Following a transformative experience at Kingsborough, Lavar Thomas, Liberal Arts class of ’11, is now a Peace Corps community health volunteer, serving in Western Province, Rwanda for 26 months. He works with the staff in a local health center where he is teaching them English, identifying the needs of the locals, such as nutrition, hygiene and proper sanitation, and helping those suffering from malaria as well. Working beyond his intended role, he is also building a library in the community to promote self-education and learning about different cultures.

“I know with the new vision that Rwanda has after the genocide that happened in 1994, it’s trying to become more efficient. They’re trying to create a knowledge-based economy,” said Thomas. “With the library idea, this can actually be supplementary for their whole vision in trying to improve the country and if you want to help a country to progress, or to develop, you have to have an educated population, and through empowering the girls and youth, I think this can really be a step in the right direction.”

A graduate from Abraham Lincoln High School, who didn’t do well in his SAT exam and failed to make the final cut in the Posse Program, a prestigious
college transfer program for high-achieving high school students, Thomas was left in tears. His high-school college counselor knew Dr. Rachelle Goldsmith, Kingsborough’s Honors Program Director, and set up an interview for Thomas for the Presidential Scholarship Program.

Thomas had his interview the next day and was accepted into the program immediately.

Thomas climbed up quickly at KCC’s Honors Program. As a freshman, he introduced himself to Dr. Fakhari, Assistant VP for Academic Affairs and Associate Provost, and through their conversations he learned about the Salzburg Global Seminar and the Kaplan Leadership Program.

“I didn’t know if I was able to get such a competitive scholarship, but Kingsborough, they supported me so much—Dr. Goldsmith, Dr. Fakhari, the Honors office,” said Thomas.

Kingsborough also made it possible for Thomas to attend the Salzburg Global Seminar where he picked up his love of travel and a passion to tackle global issues.

“They taught me why it’s important to travel and why it’s important to leave my community to see a different part of the world,” said Thomas.

After Kingsborough, Thomas attended Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts where, with the support of the Kaplan Scholarship he obtained his B.A. in Political Science. He worked in the Massachusetts State House and eventually decided to pursue his goal of seeing different parts of the world by joining the Peace Corps.

In Rwanda, Thomas’ “counterpart,” a local lab technician, is one of the friends that he influences greatly. He started learning English two years ago, picked it up rapidly and has high hopes for the future.

“Sometimes I play Scrabble with him, so he can learn new words and see how words look,” said Thomas.

The lab technician dreams of one day running his own health center. Thomas believes in making such small investments in people in order to impact the community.

“My goal as a volunteer is to touch one person at a time,” said Thomas. “By starting a library, for example, I create a resource that serves as a learning institution or environment where people can go and do for themselves. If I can spark the light of self-education in the lab technician, imagine what he can do when I’m not here.”

As a high-school student, Thomas never thought the accomplishments he has achieved so far were possible.

“And here I am,” said Thomas. “People see you along your journey; they see potential and they say, ‘you know what? I want to invest time in you,’ and Kingsborough did that for me… Kingsborough taught me how to dream.”
A death of a child is never easy, especially for a mother whose whole world revolved around her first-born child. Esther Arden, however, was able to rise from such a tragedy and become an occupational therapist.

Liam was diagnosed in-utero with a rare and severe brain defect. Despite advice to terminate her pregnancy, the couple’s faith led them to go to term. By the age of two, he overcame the odds and was functioning at a level above his peers. However, in a single night, he passed away.

“This life-changing event showed me first-hand that the present is all we have,” said Arden.

Liam had received excellent therapy, which was the motivator for Arden to pursue occupational therapy.

Her family moved to New York City, and her second son was born in 2006 with Down’s syndrome.

“I felt an urgency to follow my dream and after figuring out what the prerequisites were, to enter occupational therapy school, I came to KCC,” said Arden.

At Kingsborough, she achieved many feats utilizing the various resources on campus. The Honors Program played a huge role in Arden’s time on campus.

She was selected for the Salzburg Global Seminar and was a student guest speaker at the annual Donors Gala on campus, which boosted her confidence. Arden also won the Women’s Forum Award.

“The professors at KCC truly serve the students,” said Arden. “They are available to the students beyond lecture hours and make students feel comfortable to approach them.”

Arden grew up in Mumbai, India as the second of five siblings. All five were the first of their family to attend college and complete a B.S.

Drawing on her prior education in mathematics and computer science, her previous job entailed traveling and implementing software. After furthering her education in Australia, she received a job offer in the U.S. where she met her husband.

She earned her A.S. in Biology in 2011, transferred to Brooklyn College and then to SUNY Downstate Medical Center where she completed her M.S. in Occupational Therapy this May.

Arden is currently studying for the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy exam to become a certified and NY state licensed occupational therapist.

“Studying full time in such a demanding program while caring for my son has taken more sacrifice and dedication than I ever imagined,” said Arden.
Christopher Kim: ‘A Product of My Environment’

By Niaz Mosharraf

Like many high-school students, while planning their future, Christopher Kim was aware of the stigma associated with community colleges. But a year at Kingsborough changed his mind.

Originally, Kim was accepted to Cornell University from high school, with the condition that he spend one year at another college. He chose Kingsborough and accomplished much.

“High achieving high school students don’t desire to go to community college,” said Kim. “It is not something that they aspire to be a part of, and I’ll admit I had some of those predispositions. But it was great because I had the feeling of being part of a family here.”

Kim, like many, is a product of his environment. Growing up in a tough neighborhood in Ditmas Park, he never really felt like he belonged. But he felt comfortable at Kingsborough—speaking and interacting with the faculty/staff. It made him more optimistic about his studies and time at the college from 2007-2008.

Although he did not graduate from Kingsborough, he had several notable accomplishments while there. Kim was one of the first students accepted into the Presidential Scholars program. He was also part of the men’s tennis team which went to the community college Nationals during that year.

“I think that every single person that has been here, has gone through some significant tribulation that tested their moral grit and their fight in life,” said Kim. “And the lessons they learn from it, and I learn from them through meeting them are vital in our life and growth.”

Kingsborough has a diverse body of students from different backgrounds and ages. There is a lot to be learned from one another and that is something that was not as accessible at Cornell for Kim.

“The given environment is really what helps me excel through life and that was exactly the thing that was provided to me at Kingsborough,” said Kim.

In the past, Kim has worked for a year at KCC as a college assistant while waiting to get into law school, at the Syracuse Regional Office of the Attorney General and the Office of the Attorney General of the State of New York.

He is currently interning for the federal government at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, where one day he hopes to work full-time. He is also interested in environmental law and would love to work for the Environmental Protection Agency, among many other places, protecting the government and its laws.

He studied labor relations at Cornell University and is now studying law at Syracuse University College of Law.

“I am able to bring context into the law that I learn and also have a holistic insight on certain issues,” said Kim. “Had I not been exposed to this environment since I was younger, I wouldn’t be able to do that.”
Joel Alexander: A Jack of Many Trades

By Armin Rebihic

From St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Joel Alexander had a successful journey from Kingsborough to Columbia University, and is now pursuing an M.A. at New York University.

Alexander moved back and forth from the U.S. to the Caribbean, but he migrated for good when he was 18 years old. When he wanted to pursue his education, he chose Kingsborough due to its beautiful campus.

“I struggled to define myself, to figure out my path and my goals,” said Alexander. “I struggled to accept my new sobriquet: ‘alien’ – a name ill-befitting and ambiguous, stating nothing of me, but only what I lacked.”

Alexander originally studied art, psychology and computer science in the Caribbean, but his new passion was biology with hopes to one day become a psychiatrist.

“I had never taken science classes other than the basics in middle school,” said Alexander. “In the Caribbean, students specialize, and

I specialized in art and information systems, so science was never on my plate. I reveled in the challenge.”

Eventually he became comfortable with biology and had more free time. Alexander dived into Kingsborough’s resources.

He was nominated for many scholarships such as the Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship and Coca-Cola Leaders of Promise. He attended the Salzburg Global Seminar and was president of Xi Kappa, Kingsborough’s chapter of Phi Theta Kappa International Honor Society. Alexander also conducted research with the C-STEP Program at KCC, through which he was awarded the MACUB grant, and won the ABRCMS award at their annual conference.

Alexander transferred to Columbia University, originally as a neuroscience major, but then changed to degrees in Political Science and Russian. After he graduated, Alexander worked in a law firm as he prepared his application for his current M.A. at NYU, where he is studying international business and economics.

“KCC Honors Society and the people involved in that department have played the most pivotal role in defining my life up to this point,” said Alexander. “Entering KCC as a foreigner, the Honors Program built me into a confident and eager intellectual and citizen.”
Kingsborough’s 2015 Valedictorian, Ryan Hill

By Michelle Yedid

Kingsborough’s 2015 valedictorian is none other than Ryan Hill. The 37-year-old Hill, a criminal justice major, veteran, husband and father, has been at Kingsborough for five semesters, two of which have been dedicated to the Honors Program.

After countless emails and letters trying to lure Hill to join, Helen-Margaret Nasser, Assistant Director of the Honors Program, was a guest speaker in Hill’s class, which finally put a friendly face to the program and grabbed Hill’s attention.

“I wanted to get the annotation [on my transcript] and needed to have nine honors credits. So I tried to get all that done. I almost didn’t make it… my current semester is the most challenging, filled with honors contracts and honors classes,” said Hill.

Hill moved to New York from Illinois with his family around 8 years ago and decided to go back to school in order to figure out what he wanted to pursue as a career and take advantage of the benefits from the G.I. Bill.

“There are young people here that are here on their parent’s dime or on some type of financial aid. A lot of my financial aid came from the G.I. Bill and I knew what I’d had to do to earn that,” said Hill.

Hill understood that going back to college was beneficial for both himself and his family.

Before coming to Kingsborough, Hill served as an Army Reservist for eight years, specializing in munitions for eight years. This came to an end after a year-long tour in Iraq in 2004, when his soon-to-be wife, Lindsey, was pregnant.

“We found out we were pregnant in the end of 2003,” Hill said, “A week later I got my letter with orders to mobilize.”

Hill deployed to Iraq, leaving Lindsey to graduate with her bachelors on her own while pregnant, and was only able to see her during a two-week rest and relaxation break.

Mid-R&R, Hill tied the knot with Lindsey during her third trimester and was only able to see their son Ethan through photos via email. He finished serving when Ethan was seven months old.

Hill’s family has been supportive throughout his college experience, especially with his new title as valedictorian of Kingsborough.

“They knew I was a high school dropout. They knew I came from a city where the public school system is broken, but they also knew I was smart and had potential that was never achieved,” said Hill.

Hill plans to use the scholarships he received at Kingsborough towards his future education.

“It’s really the title and the recognition that you can’t put a price tag on that I’m happy about,” said Hill.

Hill plans on going to John Jay, continuing his studies in criminal justice with hopes of either getting his master’s degree or pursuing a career in law.

“I enjoyed coming to school and learning, the GPA was a side effect of that,” said Hill. I wasn’t trying to get a perfect GPA, I was trying to just do well and learn a lot.”
Jiani Michel: Finding a Passion Through Her Struggles

By Nimer Abderrahman

As an illegal immigrant from Haiti, Jiani Michel fought struggle after struggle from problems with her family to her place of work.

Eventually, she got through it all and graduated from Kingsborough in 2014, as a speech language pathology major.

“I didn’t really have the confidence in myself to think that I, an underpaid illegal immigrant then, could ever pull myself out of my apparent powerless-ness,” said Michel.

While at Kingsborough, Michel was involved with many extra-curricular activities, such as Student World Assembly and Phi Theta Kappa. She also attended Vassar College’s summer program, the Salzburg Global Seminar and was a member of the Presidential Scholars Honors Program.

Michel is currently a college assistant at the Women’s Center in Kingsborough and will be attending Mount Holyoke College this fall with a full scholarship.

“The challenges and obstacles I had – and still have – to overcome, cannot put my dreams on hold,” said Michel. “It took me more than ten years to go to college and today I refuse to give up on the opportunities to which I was never exposed in the past.”

Najlaa Bouras: From Morocco with Dreams

By Armin Rebihic

She escaped her home country of Morocco as an 18-year-old woman and will now be attending Smith College this fall as an awardee of the prestigious Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship.

Najlaa Bouras, and other Moroccan women, felt treated as “sub-humans” in their country. She came to the United States for an opportunity to change the world after going through dark times in her motherland.

“Kingsborough helped me transition from a very scared, naïve, limited girl from Morocco into a grown woman,” said Bouras reflecting on her journey.

She was heavily involved with the various programs on campus and as a result became who she is today.

“I did not know the opportunities and resources I could have here in the U.S. if it was not for Kingsborough,” said Bouras.

One such opportunity was attending the Salzburg Seminar - Global Citizenship Program this past year, which helped her towards her career aspirations and life goals.

““I was so bored at my first semester because I felt that going to class and coming home is not worth my time,” said Bouras. “But then I walked into the Honors office one day and my whole educational experience has changed since then.”

As a proud feminist, Bouras plans on getting a degree in government and environmental science. Eventually she’d like to attend Harvard University and run for office as “president of U.S.A.”
Robert Cowan: ‘This Isn’t Farewell Kingsborough’

By Brittani Medina

After seven years as an Associate Professor and editor of “Distinctions,” Dr. Robert Cowan will be leaving Kingsborough’s community to pursue a career at Hunter College.

Since 2008, Dr. Cowan taught English at KCC where he works closely with the Honors Program. He is the editor of “Distinctions,” the Honors Program Journal, which just celebrated its ten year anniversary.

“Over time, I’ve made this journal more efficient and have it down to a certain size that we are very happy with,” admitted Dr. Cowan. “After seven years, I’m ready to pass over ‘Distinctions’ to someone else and give them the opportunity as editor.”

Although Dr. Cowan is leaving, he has high hopes for “Distinctions” and would love for it to receive great recognition outside of campus.

“Teaching at a campus with students from 142 countries, almost half of whom have a household income under twenty thousand dollars has definitely made me more interested in what power structures have been oppressing them or discriminating against them,” said Dr. Cowan. “In order to help them develop some sense of their own agency, my teaching and scholarship have been more geared towards that.”

With such mentality, Dr. Cowan became an essential part of the Honors Program through his many other works. He was the head of the Honors Faculty Interest Group, chaperoned one of the the Salzburg Global Studies trips, taught honors English courses at KCC as well as in the Vassar Exploring Transfer summer program.

Dr. Cowan admits that his inspiration for writing and work comes from his very own students. Last year, he started to write about his students and then published pieces of his writing in The Chronicle of Higher Education and Commonweal.

“Many of the students don’t believe that they are ‘honors material,’” explained Dr. Cowan. “But I know how truly skilled they are and I enjoy watching their transformation.”