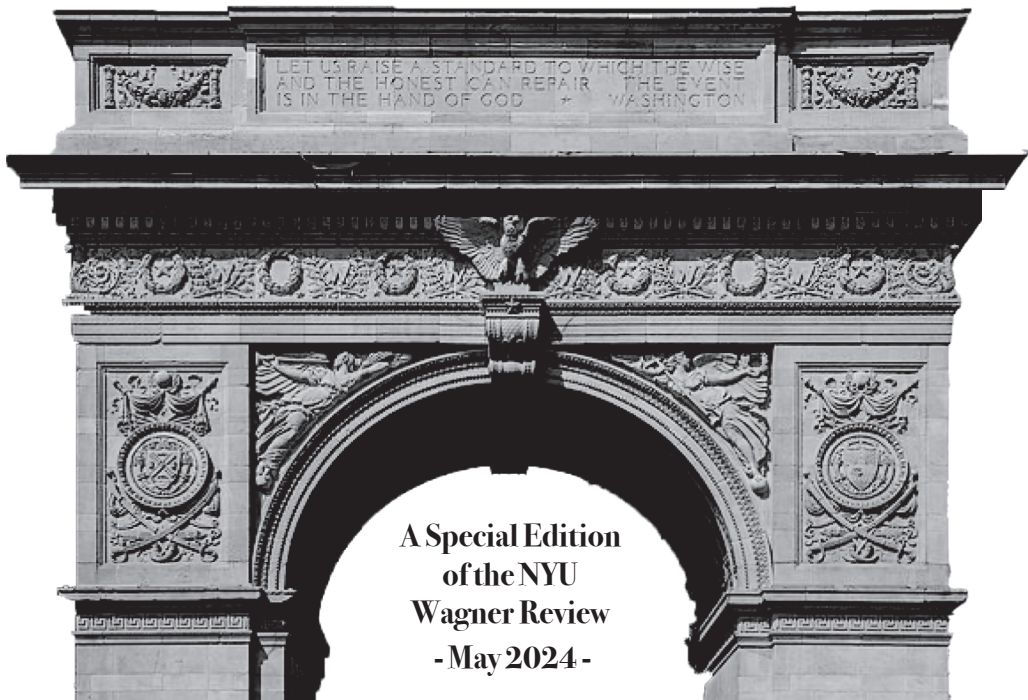


# What I (Actually) Learned in Public Service School



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# Welcome to New York

*By Ben Hitchcock*

As I've worked through my Master's in Public Administration at NYU Wagner, I have had to explain to countless baffled friends, cousins, coworkers, barbers, dental hygienists, and airplane seat-mates what one actually studies at a school of public service. Public policy, public service—these are big, vague concepts, tough to define even for practitioners.

“It's mostly studying the government,” I sometimes say. “And you know the American government—there's always something that needs fixing!”

This line gets rueful chuckles out of literally any constituency.

But the quip doesn't reveal much about what's actually happening here. Us Wagner students arrive in Washington Square from near and far, united only by a do-gooder spirit. What happens next? What do we learn in public service school?

This spring, we at the Wagner Review invited a few student leaders from the Wagner class of 2024 to reflect on their experiences in grad school and try to answer those questions. Their answers are collected in this booklet.

Personally, policy school taught me about New York. Two years ago, I hauled a duffel bag out of a rented truck, craning my neck up at Manhattan glittering above me. I had moved to

the city essentially sight unseen. I didn't know FiDi from Flatbush. But in class I learned about why the city looks the way it does, and why New Yorkers live the way we do, and why the rent is so damn high. I learned that the city is completely broken in about 40,000 different ways, but I also learned to see its potential. Improving our tangled metropolis will take tremendous, perhaps even delusional dedication, but Wagner at least showed me where we might start.

At Wagner I also made friends. These friends, too, taught me about the city. We sprawled on picnic blankets on the gentle slopes of Central Park. We danced 'til late in Brooklyn basements. Mostly, we huddled together in dim Village bars with sticky tables, talking and laughing ourselves tired. What an education!

We are all champing at the bit now, ready to sprint out of this academic enclosure, restless after two years of seminars. I leave policy school with a clear understanding of the huge obstacles facing those of us who cling to hope. But over the last two years, I have been struck by my classmates' optimism, and smarts, and vigor, characteristics that are reflected in the essays collected here.

Surrounded by these people, it does not feel foolish to say that our goal is to build a better world. It won't be easy, but I like our chances.



*Ben Hitchcock is graduating with a Master's in Public Administration and a concentration in Policy Analysis. Ben was the Editor in Chief of the Wagner Review for the 2023-24 school year.*

# The power of comunidad

*By JD Mazuera Arias*

My journey to NYU Wagner’s graduation stage has been far from conventional. As a Colombian immigrant who happens to be formerly undocumented and gay, the path to public service was littered with hurdles, both seen and unseen. Yet, despite some dark moments, I have walked this path with increasing certainty and pride, driven by a firm belief in the power of public service—a belief instilled in me by mi familia, particularly mi abuelita, from a young age. Her words will forever live with me: “Ayude donde puedas, sin importar a quien.” Help where you can, no matter who it is.

At the beginning of my Wagner journey, I was awarded the Bloomberg Fellowship. The fellowship didn’t just ease the financial burden of graduate school—it symbolized hope and opportunity, demonstrating that higher education and impactful careers in public service are attainable, regardless of socioeconomic background. For many seeking a professional career in helping others, the entry barriers—low wages, impostor syndrome—can be daunting, but my experience at Wagner has reinforced my belief that public policy should be driven and created by those impacted by it the most.

A year later, my peers elected me to represent them as President of the Wagner Student Association, a moment that will

forever be etched in my memory. I felt vulnerable sharing my story with my classmates, but I was met with overwhelming support. For me, the journey underscored a collection of vital lessons: the importance of shared experiences, the strength found in diversity, and the power of connecting with others.

Studying in a university, one can sometimes feel disconnected from the on-the-ground realities of those we aim to serve. But now, as I prepare to turn the corner into the next chapter of my career, it is clear to me that this time spent learning here will serve me well. I will carry with me the knowledge gained in the classroom, but also the lived experiences and personal growth that Wagner has facilitated on the colorful canvas of New York City.

The most important lessons I have learned at Wagner transcend academic achievements. This journey has reaffirmed my commitment to public service. It has fueled my passion for advocating for those on the margins of society and bolstered my ability to find strength in the rich tapestry of my Colombian heritage and the resilience of the immigrant community in the US. Leaving Wagner, I know that at the heart of public service lies a profound respect for human dignity, a commitment to social justice, and an unyielding belief in the power of comunidad.



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# Bridging borders, building futures

*By Judy Huynh*

As a first-generation international student from Toronto, Canada, I arrived at Wagner with a mix of self-doubt and determination, my modest undergraduate GPA clashing with my entrepreneurial spirit. Looking back now, graduate school served as a launchpad for demonstrating my resilience. The most profound lessons I learned lay hidden beneath the surface of academic syllabi and professional internships. It was the intangible experiences, leadership opportunities, and bold ideas that truly shaped my path.

When I became the Chair of the Urban Planning Student Association, I discovered that leadership is not just about guiding others—it is about inspiring and being inspired by a team of talented individuals. These peers became my lifelong friends and future collaborators in the interdisciplinary world of urban planning. Whether it's housing, transportation, or environmental planning, Wagner taught me that the world is indeed your oyster, and your voice can and should echo through the halls of power.

Wagner took me far beyond Washington Square Park, too. Taking the Urban Health Equity course in London, through the School of Global Public Health, broadened my understanding of urban planning's impact on health outcomes. Our role is not only to enhance quality of life, but also to create environments

that promote well-being, bridge inequities, and foster community cohesion. Back on this side of the Atlantic, I collaborated with a team from across NYU, including students from Wagner, CUSP, Schack, and SPS, on a project to revitalize a coastal area in North Charleston, South Carolina for the Urban Land Institute's Hines competition. My specialty, urban design, is not necessarily a core element of Wagner's standard curriculum, but the school allowed me the flexibility to find design classes and opportunities to enter design competitions to showcase my creativity.

Through these projects, I felt encouraged to think outside the box, to find unexpected synergies, and to bring my lived experiences into my academic pursuits. With my peers by my side, I came to understand that there are no bad ideas, only those awaiting the right collective to bring them to fruition.

Once I graduate, I will carry with me not just a degree but a rich array of experiences that have shaped my perspective on urban planning and life itself. The lessons learned and connections forged at grad school will continue to inspire and guide me in creating a better, healthier, and more equitable society. This has been a pivotal experience, and as I stand on the precipice of the future, it fills me with satisfaction to have honored my family and to have carved a path that others may follow.



*Judy Huynh is graduating with a Master's in Urban Planning with a concentration in City and Community Planning. Judy was the Chair of the Urban Planning Student Association for the 2023-24 school year.*

# The vision that guides you

*By Ceinna Little*

In 2018, my grandmother's house caught fire on the fifth anniversary of her death. The damage was so extensive that my mother and her siblings decided to sell the house for \$250,000, hoping to repurchase the house once the damage was repaired. However, in 2020, after the repairs, the house was listed for \$650,000—about 6.5 times more than what my grandmother paid in 1973. My grandmother raised four children as a single Black mother on a low salary, and the only asset she was able to leave behind was the house in Oakland, California—a once undesirable city because of its high crime rates and history of redlining. Yet as the neighborhood changed, my family had been priced out.

This experience made me realize that my true passion lay in affordable housing, community development, and preventing displacement. So I abandoned my plans to become a nonprofit administrator, and as soon as I finished my Bachelor's in Business Administration I shifted gears and enrolled in the urban planning program at NYU Wagner.

My time at Wagner has allowed me to learn from, connect with, and grow amidst urban planning professionals. I am grateful for the professors and classmates who have helped guide me through the program. I've been able to see how connected the

urban planning profession is in New York City and how varied the work can be. I've worked in housing policy research at the NYU Furman Center, land use planning at the New York City Economic Development Corporation, and community development at St. Nicks Alliance. Each experience was unique and allowed me to contribute to work that ultimately had the same goal: making the built environment work for New Yorkers.

This work experience, coupled with my experience inside the classroom, has given me a new perspective on how I—or anyone—can best enact change. There is no single answer. Whether you do advocacy, research, or development work, what matters is the connections you make, the people you touch, and the vision that guides you. Wagner has allowed me to start the process of making change and guided me on how to continue that change in the future.

Wagner has been a resource. I have been able to develop new skills in the classroom and I will now go out into the world feeling emboldened to use those skills in my work. I will leave Wagner without any doubts or unfulfilled desires about my time here, only excitement for the positive changes I know my peers and I will make.



*Ceinna Little is graduating with a Master's in Urban Planning with a concentration in City and Community Planning. Ceinna was the Chair of the Black Student Association for the 2023-24 school year.*



# Not in this for ourselves

*By Amelia Cecchetto*

I walked out of Wagner's new student orientation in September 2022 feeling a sense of hope and optimism that I hadn't felt in a long time. Our class started at the tail end of the age of COVID restrictions, and many of us had spent the past few years in isolation, working in issue areas that had been hit hard by the extremist politics that took over our country. When I came to Wagner, I learned quickly how deeply each of us needs community to do the hard work of making change.

My classmates and I hit the ground running. While at Wagner, I've had the honor of being President of the NYU Reproductive Health Action Network student group. We started a program handing out emergency contraception to students across campus, and continued our outreach and education on sexual and reproductive health. These programs came directly from what I learned at Wagner and have already impacted hundreds of students at NYU. Wagner's MPA program allowed me to hone in on my interest areas of advocacy and political action, with a special emphasis on strategic communications.

Wagner also encouraged me to look at the world through a policy lens. Why are things the way they are? Who made these decisions? Who holds the power to change those decisions? If there's a problem, there's probably a policy creating it—and a

policy opportunity to change it.

But Wagner taught me, ultimately, about people. Many people go to grad school to add a section to their resume or fast-track a promotion and a higher salary. While Wagner absolutely provided these opportunities, and earning an MPA is a huge personal accomplishment, most of us aren't in this for ourselves. We're called to public service because we believe in a better future, we've found something we're passionate about and there's nothing else we can see ourselves doing.

Public service isn't exactly known for glamor or big paychecks, and committing to public service isn't a decision to be taken lightly. There's a lot to fix—from health care to housing, immigration policy to voting rights, reproductive rights to the climate crisis, we have our work cut out for us. My colleagues in this program have shown me that our generation has the knowledge, drive, and grit to take on these problems.

Don't get me wrong: I'm still pretty nervous and fired up about the state of the world. However, so is everyone else in my cohort. We're all determined to create a better world than the one we walk into as graduates.



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