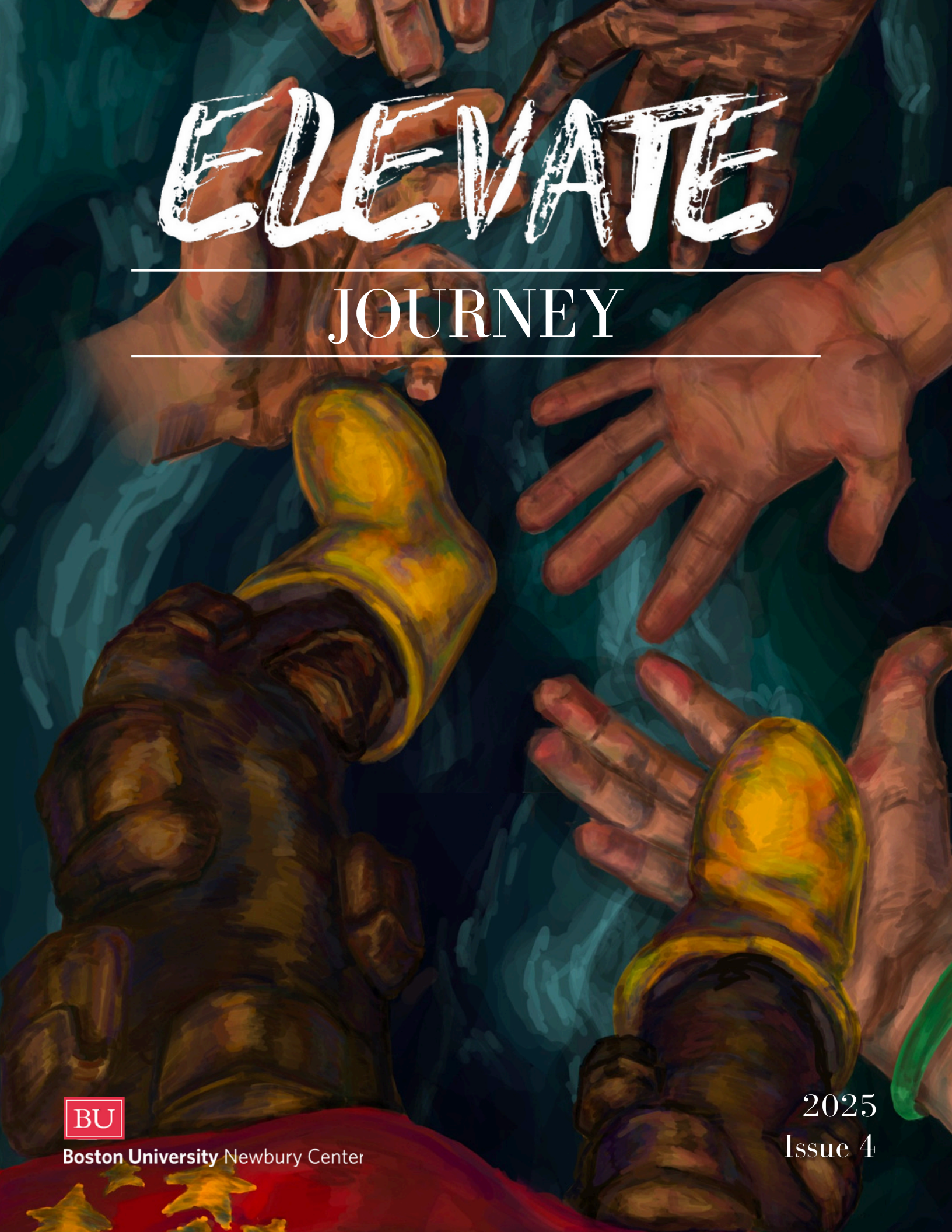




ELEVATE

JOURNEY



Boston University Newbury Center

2025
Issue 4

JOURNEY

(NOUN)

AN ACT OF TRAVELING
FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER.



Boston University Newbury Center

ELEVATE JOURNEY

HONORING THE LEGACY OF NEWBURY COLLEGE

In the spirit of the Newbury College mission, the Newbury Center at Boston University is devoted to fostering the success of first-generation students both during their time at Boston University and as they pursue careers and fulfillment after graduation.

DEDICATED ON OCTOBER 26, 2020

Elevate was created in 2021 by Co-Editors-in-Chief Katarina Quach (COM '24) and Valerie Sanchez Covalada (CAS'24). The inaugural edition was then published in the spring of 2022. *Elevate* was founded and is curated annually, by Terrier FIRSTS, for Terrier FIRSTS. We strive to uplift and, more than anything, “elevate” the voices and identities of first-generation students at Boston University.

Newbury Center Executive Director, Maria Dykema Erb, puts it best:

“By amplifying their voices through their pieces, the contributors are sharing hope and joy with their first-gen peers...you will be moved by the incredible stories and perspectives of our beautifully diverse Terrier FIRSTS community”.

In order to prepare for *Elevate* this year, we introduced “Maker Spaces” where contributors were invited to workshop their pieces and get feedback. Pieces that were submitted came from BU first-gen undergraduate and graduate/professional students, staff, and alumni. The work put into *Elevate* culminates into our “Elevate Launch Party” where contributors and supporters gather to share more about their pieces and celebrate the newest edition.

We are so thankful to everyone who made *Elevate* possible--our contributors, our magazine mentors, and our incredible co-editors. Yearly, we will continue to produce a work of art that honors the experiences, perspectives, and creativity of BU's first-gen community.

It is an honor and a joy to showcase *Elevate*.

We would like to acknowledge that the artworks and pieces submitted to Elevate are the voices, experiences, perspectives, and stories of our first-generation students. While the Newbury Center is honored to showcase the work of our students, these submissions are not indicative of the views held by the center.

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A Note from the Co-Editors

Working on this year's edition of Elevate with Malia has been a journey of reflection, growth, and learning. As I explored this year's theme, I found myself appreciating the time I spent with these introspective thoughts. As you read this edition, I encourage you to think about your journey—whether it has been a perfectly straight road or a winding path. In a fast-paced world, it is easy to get lost in the chaos of our everyday lives. I hope that as you read this magazine, it offers you a moment to be present with yourself and enjoy your own company for a moment.

– Yuna Yi, SAR '27

When Yuna and I were coming up with this year's theme, we immediately thought “journey.” I'm nearing the end of my undergrad, and it feels like my journey has both flown by and barely begun. I've accomplished so much and have so much to accomplish. While creating Elevate, I had the chance to connect with so many first-gen students about their journeys. As I edited, I felt their pride, sadness, struggle—everything. And as I immersed myself in these stories, I felt a sense of community and comfort. Though I have worries and stresses about my journey, my fellow FIRSTS are proof that I am not alone and will figure it out. I hope as you all read through this year's issue, you feel this too.

– Malia Montalvo, COM '26



A Note from the Directors

To our trailblazers and sojourners,

We are all gifted in our own unique ways. Some of us can create new worlds with just a few brush strokes. Some of us can capture our current one in brilliant simplicity with just a few clicks. Still others straddle both, blending and merging different media to make sense of the world around us. We are thankful for you all sharing these incredible gifts with us. These pages are not just a collection of art, pieces that heal and inspire. These pages are a testament to the fact that while we all share in the first-gen student journey, we all travel our paths in distinctive and special ways.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. implored us to be hopeful in spite of what may seem like insurmountable odds. He noted, "Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars." Thank you for being not just those bright spots amidst a black backdrop. Thank you for being the guiding light that brightens our path. Thank you for being those beacons who remind us where home is.

A special note of gratitude to our co-editors, Malia Montalvo and Yuna Yi. Your steadfast dedication to continue to uplift Elevate Magazine continues the legacy of so many first-gen artists and creatives who walk these hallowed halls at Boston University. We are indebted to you.

Yours in solidarity,
Tony and Maria

Anthony Abraham Jack, PhD
Newbury Center Faculty Director
Associate Professor of Higher Education Leadership, Wheelock College
and Education and Human Development

Maria Dykema Erb, MEd
Newbury Center Executive Director

ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK, PhD,

FACULTY DIRECTOR

*From first flights to those across oceans
From first nights away to constantly searching for route back home
From first degrees to second and third
Oh, what a ride*

Journey is a beautiful invitation. So often we are so focused on where we are and what we have to do in the moment that we forget to reflect on how far we've come, look back at how much we've overcome, truly ruminate on how much more we've done than we even dreamed we could do.

So cheers to the now. And all the mile markers we too often let slip by us. The naps. The walks. The warm cookie after brunch. The hitting "Next Episode" on Netflix on the couch with friends. The calls home that make us ache for better days that we are building. To us.



MARIA DYKEMA ERB, M.Ed.,

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



When I reflect on my first-gen journey, I didn't realize it at the time, but there were so many amazing people walking by my side, helping me along the way to complete my college degree. One of those incredible people is my University of New Hampshire college bestie and fellow first-gen friend for life, Sheila. Those two young first-gen college students in the top photo never could have imagined we'd be where we are today—successful in our careers and living full lives!

And Still We Walk this Path Together

M.C. DAMM

NEWBURY CENTER ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR



When I think about my journey, first as a student and now as a professional, I think about everyone who walked alongside me and all those I have the honor of accompanying. I think about all of the paths that have converged to bring the communities that I am a part of together. Pictured here is a favorite memory from fall semester—Terrier F1RSTS graduate (and former Elevate Co-Editor-in-Chief) Katarina Quach returning to Boston for her first visit after graduation. It is one of the great joys of this work to see your community expand over the years, to see former students forge the brave and uncertain path of postgrad life, to count them among friends and colleagues and collaborators.

To the students who wonder if we remember you, if we'll think about you once your journey carries you beyond BU—we are here, cheering you on from afar. May your path always guide you back to your Terrier F1RSTS community.

The Going Itself is the Path

AHNNA REYES

NEWBURY CENTER PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR

This piece came from transforming one of my high school senior photos into something that conveyed movement and meaning to me. At that time, I was so expectant and hopeful for what college might have for me and where the journey could take me. But things quickly felt derailed when I only lasted one semester at my first school. By the time I graduated, I'd transferred between three colleges, changed my major four times, and struggled to understand the point of it all or what I was "supposed" to have gained. The path has taken me many places and brought me into the orbit of people that directly changed the trajectory of my life. I have not always understood or appreciated the path, but on days when students stand in my door and talk to me about transferring or growing up in the South or how your plans and purpose can change so many times—then all of it feels infinitely important.



Uprooted

ROSEMARY FERREIRA

NEWBURY CENTER ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

“Hey y’all! Can everyone gather around the story pit? I got some news.” Isaiah yells through cupped hands.

Alma brings her gaze up to look at the coordinator of the garden and is temporarily blinded by the sun. She raises one hand to block out her eyes. Her other hand is still deep in the dirt, wrapped around the roots of a mint plant that had been choking out her cilantro. She had planted the cilantro earlier in the year during her spring break from Hilton College. This was a request from her mother. “What can I do with kale?” Her mother had asked as Alma shared her gardening list.

“Grow me some cilantro this year por favor. I can’t find what I need at the supermarket and the plátanos... they’re 2 for \$1! Can you believe it? No puede ser.”

“I got you mami,” Alma nodded, her stomach clenching at the thought of her mother not being able to afford food while she sat in dining halls where lobster nights happened each semester. She scratched out the word kale from her notebook, a vegetable Alma was first exposed to at Hilton, and scribbled the word cilantro next to the crossed out clump of blue ink.

Alma sees Isaiah and the other volunteers begin to walk over to the garden’s fire pit that has never held actual fire. Not in this neighborhood where flames nearly devoured Bushwick in the 1970s, almost killing it. At least that’s what they thought they were doing. The realtors, the landlords, shit even some of the residents, all setting Bushwick on fire and letting it burn. It didn’t matter if there were abuelitas or babies stuck on a third floor walk up, as long as they collected their insurance checks, they were good.

But even with the end of one Bushwick, the neighborhood pushed through, kicking and screaming itself back from its own ashes. Cuchifritos, bodegas, drug dealers, block parties, stop and frisk, the flyest Puerto Rican day parade in all of the city, this very community garden, the really good, and the really bad all followed Bushwick into its rebirth, and Alma’s family had been through it all.

Alma yanks at the mint and throws it in a pile she made earlier. She gets up, shakes the dirt off her jeans, and walks over to the pit. She plops herself down on one of the wooden benches that she and a few other volunteers painted bright shades of blues, greens, and yellows a few years ago in celebration of the garden’s 30th anniversary. Alma runs her hand across the now chipping paint and looks to Isaiah standing next to the pit.

Isaiah wipes the sweat that had been pooling above his upper lip with the back of his hand. He takes a deep breath and sighs out loud to the group of a dozen volunteers he coordinates, “Thank you for joining us today.”

He takes a pause, “Unfortunately, I have some bad news. The owners of this land, you know, the Abrams brothers, who own the discount store? They’ve been getting some offers, millions of dollars...”

Everyone nods. Just like their own landlords, or if they were so fortunate to own their own homes, they knew about the constant pleas from companies who were only interested in flipping their homes for more money. The constant ringing of their phones, their crowded email and voicemail inboxes, and the flyers stuffed between the iron gates of their buildings with “WE PAY IN CASH!!!!” written in large red letters reminded them each day that they lived in one of the “hottest” neighborhoods in the city.

“Que vayan pa’l carajo,” Alma’s father said the previous week as he crumbled up one of the flyers and threw it into the trash.

“Well, they accepted an offer. \$18 million dollars,” Isaias says. “I’ve been made aware of the developer’s plans and the garden...” He takes another pause. “... it has no place in it. They’re planning a 20-story building...”

Isaiah continues on to talk about some large underground parking lot they’re building and a community space on the first floor, but Alma is no longer listening. The thick, humid air suddenly feels heavier in her lungs. She feels a wave of shock and a deep painful gap opening inside of her chest. Looming at its center grows a thundering storm of anger.

A familiar set of feelings. Feelings she had felt at Hilton when she was assumed to be part of the cleaning staff one morning for wiping a spill of makeup on the bathroom counter or when a group of students mindlessly pushed her out of the pathway to the campus center and didn’t even bother to look back to apologize.

“No!” Alma exclaimed, surprised by the sudden demand in her own voice.

With her eyes on the story pit, she thought of all the beings who planted roots in the garden, her neighbors, the group of middle schoolers she taught during the summer, Ms. Lola and her mother who started the garden after the fires that almost killed Bushwick. If they didn’t want a garden, she’d become a weed, she thought to herself. Gnarly and unruly, growing where unwanted.

My submission is part of a short story of a young woman returning back to her neighborhood in Brooklyn after spending four years away at a selective, historically white institution. She must confront both the changes happening in her neighborhood due to gentrification and her own internal conflicts as someone experiencing social mobility. This story is one about social class, race, gentrification, and diasporic identity, which all shaped my own experiences as a first-gen student.

My Journey to Who I Am is Based on Where I've Been

KATHERINE LAWLOR

NEWBURY CENTER ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

I am from the river walks,
From lakes and Texas sunsets,
I am from the valley of the Blue Ridge
mountains, which is adventurous, radiant, and
possesses my favorite smell of campfires
I am from the aspen trees,
with dreamy golden fall leaves,
I'm from hard work and stubbornness,
From the strong women who've mentored me,
I'm from kindness and anger,
From laughter and pain,
I'm from the town that begins with love and the
place where we were expected to be brave and faithful,
community markets and community meals,
From the land of wanderers and sojourners.
I dare to dream,
Of becoming fearless, healed, and loved.

I am a first-generation college graduate! Who I am is influenced by where I've been, where I am now, the people who've influenced me, and where I'm going with my life. The relationships we have and the places we've been impact our life's journey.



The Greatest Legacy

BY SOFFÍA BLYSTRA, GRS '25

When I was little, my grandmother used to sit on the porch of our small house, her hands calloused from years of scrubbing floors and folding other people's clothes. She would smooth the hem of her worn dress, look at me with eyes that had seen too much, and say, "Study hard and go far. I don't want you to end up like me." Her voice carried a plea, formed by years of sacrifice and long days when she often worked without eating or sleeping.

Her words boomed in my head over and over again. They were picked up by my mother, who worked tirelessly at multiple jobs to ensure there was always food on the table and books in my bag. "Go far, mi amor," she would say when she kissed me goodnight. "There is nothing that you cannot achieve." I come from a line of women who were not allowed to dream for themselves. Their lives were full of displacement, violence, and loss. They carried the weight of generational trauma like an invisible chain, yet they endured. They persevered. They survived.

As I grew older, those words—"study hard and go far"—became a double-edged sword. They filled me with purpose, but they also felt like a burden. I thought of their sacrifices and told myself I had to succeed, not just for me but for them. I could not let their efforts and pain go to waste. Every exam I aced, every milestone I reached, felt like proof that their suffering had meant something. But in the quiet moments, many doubts whispered in my ear. What if I was not enough? What if I failed them?

The fear weighed heavy, and I made so many mistakes. I stumbled through the unfamiliar world of college, where terms like "financial aid" and "student loans" felt like a foreign language. I felt out of place, unsure, and unsteady. The silent pressure to make them proud was insistent.

Then, one day, I stood in my apartment, surrounded by books and unpaid bills, and realized something. My grandmother and my mother never asked for accomplishments. They did not love me because of what I could achieve. Their love was not conditional on grades, degrees, or titles. It was because I existed. Because I carried their blood, their stories, their resilience.

I remembered my grandmother's hands, rough yet gentle. I thought of my mother's tired eyes, always brimming with love. They were more than their suffering. They were the strongest, kindest, most selfless people I have ever known. When my mother told me, "Don't be like me," I knew she meant she wanted me to have more, to live with less pain and struggle. But what she did not realize was that if I could have half her courage, half her heart, I would be proud to turn out just like her. So now, when I hear their voices in my head urging me to "go far," I do not hear pressure anymore. I hear love. I hear a legacy. I carry their dreams not as a weight, but as a gift. I remind myself that every step forward, no matter how small, is worth celebrating. That my achievements are theirs, and my existence honors theirs.

And if I ever have children of my own, I will tell them that it is not about what you achieve. It is about who you are. And if you turn out to be even a fraction of the people who came before you, you will have the biggest, kindest heart in the world. Just like your great-grandmother. Just like your grandmother. Just like all the ancestors who lived and loved so that you could be here today. That, in itself, is the greatest achievement of all.

My submission reflects the resilience, sacrifice, and love that define my journey as a first-generation college student. Being the first in my family to navigate higher education at BU has been both challenging and empowering. It's a tribute to my grandmother and mother, whose sacrifices gave me the opportunity to dream and succeed. Their legacy inspires me to honor their strength and create a future that reflects their hopes and love.

Dancing Lions Study

BY VIVIAN NGUYEN, CGS '28



Without the essence of our families' stories and culture, we lose our shape of self and disguise our body with such rigidity that was meant to wrinkle with expression. Growing up, I remember turning my family members away from the annoyingly vivid colors and patterns etched into the clothes and food they would share with me. I failed to notice that those colors and patterns were a comforting fire to me. I depict dancing lions with organic features, lines, and structures to imitate the freedom to express one's cultural identity and love that is immune to narrow-mindedness. Furthermore, the featured image of depicted movement symbolizing freedom is a reminder to transmute your reserved energy to one that blazes with outward liveliness. We take ourselves too seriously as first-gen students; it's a time to celebrate and be unapologetically authentic to what we grew up with!

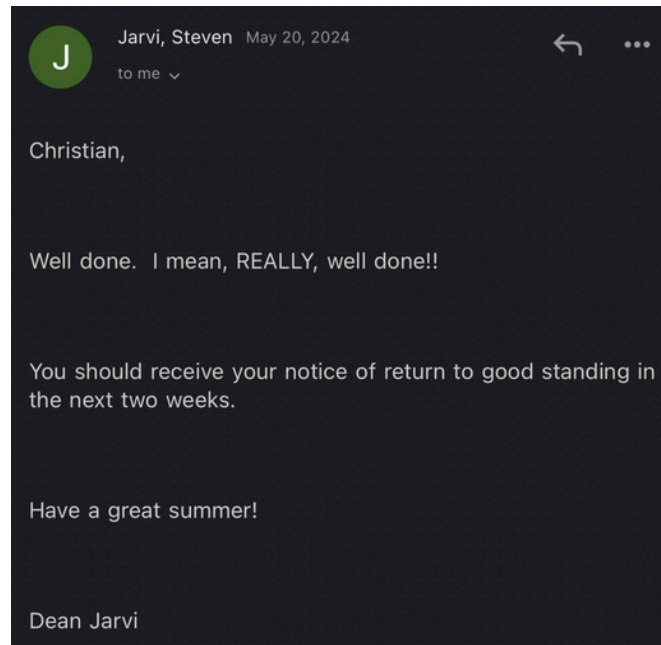
Resilience in Motion

BY CHRISTIAN GONZALEZ, CAS '25

This email from Dean Jarvi – “Well done. I mean, REALLY, well done!!” – was short and to the point, but it stayed with me. After a long period of trying to find my footing at BU, that message confirmed that I was moving in the right direction. It wasn’t just an acknowledgment of progress—it was proof that the work I had put in was paying off.

That period of uncertainty taught me a lot about resilience. There were moments when self-doubt crept in, when the path forward felt unclear. But I found ways to push through by leaning on my friends and family. I stopped seeing challenges as roadblocks and started treating them as opportunities to grow. That email symbolized more than just progress—it marked a turning point in how I saw myself and my potential.

It’s easy to get caught up in setbacks, but this journey reminded me that progress is never linear. What matters most is showing up, putting in the work, and embracing every lesson along the way. Being a first-generation student at BU is an opportunity to grow independently, navigate academics, and seize career opportunities while paving my own path.



Journey

BY HANNAH HALLETT, SSW '25

Grad school was movement—a climb that kept changing beneath my feet. Just when I found my rhythm, the path would shift, the incline steepening, forcing me to adjust. Some days, my steps were sure, the air clear. Other days, the weight of deadlines, the pull of responsibilities, the endless demand to be more, know more, do more felt like an uphill stretch with no end in sight. It would have been easy to stop, to listen to the voice that whispered, ‘Maybe this is too much.’ But something else was rising, too. In the quiet moments, between the push and the pressure, I felt it—a deeper knowing, a shift in how I carried myself. The people around me became mirrors, reflecting back the strength I couldn’t always see. Their belief in me softened the doubt, turning it into something lighter, something I could release.

Statue of Liberty

BY MARIA WILDA CAMERO
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, FINANCIAL
AID BU LAW

Seeing the Statue of Liberty in person was an incredibly emotional experience. It symbolizes freedom, hope, and the promise of new beginnings. For many, like me, it represents the opportunity to start fresh in a land where dreams can come true, despite the challenges that might come with adjusting to a new life. It is a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made and the endless possibilities ahead. I dedicate this photograph to my mom, who came to this country with courage and dreams, and became a US citizen. Though she passed away in 2018, her strength and determination live on in me. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes the freedom and opportunities she embraced, and the new life she built. She was a true trailblazer, and because of her, I am the person I am today. I carry her legacy with me every day. This is for you, Mom.



FILM JOURNEY



THIS PAST SEMESTER,
I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF
WORKING ON TWO THESIS
FILMS.

MY JOURNEY WENT FROM BEING
A PRODUCTION ASSISTANT ON
BUTV TO HAVING A HEAD ROLE
ON TWO PRODUCTION 3
PROJECTS.



Art of the Boom

BY JAIRO ZELAYA, COM '25

This is my film journey as a first-gen college student. It has been a lot of fun. I worked on a couple of thesis films last semester. I also helped on many projects. I enjoy the collaborative aspect of filmmaking and being able to bring to life these thoughts and ideas that exist in our minds.

The Power of Starting Over

BY SANDRA ADAMS, (GR) MET '26

I wasn't supposed to make it.

I wasn't supposed to be here, standing strong in front of you today. But here I am. I started with nothing, but I fought my way forward—one step, one decision, one small victory at a time, defying every obstacle that told me I couldn't accomplish what I have already achieved.

Rather than focusing on what happened, I want to focus on the power of choice.

What has shaped me more than anything are the moments when I chose to start my life over—when I decided to move forward and break the cycle by leaving an abusive relationship. It wasn't about waiting for life to align; it was about making the choice to take the next step, even when I didn't know exactly where it would lead. Each choice, even the ones that seemed insignificant at the time, added up to the person I am today.

The first part of my journey felt like walking down a dark road through a dense, unwelcoming forest. I couldn't see where the path was leading, and I had no idea how far the end was. There were no stars, no light—just an overwhelming sense of isolation and fear. The road twisted and turned, sometimes narrowing so much that it felt like I was walking in circles.

In that place, the future was a mystery. There was no clear vision of what would come next—only the weight of the present, which grew heavier with each passing day. My every step was uncertain, and every decision felt like a potential misstep. The shadows of doubt, pain, and confusion loomed around me. The abusive relationship I was in was that forest—dark, disorienting, and full of threats I couldn't always see. I wasn't sure how I had ended up there or how I could ever escape. I felt lost in the woods of my own life, with no clear way out.

Then, one day, I saw a way out. I took it. The sun began to shine, and I felt its warmth on my face. For the first time in a long while, I felt the possibility of a new beginning. I realized I needed to focus on me. So, I made the decision to prioritize my mental health. In the aftermath, I was diagnosed with PTSD and anxiety—news that was not easy to hear. But in that moment, I knew I could heal, and that healing would be the first step toward reclaiming my life.

The beginning was a struggle. There were days I could barely see a way forward. But I pressed on, one decision at a time.

Some choices were small, like walking into my first class at Los Angeles Community College. Others were monumental, like choosing to leave my past behind and take that first step toward a future I had never dared to imagine. That single decision sparked a path of academic success, which eventually led me to my dream school—California State University, Long Beach, one of the most competitive CSU campuses.

Arriving at California State University, Long Beach, felt like stepping into a new chapter—one I never thought was possible. Surrounded by ambitious, confident students, I was intimidated at first, but I also realized something: for the first time, I truly belonged. No longer just surviving, I was thriving.

I didn't want to just get through college—I wanted to make a difference. Joining student government, I found my voice, advocating not just for myself but for all CSULB students. I worked to push policies that would improve the student experience, especially for those who, like me, had to fight harder to get here. But beyond that, I didn't let CSULB shape me—I began to mold CSULB to me. I stopped worrying about fitting in or seeking approval. I learned to believe in myself, to embrace who I was, and to stop caring if people liked me. For the first time, I understood that being myself wasn't just enough—it was what the world needed.

Through this journey, I didn't just become a student leader. I became an advocate for all students, showing them that no matter how dark the path may seem, there is always light at the end. I empowered others to believe in their potential, and in the process, I found the confidence to own my own story. Taking a chance, I applied to Boston University for graduate school. When I was accepted, it felt like the culmination of everything I had fought for—the proof that my journey, no matter how uncertain, had led me to something incredible.

As a first-generation student, my only support system has been myself. I spent nights until 10 p.m. in class, away from my young son, but through my journey, I showed him that college matters. Today, he's a sophomore in college himself—proof that the choices I made, even when they seemed hard or uncertain, have had a lasting impact.

None of us can predict where our choices will lead us, but we always learn from them. Mistakes are powerful tools. Failure, too. You learn more from failure than you ever will from success, and every misstep has taught me something invaluable. My journey has not just been about reaching my own goals; it's been about setting an example for those who come after me, including my son. We both learned that it's not about being perfect—it's about showing up, learning, and growing.

I started my life over—and it has been a beautiful journey. I am loving the person I am becoming

In my submission, I reflected on the journey of being a first-generation college student, emphasizing the pivotal choices I made to rebuild my life and pursue education despite numerous obstacles. Coming from a family without a college background, I am breaking the cycle by pursuing higher education and bettering myself. This journey isn't just about achieving academic success—it's about pursuing my dream of becoming an attorney and showing my son that anything is possible. I'm embracing the power of starting over, and each step forward is a testament to my commitment to change my future and inspire others to do the same.

My Grandparent's Displacement During WWII

BY DONNA PALOMBO, SPH '24



I am the first generation of my family to attend college as well as the first generation to study in a master's degree/professional degree program. I graduated in August 2024 from the School of Public Health with a master's degree at well over 40 years of age which would not have been possible without the assistance of my maternal grandparents. They are originally from a tiny remote mountain village, and their education was curtailed by WWII. More were displaced from their homes because of the Battle of Monte Cassino. While they do not appear in this photo, the photo does demonstrate the displacement of the province from where they originate. I decided to share this to honor them. My maternal grandmother turned 95 years old in November of 2024; my maternal grandfather passed in 2017.

Growing up in a predominantly white town in Ohio, I didn't have a Latino community to relate to. When I arrived at Boston University, however, the diversity of the campus was a stark contrast to where I grew up, and I immediately connected with other Latino students. Finding this sense of community reminded me of my experiences in Mexico, where, despite being in my native country, I still felt like an outsider. Over time, though, I became more connected to Mexican culture, picking up on the slang and jokes that shaped my identity. I'm grateful for the deep connection I feel with my culture, which allows me to bond with my Latino friends at BU. It's through these shared experiences, like being sent to buy a crisp bottle of Coca-Cola before a meal, that I've come to truly appreciate the value of this cultural community—which helps ease the occasional stresses of being a first-generation student.

The Corner Store

BY JULIO FUENTES, QST '27



The Nomad

BY MALIA MONTALVO, COM '26

I have undoubtedly hit a standstill. Listening to my peers talk about their directions in life, I can't help but feel this. I am physically moving. Don't get me wrong, I am moving nonstop, always having something to do. I'm always busy, whether it's an extracurricular, a class, or work. But while it seems like others are moving forward, I feel like I am running in circles. I'm doing things with no reason, no plan, no passion. Packing on the load just to say I've done something. Taking classes that don't fulfill me. Doing school with no purpose. Drawing a blank when asked what my "story" is. This, to me, is indeed a standstill.

I tell myself it just takes time. That's what everyone tells me. But sometimes, I feel like I exist just to pass this time. What does one do when the journey has no destination? When your legs grow tired but the only thing ahead is the road. When your reason for going to college even in your third year is still "because I felt like I had to." I am grappling with these questions as I near the end of college. Time is relentless. Each day I don't figure everything out, I want to collapse under the uncertainty.

Paired with this uncertainty, I feel frustration. Unadulterated. Frustration over feeling like I'm wasting my time. Frustration in myself that I can't seem to find one thing to commit to. Frustration stemming from the possibility that I'm doing everything for nothing. I've grown tired from stumbling through every day, uneasy staying in one place for too long but not knowing where else to go or what opportunity to take on next.

I feel the weight of this lack of direction with each passing day I get closer to graduation. I really am the first. Not my parents, not my grandparents, not even my great-grandparents. College is something you can never really be prepared for when you're the first. No matter how hard you try, you are always playing catch up. Still trying to figure out what you want to do as you near graduation while your peers have their whole lives laid out. Guessing every next step and just barely getting by. This too, is the first-generation college journey.

But the fact that I've somehow made it to college is proof that my journey is unlike any that have come before me. I'll continue to flounder through the challenges life throws my way and wander through the days like the nomad I am, but my journey thus far is a testament that I'm on my way to figuring it out.

Last year, I grew restless to figure out where my journey would take me. In an attempt to make sense of it all, I've started with unpacking my feelings deep down. The frustration, the sadness, the boredom—these are all part of my journey.

The First-Gen Journey: Addison's Version

BY ADDISON LANDON,
(GR) COM '25

"You're on your own, kid / You always have been."

As I cross the bridge into Boston, Taylor Swift's words feel more real than ever. I'm not really on my own, but as I start a new adventure in a new city, it feels like it. I've never lived in a city, I don't know anyone here, and I've never lived alone. To be blunt, this is new, and I'm scared.

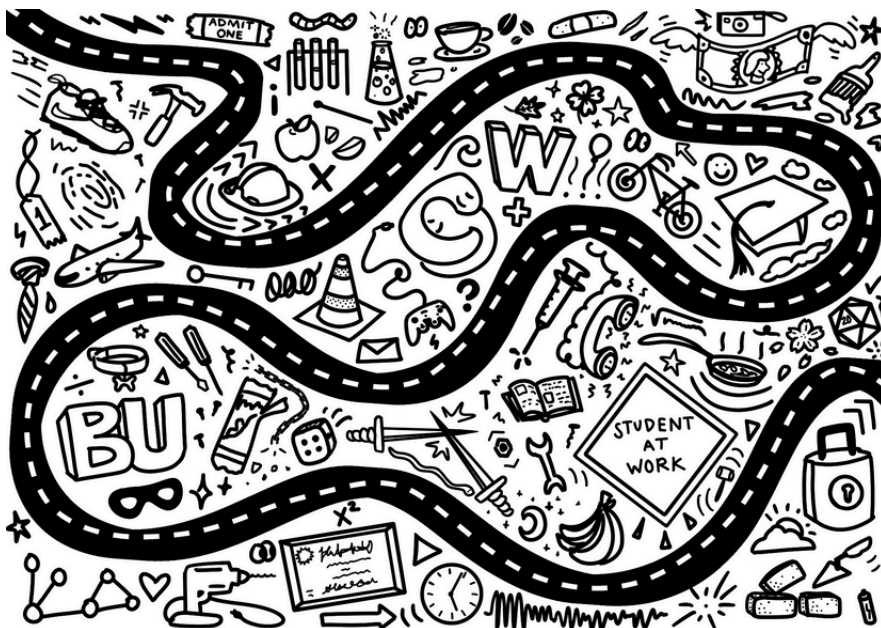
After a few weeks, the scariness has worn off. I've developed a routine, and I'm getting to know the people around me. Soon enough, I became part of the Newbury Center community and made some friends in classes. Life feels good. Sure, there's rough patches, but it's nothing a call home and a Sabrina Carpenter marathon can't fix.

If you know me, you know I love mainstream girly pop. It's been a staple for me when I need a spark of joy during difficult times. For this reason, I've developed a hype-up, inspirational playlist. No matter your interests, I want you to gain at least one thing from listening to this playlist; it will be hard, but you can do it. As Chappell Roan once said, "Good luck, babe!"



Under Construction

BY SYDNEY BOOTHE, SPH '25



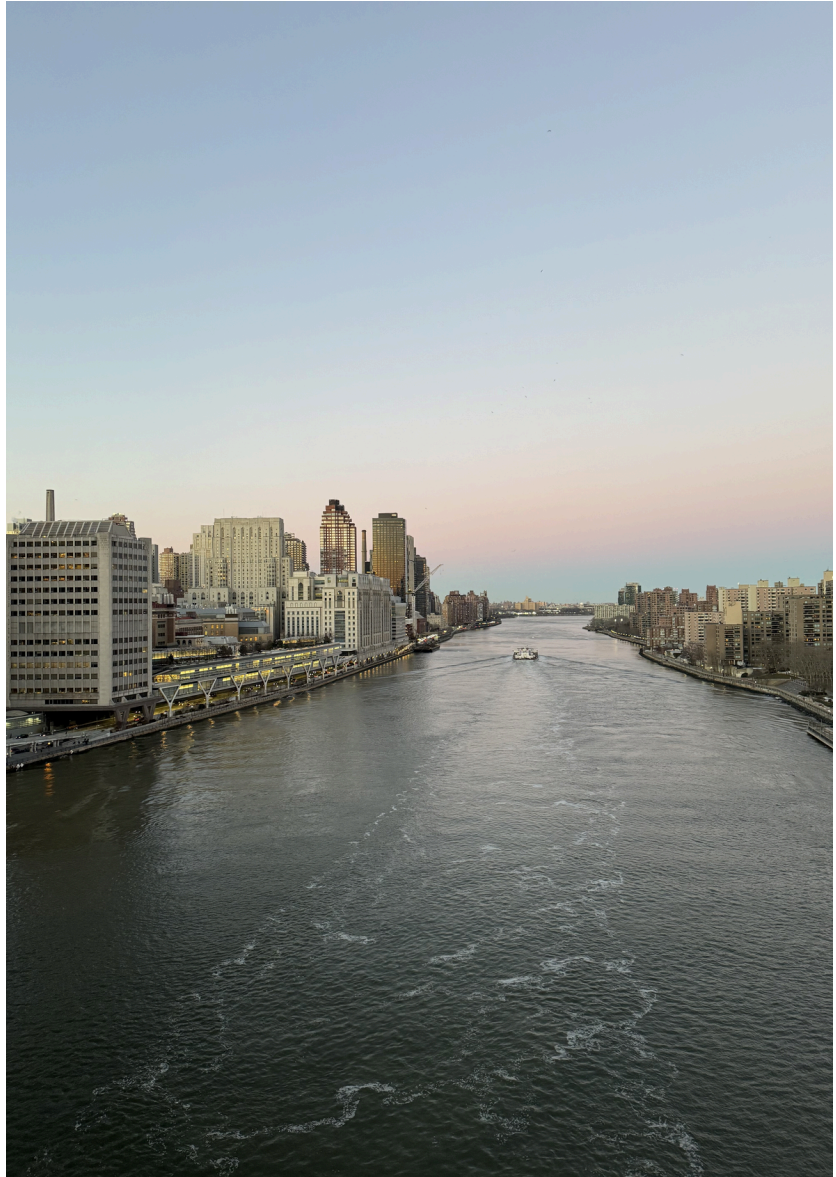
Life as a first-gen student is often hectic and complicated, with many interests, pressures, desires, and demands competing for our attention and identity. My piece contains elements that were a part of my first-gen journey, either symbolically or literally, along with tools used in construction. Together, these are the materials for building our road to success.

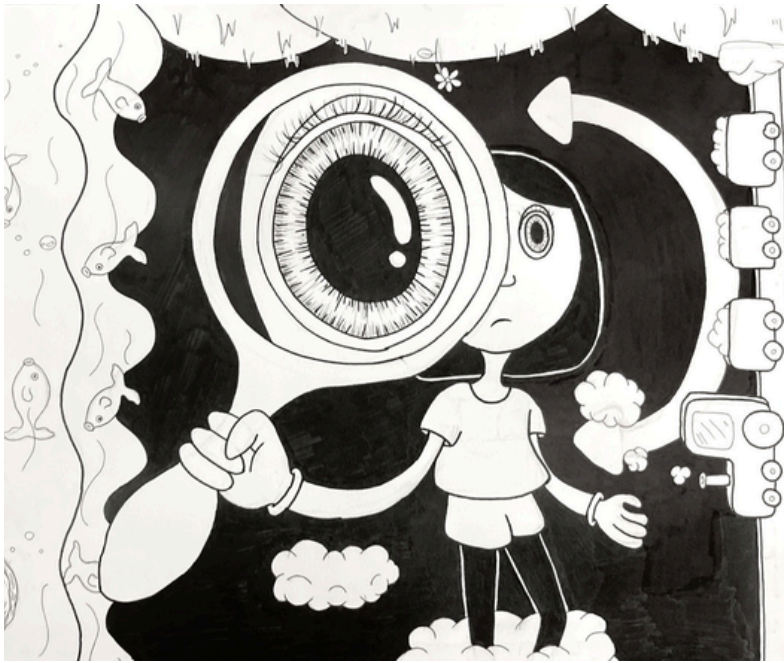
Serendipity

BY ALVIN SUN, QST '27

Entering college was both a scary and exciting experience for me. Stepping out of my comfort zone and exploring beyond the familiar felt uncomfortable at first, but it turned out to be life-changing. I'm so glad I made the decision to come to BU instead of staying in my hometown. At BU, I've had the chance to meet incredible people from diverse backgrounds. At the same time, the transition was tough for me. During my freshman year, I struggled to find a community that I could be a part of which is why I found it difficult to adjust to college life. As a first-generation college student, I've come to realize that this journey is about more than just earning a degree. It's about breaking cycles, paving the way for future generations, and creating opportunities where there were none before.

I want to create a culture on campus that welcomes and supports all students, no matter where they come from. My submission is a picture of the many sunsets that I watch at the end of each day. I feel that as college students, we are so busy trying to balance classes, work a part-time job, hold leadership positions, have a social life, and more. We tend to sometimes forget to appreciate the little things. Seeing something so often may become normal for you but for me a sunset is a beautiful moment that only happens once a day and I try not to take it for granted. Every evening when I see the sun setting, I try to stop doing whatever I am doing at the moment and just admire the view. It's a beautiful reminder to rest, reflect, and acknowledge the hard work I've put in each day. It's these moments that remind me to take care of myself and appreciate the journey I'm on.





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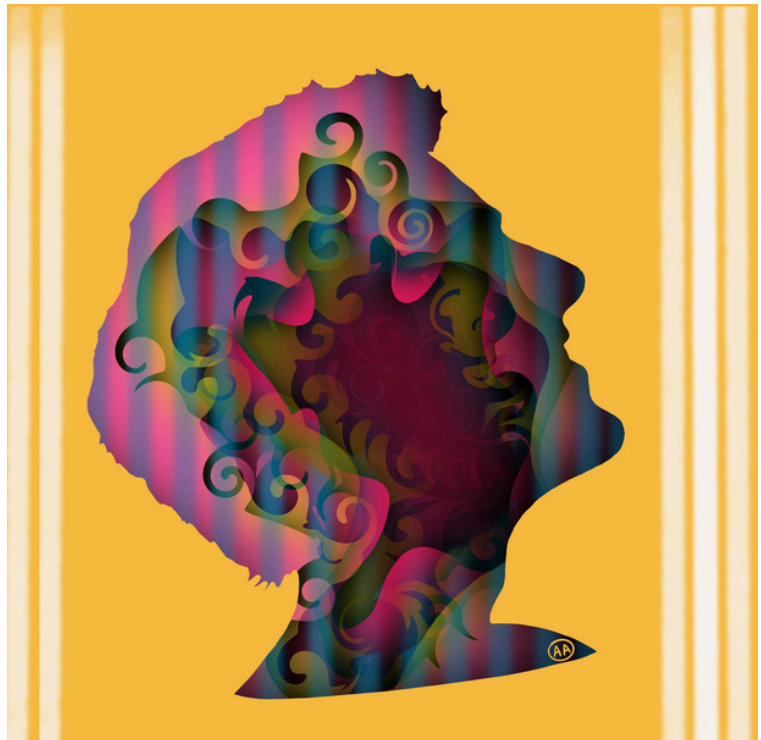
BY ANANYA MANNUR,
CAS '25

My drawing depicts idioms as figures (fish out of water, train of thought) to represent the uncertainty I felt when I first arrived at BU in a humorous way. That uncertainty is balanced by the whimsical style (inspired by 1960s cartoons) to invoke the joy and wonder I felt. My drawing fuses my worries and excitement, capturing my experience as a first-generation student.

Unraveling, Becoming

BY ANUSHKA AGHI, SPH '25

This artwork represents the layers that make up who we are—some visible, some hidden—and how, as we grow, we uncover new depths within ourselves. When I first came to BU as a first-generation college student, I felt like I was peeling back those layers, discovering more about myself, my passions, and my resilience. BU has been a place where I've faced challenges, but each one has shaped me in ways I never expected. The deeper I've gone into my studies, the more I've learned—not just academically, but about what truly excites and drives me. There have been obstacles, moments of doubt, and times when I felt lost, but that's part of the journey. Growth isn't always easy, but it's what makes us who we are. This piece is a reflection of that journey—the idea that the more we explore, the more beauty we find within ourselves. At BU, I've learned to embrace my layers, navigate my path, and trust in my own journey. Through it all, I've realized that becoming the best version of myself means owning my truth and appreciating every part of my story.



As a First-Gen Student Creativity Becomes My Bridge to Healing, Growth, and Empowerment

BY JYOTIRMAYA PATRO, (GR) QST '25

I come from a background where every dream I had felt like it was miles beyond my reach. My parents, who faced financial hardships that kept them from continuing their education, taught me the most valuable lessons I could ever have received: resilience, courage, and the importance of creating your own path. My father, despite not having higher education, became a primary school teacher through sheer grit and self-reliance. "*The world won't give you success, you must make it yours*," he would often tell me, instilling in me the drive to build my future. Though my parents couldn't provide luxuries or advanced learning tools, they gave me a mindset that prepared me to face the world with confidence, regardless of the obstacles in



front of me. These teachings followed me as I ventured into my first-gen journey at BU, where I encountered new challenges but also a world full of possibilities.

Creativity as a Tool for Expression and Healing

From childhood, I've always been drawn to creativity. Whether it was painting, calligraphy, or even the art of mimicry and acting, these outlets became my sanctuary. I enjoyed creating the wildest, funniest facial expressions to entertain my friends and family, using mimicry as both a form of humor and self-expression. I performed on small stages during my school and college days, embracing drama as another way to communicate my feelings and experiences. These performances allowed me to release the emotional pressure I felt and, at the same time, connect with others through creativity. When I first arrived at BU as a first-gen student, I found myself grappling with the tension between my family's dreams for me and the academic pressures I faced. Creativity became a bridge—it allowed me to express these internal conflicts and process my emotions in a safe space. The face art I began doing was not just a creative exercise; it was a dialogue with myself, a visual representation of my journey and struggles. Through my creativity, I found a way to confront my mental health challenges—stress, anxiety, and the pressure of being first-gen—and turn them into something beautiful and meaningful.

Creativity as a Mirror of Struggle and Strength

As I look back on my journey, I see how my creativity has mirrored my personal struggles and growth. My early works were chaotic, expressive, and raw, reflecting the tumult I felt as I tried to navigate two very different worlds—the expectations of my family and the reality of higher education. But as I grew more confident in my identity as a first-gen student, my creativity began to evolve. The once-wild strokes transformed into more fluid, intentional designs, symbolizing the balance I sought between academia and creativity. In these moments, I realized that creativity was my mirror. It showed me not just the struggles but also the strength I carried within. Every piece of creative work became a reflection of my journey—of the highs and lows, of overcoming challenges, and of finding my place in a world that often seemed unfamiliar and overwhelming.

Face Art as a Canvas for Transformation

The face art I create is where my internal struggles and growth are most vividly reflected. Each stroke I paint on my face is a conscious choice to express something deeply personal—whether it's the stress I'm feeling or the hope I have for my future. My face has become a canvas for my evolution, a place where I can display my most vulnerable emotions and empower myself to keep moving forward. The colorful strokes are more than just an aesthetic choice; they represent the balance I have sought between the chaotic nature of my academic life and the inner peace I've worked hard to achieve through creativity. These expressions on my face are not only a reflection of my identity as a first-gen student but also a visual representation of the mental health balance I continue to strive for.

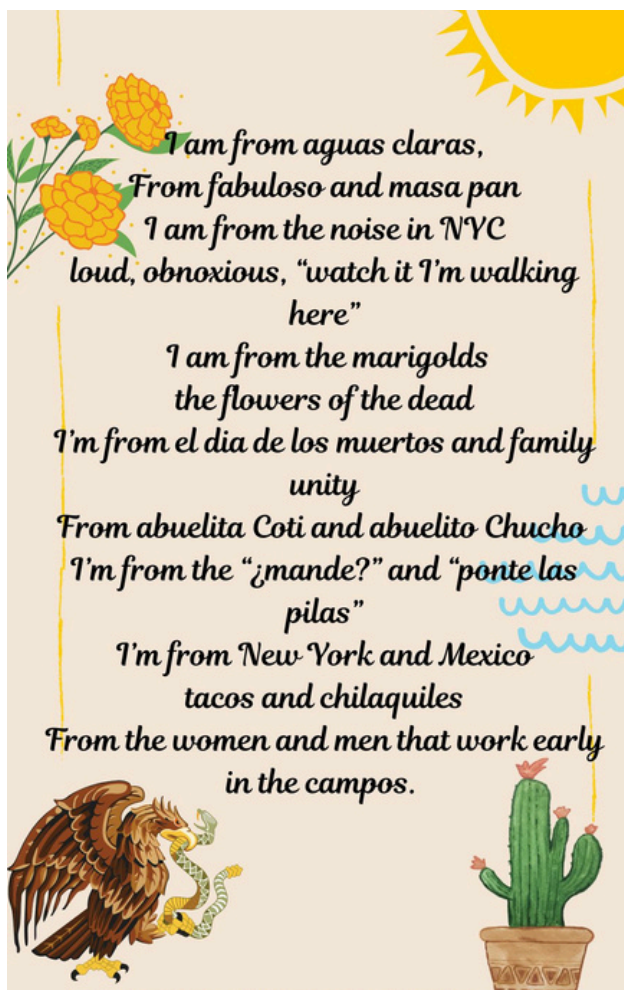
The Newbury Center as a Safe Space for Growth

As a first-gen student, I've faced numerous challenges, but the Newbury Center at BU has been a constant source of support and guidance. The Newbury Center has created a safe space for me to grow, express myself, and embrace my journey with confidence. The community here allows me to make mistakes, learn from them, and keep moving toward my larger goals. It's a place where I can take risks in my academic and creative endeavors without fear of judgment—because I know that failure is part of the process of growth. Each day, as I navigate the chaotic demands of academic life, the Newbury Center serves as my anchor. It provides the support I need to move forward, despite the setbacks. This environment has given me the confidence to face challenges and continue working toward my dreams, knowing that I am part of a larger, supportive community of first-gen students who share similar struggles and triumphs.

Creativity as Therapy and Empowerment for Fellow First-Gen Students

I've learned that creativity isn't just a pursuit—it's also a healing process. For me, face art is a way to speak my truth without words, to communicate my inner struggles and growth. The vibrant strokes I paint on my face and head have become symbols of resilience—each piece representing a step forward in my journey, and a reflection of the causes I am passionate about. Through my creativity, I have come to understand that creativity is universal—it's a way for us to communicate our most personal stories, our struggles, and our victories. It helps us understand ourselves better and connect with others. **To all my fellow first-gen students: our voices deserve to be heard, and our stories deserve to be shared. I hope my face art encourages you to embrace your own creative expression and to share your journey with pride.**

My submission is a reflection of how creativity has been my bridge to resilience, self-discovery, and empowerment as a first-generation student at BU. Coming from a background where education was not easily accessible, I faced immense pressure to succeed while navigating an unfamiliar academic world. Through face art, performance, and other creative expressions, I found a way to process my emotions, balance my struggles, and embrace my unique identity. The Newbury Center has been a crucial part of my journey, providing a safe space where I can grow, take risks, and connect with others who share similar experiences. It has reinforced the idea that being first-gen is not just about overcoming obstacles but about redefining success on my own terms. I hope my submission encourages other first-gen students to embrace their creative outlets, tell their stories, and find strength in their journeys. Creativity is more than just an expression for me—it is a form of healing and a way to inspire others to own their narratives with pride.



Yo Soy De

BY MELANIE HERNANDEZ, SAR '26

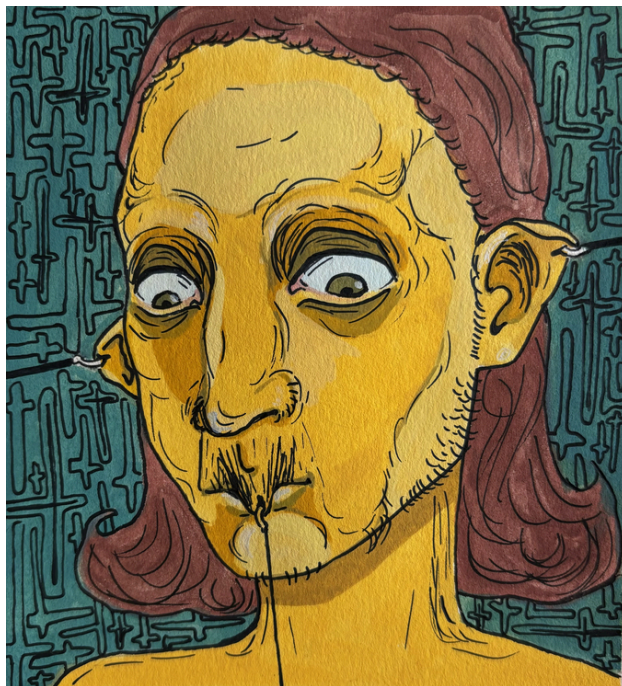
Being a first-generation college student at Boston University with a Mexican background today means navigating a complex intersection of identity, culture, and politics. In a time when issues of immigration, racial inequality, and the treatment of Latino communities are highly politicized, I may often feel like I'm walking a fine line between honoring my heritage and striving to succeed in spaces that have historically not been made for people like me.

There's a constant need to balance familial expectations with personal ambition, while also confronting the larger societal challenges that many of us face, like stereotypes or limited access to resources. Yet, it also offers a unique opportunity to bring diverse perspectives to the table and to empower not only myself but also my community.

Pull

BY YEGANEH TAHERI, (GR) ENG '28

I work in a biomechanics lab where I use sutures on human tissue to stretch it and collect data. It's kind of fascinating, in a simple and almost childlike way, that we essentially "pull" human tissue to see how stretchy it is, and I like painting it. Both of my parents are nurses, and even though they didn't go through grad school like I am, I especially enjoy sharing how much better I'm getting at suturing tissue—something we can all relate to. It warms my heart to feel connected to them, even though they're halfway around the world.



Two Where We Are Now

BY KIM TA, GMS '26

I've arrived early to the party. I wonder when the food will be served.
To the party, I'm late. I wonder if the food is out yet.

So many people, where can I sit?
So many cars, where can I park?

"Hello, it's nice to meet you."

That guy, he was cute. I wonder what he's doing.
That girl, she was beautiful. How do I approach her again?

It's late, I need to go.
I think she's leaving.

"It was a pleasure meeting you."

He was nice, I hope we meet again.
She was sweet, I need to see her again.

But I guess it wasn't meant to be-
"Wait, can I get your number?"

At the party, we arrived together.
After the party, we went home together.

So many people, but I'm glad to sit with you.
So many cars, but I'm glad to take you home.

"Hey, how was tonight?"

The night was great.
The weeks get better.

Time goes on and each month we celebrate.
Years go by and we still count the days together.

"If you could go back, would you change anything?"
"I would go back, but I wouldn't change a thing."

Every moment led us here.
Two where we are now.

This submission is a poem that my partner and I wrote together. It's about how we first met and how we are still together now. It's about how we wouldn't change a thing because our journey led us here. To me, being a first-generation college student is like beating the odds. I definitely struggled to find resources and there were times where I had no idea what I was doing. I'm glad to have met people who helped me get to where I am today.

Being a first-generation college student means constantly figuring things out on my own, whether it's navigating financial aid, understanding academic expectations, or finding a sense of belonging in a new environment. When I transferred to BU, I worried about starting over. Joining BU Chankaar gave me something I didn't even realize I was looking for: a community that felt like home. This picture represents more than just a dance team. It's late-night practices after long days of classes, shared meals after performances, and the feeling of being surrounded by people who just get it. As a first-gen student, my journey has often been about persistence and independence. Chankaar reminded me that I don't have to do everything alone. Moving forward, I want to keep building spaces where others—especially those who, like me, have had to carve their own paths—feel seen, supported, and celebrated.

Dancing through College

BY TONIMA BHOWMIK, CAS '27



Photograph

BY JESSICA WU, CAS '27



This is the building that I see every morning on my way to class and work! My sister and I refer to the CDS building as our "beacon" that will always leads us back home. This building not only represents the strong and supportive community I have here at BU, but it also always reminds me to look up at my goals and aspirations for the future.

Alicia Keys featuring Teenage Kids: A Rt 66 Production

BY TANG YUANDI, COM '23

Stop Requested, Doors Open
A surge of youthful motivation rushes onto the bus
Pulling windows, shaking seats
Shouting, yelling, running back and forth

Poker Face, Earphones On
I remain indifferent as Alicia Keys sings loudly
Great piano, calm voice
Those mischievous ones should really leave

“Some people want it all,” ALL YOU GUYS STUPID
ENOUGH
“If it ain't you, baby If I ain't got you,” YOU GIVE ME
SOME SNACK

Sudden Lights, Nothing Annoys
14-year-old me with the same desire
Earphones off, smiling with boys
Youth is a gift that I deeply admire

Stop Requested, Doors Open
I move slower as my body rusts
Shouts continue, bus waving
Embrace the past and enjoy what lasts

“Some people want it all,” only cherish when it's gone
“If I ain't got youth, baby,” I silently sing along

*After graduation, I realized the Newbury Center is an
oasis for first-gen students. You raise me up and my time
would have been totally different If I haven't met you.*



Shaping Our Future

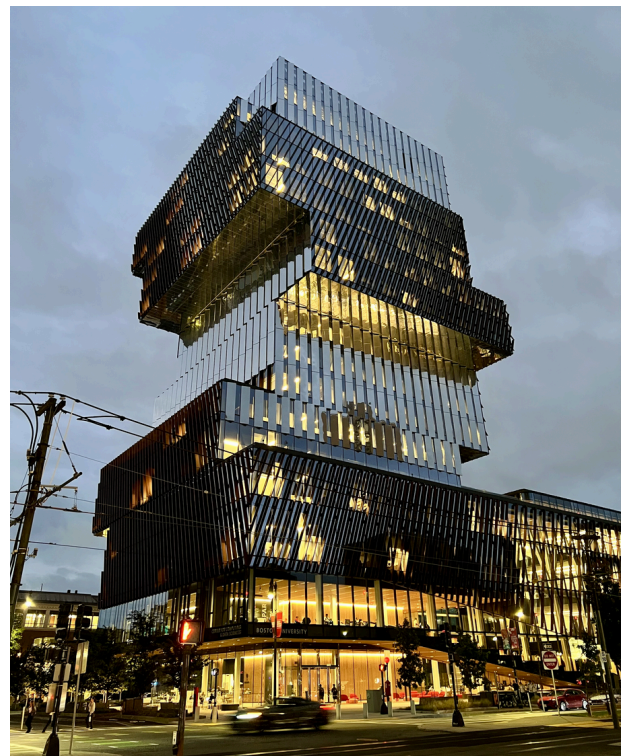
BY MIRANDA GARCIA, COM '28

In my view, the experience of being a first-generation student revolves around the idea that we are in charge of shaping our own future. We are the first ones to do something that no one else in our family has done before, and even though that pressure weighs down on our shoulders, it is what drives us to strive for success. Not only are we going after our dreams, but also showing those around us that they can achieve the same things despite all of the challenges along the way. Like many, I hope to inspire my siblings, who come after me on this journey, to become motivated to pursue a college education. The artist in my drawing represents every first-generation student bringing their dream to life here at Boston University. Slowly building from the ground up, each trace becomes one step closer to fulfilling our goals. Being a first-generation student at BU means to begin a new chapter full of opportunities and personal growth. To be able to pursue higher education in a new environment with the help of resources like the Newbury Center.

Golden Glow on Gray: CDS Building Against the Dusky Sky

BY HAOYU YAN, MET '25

After having a feast on Lobster Night, the CDS building looked beautiful as we stepped out.



Shamwari Garden

BY MARINE NIMBLETT, GMS '25

All my friends are flowers:
unique in beauty and charm,
some sensitive, some hard,
but all resilient in this soil that is
hostess of our celebration and mourning.

My people grow and bloom over time,
evolving through hardships softened by the laughter
of nights spent with bubbly drinks and
silly movies and shared secrets.
Their humanity steadfast through harsh winters and
blistering summers, soft springs and calm falls.
Their seasons change but the love remains
in their bountiful seeds of humanity.

My people thrive with care and whispers
from mothers whose soil thrived in lands far from ours,
who gave just enough on this new plot
to feed petals that flourish into transient beauty,
embodying the continuous journey of life that is
our roots.

I'm so blessed to be in harmony
with this environment of
resilient stems that extend vibrant minds
eager to seed change and
bear fruits of justice.
Together we grow and make better this Eden
before returning to the soil.

"Shamwari Garden" is about the friends I made in undergrad during my time at Northeastern University, who I now call family. We went through everything together, and all of us have immigrant mothers "from lands far from ours." Our shared childhood experiences between all of us watered our friendship, and nourished the soil of my development during undergrad, and no matter what happens later in my life, I am just glad we were on the same plot for a time. I wouldn't be who I am today without my friends, who are mostly first gen. Shamwari means "friend" in shona, where my mother is from.

Sacred Hearts

BY MARIA CUNEO, (GR) MET '26

Navigating my time at BU as a first-generation undergraduate and now as a first-generation graduate student has felt daunting and at times even impossible. Without the guidance of experienced family members or mentors, I never knew if I was on the right path and never felt like I was doing things correctly. Each step in my academic career has felt like blindly taking the next step without being able to see the whole staircase, and without a guiding hand to hold. I have turned to art to express and process some of these more difficult feelings as I move through life at BU. While I may not always know if I am making the right choices or heading in the right direction, I can always dedicate myself 100% to the task at hand and work unceasingly to meet my goals as I have done in creating this piece. I am proud that I have made it this far in my life and career and am extremely grateful of the opportunity to work and study at BU. I hope that I can continue to blaze a trail into the world of higher education for my family and continue to make them proud.



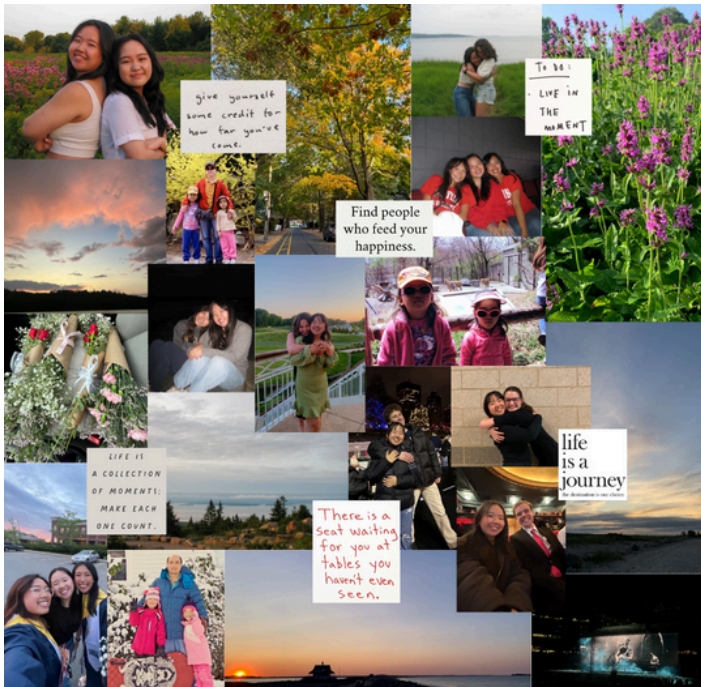
A System of Support

BY YUNA YI, SAR '27

As you can see, this collage includes people, places, memories, and quotes. Reflecting on my first-generation college journey, I realize that having a strong support system was vital to my success: the people who instilled confidence and belief in me at times when I was not doing that for myself. Nature always grounds me and the quotes I added remind me that I don't constantly have to bear tremendous pressure on myself.

Upon reflecting on my journey, if there is one thing you take away from my piece, it is to remember that there is support available to you in your communities.

Give yourself grace during hard times, and remember that nothing is ever permanent.



Vision Board

BY JENNA HANSEN, (GR) SED '25



I made my first “annual” vision board last year, when I was (by all appearances) living my best life in France. The reality is that Paris – and France as a whole – is the place I most long to be. I did love it there.

But it was a lot of work.

I had just graduated from Boston University with my B.A. in Anthropology and I spent the entire summer working 6 days a week. I was saving everything that I could to fund a year of teaching abroad.

The truth is, while it was amazing and beautiful and truly a formative experience – it was hard. And I know that this comes from a place of incredible privilege: to have ever had this opportunity was amazing. With that being said, I was working as much as possible, applying to grad school, and doing everything that I could to travel in Europe while the flights were so wonderfully inexpensive.

Acting like I have it all together, when I want nothing more than to curl up in a ball and hide my face from the world, is a skill I practiced every single day. Moving away does not, apparently, fix all of one’s problems (a lot of them? sure).

So, I was feeling a certain type of way (a combination of second-language embarrassment, loneliness, exhaustion, and an utter lack of Reese’s Pieces) when I made my vision board for 2024. And it helped.

When you feel alone, sad, isolated – all things that I have come to learn are a very normal part of the graduate student experience, especially as a first-gen student – having anything to look forward to is incredibly necessary.

So, about a week ago (the end of January, I suppose), I made my 2025 vision board. I was, once again, feeling a certain type of way (this time with Reese's Pieces, at least). Through blurry-eyes and sniffles, I meandered my way through Pinterest. A few of the pictures are mine, and most of them aren't. Here's the run-down:

1. A beautiful, peaceful beach somewhere. I've never been on a beach vacation. That sounds nice.
2. Books. Books that I want to read. Books that make my heart happy instead of making my eyes tired and my brain foggy.
3. A port in Montpellier, France. Warm, French-speaking, historic? Sign me up.
4. Burberry Goddess perfume. My absolute dream fragrance. For over \$100? Keep dreaming girly.
5. Roses. Pink ones. I could buy these for myself, yes. But I would very much like someone to give them to me when I finish this whole grad-school thing.
6. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum: I love it here. I want to be one of those people who journals and looks pensive and cool. I definitely look pensive. Not sure about the cool part.
7. (Replica) of Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam. I have seen this in person (you aren't permitted to take pictures in the Sistine Chapel, but alas). This is to remind myself that I have in fact done interesting things.
8. Cléo de 5 à 7 poster → Agnès Varda is a genius and no one can tell me otherwise.
9. A cozy coffee shop somewhere. I spend a lot of time in places like this and I don't plan to change that anytime soon.

Bonus:

- Italian quote that says "patience is a virtue of the strong" (or, something like that). I'm learning Italian. But I am also learning that if I can have so much patience for others, I need to have it for myself. It's okay for me to go at my own pace.
- Quote from the bible: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). No matter what you believe, empathy is always good. Also, my grandma would have loved that I included this, and I want to think of her. So now I will, every day.

I don't necessarily think that creating a vision board is an act of manifestation (it would be so absolutely great if it was, though, so fingers-crossed). Instead, it's the very human act of asking myself what would bring me the most comfort and joy in the future, and allowing those things to be whatever they are. It's okay if a fancy perfume would make my whole month. Or if looking angsty at a museum is one of my favorite things ever.

This journey is hard, but we are allowed to round-out the sharp edges and cushion the blows. For me, that means daydreaming and vision boarding and turning on my twinkly lights as soon as I get home. Whatever it means for you, make sure that you do those things as often as you can.

Never feel guilty for giving yourself the gift of rest and joy.

The train doesn't stop when you do, but I promise that you can get back on at the next station.

Clarity

BY KALINDA TRAN, CFA '26

I associate eyedrops with self-care and a sense of relief and refreshment. They represent a sense of clarity through my experiences at BU and the support I've received here that has helped me grow immensely. Details like the pajamas and earrings in my painting are references to my family and their support which made my education possible, even when it felt like a big leap. This piece captures not only my experiences at BU, but the support from home that has guided me along the way.



Monstera

BY EUNJI PARK, GRS '26



Submitting my drawing of a monstera leaf represents my journey as a first-gen at BU. Just like the monstera, which is unique with its holes and diverse colors, my experience is about embracing diversity and finding beauty in differences. As a first-gen, I'm carving out my own path, much like how the monstera thrives despite its unconventional appearance. This submission reflects my desire to create harmony and celebrate the diverse experiences that define my journey.

Commanding a Millennium Odyssey

BY JOSE CRUZ, ENG '28

It was a fiery-orange sunset which shimmered through the airplane window, creating a glow in my hands. I held onto those little fragments which have no beginning and no end – my memories. As the engines came alive, I carried the sky, and off to a new life yet where had time gone by? As a child, I loved spending countless hours in the magic tales of adventures. It was the calming notion of adventuring, and tinkering with the idea of “what could happen next?” My imagination ran wild and I knew the thrill of wearing the ‘cape of mystery’ and ‘rose-tinted glasses.’

Moments before getting on the plane, my mother couldn’t hold herself anymore, “Mito, don’t go, just stay five minutes longer,” hugging me tightly, as her tears left scars, and I couldn’t grasp the moment until the second she let go. My head holds my heart, as this breakaway guilt, the insecurity within my own bounds to pursue educational mobility. It is a journey that will involve gain but also loss – of my past. I feel disjunction that I will carry many layers of identity, my old self and someone who I will eventually be. I don’t want to forget my roots, it's scary jumping in blindly, yet I am living through it. It’s not easy being away from those special people, and as the night falls, I am only in my head. Why? To one day treasure the things that value me the most.

This semester has felt like a dream—but the kind of dream you don’t really have control over. It wasn’t about simply existing but about learning to live fully, embracing the uncertainty and growth that come with new beginnings. At the start, my definition of success was hazy, tied to grades, social connections, and feeling like I “belonged” somewhere. I thought success in college would mean being in control, having a clear path, and excelling in everything I tried. However, as the semester progressed, my perspective shifted. Success became less about control and perfection and more about the process of finding meaning in the small, everyday moments.

I found myself circling back to improbable events—trying to figure out where to go, who to meet, and how to adapt. These experiences taught me that success isn’t about having all the answers but about being open to exploration and growth. I wanted to find a space where I could truly be myself, and that desire pushed me to look beyond superficial achievements. For me, success now includes understanding that “story-truth,” the narrative we craft to give life meaning, often resonates deeper than “happening-truth,”. It’s about shaping my own story, crafting an idea of “what will happen next,” even when I don’t have all the pieces figured out.

It's an impending doom. When in my thoughts, I hold an unknown future, and the silence of night, everything in its double nature, it’s like those late hours in the night when I can't remember how I got from where I am to where I will go – yet the seconds stand – but it doesn't matter because I know who I can be.

It was a fiery-orange sunset which shimmered through the airplane window, creating a glow. For as long as I can remember, there has been a constant lump in my throat when looking at others. *Belonging* is like an uncolored children's book, it's blank until there's color. Why am I not good enough? I can't possibly be the only odd one out or am I? These questions bounce around and my breath holds still, the time is still running though.

I always saw the world in black and white until I met someone who brought me tinted glasses, turning my world into color. Yet it hurts when that someone is miles away, I have not found a way to *belong*. Presently, it's a legion lost in traveling between new faces, wanting to speak but your throat dries up, or your head hurts from overthinking. This little boy from *Huachinango* always wants to belong somewhere, with somebody. Yet, now I am 18, and I look at myself in the mirror and I think the same old thing "when, why, how." Until now I have not felt that sense of belonging, my own shadow walks with me and it never goes away. I found people that I can call companions but not friends. I moved out to a new city, but now October is dawning on me. I know that not everyone has it figured out, but if it is a journey which I must endure, will it involve gain and loss? Still I can point to one of two things I have definitely learned by being... That is a beginning

The freedom to express is the voice that has carried me to find adventure during my time at BU. It's been such a short time since I got here, but this journey will carry on. It's about seeing things I never saw before, turning dreams into goals. My journey as a first-generation student at BU is to take the road less traveled, as I am destined to live the life my family could not, and through that, a testimony will be borne.

In the Footsteps of Sacrifice: Shared Burdens, United Hands

BY IRIS CHEN, QST '28



When I first started illustrating my experience as a first-generation student at BU, I envisioned incorporating various symbols throughout my work. The vibrant lower portion of the red shirt reflects my pride in my Chinese heritage, while its angle mimics the Chinese flag, emphasizing my identity. The oversized yellow rain boots juxtapose the big role I feel I need to fulfill from being first-gen and a role model to my younger cousins and brother to how I still feel like a child, even as I step into the new world of college. The pant-pockets symbolized the expectations put on me in the form of a physical weight that I carry as I walk. At times, when the pressure of the pockets becomes overwhelming, I think of the calloused hands of family members, who have sacrificed so much. These hands remind me of the support I have and the path they, together, have paved for me. As I navigate the waves of challenges and uncertainties that come from college, I remember the hands I once held as a child, grandchild, niece, even as a great-grandchild and how I've continued to hold onto that support.

My Journey

BY ERIKA VILLALOBOS TORRIJOS, GRS '30

Wandering through the world,
I find myself more at home
than I ever was.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that my taciturn face
transforms into character.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that the unforgivable crime of being
is doing nothing.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that the clock spins faster
for those who don't take risks.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that my homeland doesn't mean
my home.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that my home doesn't mean
my family.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that my family doesn't mean
blood kin.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that blood kin doesn't mean
love.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that love doesn't mean
complement.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that complement doesn't mean
wholeness.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that wholeness doesn't mean
children.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that children don't mean
happiness.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that happiness doesn't mean
security.

Wandering through the world,
I understood that security means
daring.

Wandering through the world,
I became a first-gen
who made her dream come true.

The journey has been long, difficult, but very rewarding. I am the first person in my family to choose to study and be part of the academic world. My family doesn't understand what I do, and that has left me feeling isolated, but I have found in the academic community a network of understanding that I am grateful for. Being the first person to do something different always brings change, and changes are often uncomfortable for many people. The poem I wrote reflects these adjustments and challenges I have faced on my journey as a first-generation student. I hope that others who are part of the first generation can relate and know that there is a community that can support them. Being part of the first generation community is very important to me. I come from a traditional family that believes success is only possible through hard work, but not in academia. That's why it's important for me to write about the struggle and loneliness that comes with daring to do and think differently. Every person should have the right to decide about their life and their journey, which is why being part of the first generation that did things differently fills me with pride.

Breaking Barriers

BY CAROLINA RIVAS, CGS '25 / CAS '27

My journey hasn't been easy. I had to figure most things out on my own. Others seemed to have more resources than I had. There would be times when I felt like I didn't belong. There would be times when fear crept up. There would be times when I was ashamed of where I came from, allowing guilt to step in.

My mom has always been adamant about prioritizing school. If work permitted, my mom would attend most of my award ceremonies; I had the grades, perfect attendance, and the support. I didn't want to throw it all away, hence why I'm determined about my academics.

In high school and college, I noticed there were people who didn't look like me. There were people from all sorts of family incomes. In high school, I was in IB classes, which was an ego booster for me. However, there were times when I felt in utter loss when my classmates spoke. In my discussion sections, I question if I'd ever speak as eloquently as them or have that same powerful knowledge as them.

At home, we primarily speak Spanish. Living in a Hispanic household, once you speak English you become a walking Google Translate. I've adapted to it, but sometimes it's hard, especially now. I want to inform my mom about my college life, but then I get stuck because I don't know how to translate a word or phrase. I have to backtrack and describe the word for her to understand what I'm saying. They're small inconveniences, but it can be frustrating for both of us.

I would hear people talk about their parents' careers or what they did in college. These people have lifetime guidance in terms of professional experiences. They have the connections I wish to have. If they are ever in a fallback, they have a safety net to help them. They have parents who don't have to worry about being deported on a random Tuesday. They don't have to worry about only earning \$11 per hour.

EMERGE is a non-profit organization that empowers selected first-generation students from low-income areas in Houston Texas. They pushed us to pursue a higher education in the nation's top colleges. I had advisors guiding me throughout the whole college application process. They mentally prepared me for the difficult challenges that might arise and resources to seek. I'm appreciative of them because they made sure we too can succeed like anyone else.

My parents are major contributors to my ongoing journey. They're hardworking people who make sure my sister and I live a comfortable life. Although my journey is far from being complete, they're the cheerleaders from the sidelines. No one's journey is easy, but that doesn't mean one should quit halfway. There will be fallout moments, where one's feeling frustrated, doubtful, or scared of what lies ahead, but one should think about why they are doing it. For me, it's because of my family.

It's a privilege to be pursuing an education at a rigorous institution. I wouldn't be sitting here right now, 2,000 miles away from home if my parents hadn't been supportive. Everyone has a story, and I want to tell all first-generation students reading: we set the precedent for future first-generation students. We have the power to make a change. People may make up excuses as to why we are where we are, but that's wrong. We deserve to be here, just like anybody else in that room where no one else looks like you. We may have to work twice as hard to be successful, but that shouldn't be why we quit.

As of now, I'm unsure what my journey will entail. With small steps at a time, I want to continue to improve skills that will get me out of my comfort zone. I want to help other first-generation students who may be experiencing similar feelings as me. I want to continue studying. I want to go to law school. However, what I do know is that I will graduate from Boston University with a bachelor's degree.

I wrote about my challenges, the people who have motivated me, and who have supported me throughout my life. Goals can be hard to achieve, one step at a time though. Before you know it you're going to look back and realize how far you've come. I want first generation students to know that they're not alone, there's a big community behind us that is rooting for us to make a change. We should be proud of how far we have come from breaking barriers.

BY ALYSSA CINIGLIO, (GR) SED '26

I chose a photo collage to symbolize my journey as a first-generation undergraduate and graduate student. Each photo represents the path that led me to Boston University—from navigating college applications to graduating, working full-time, and starting graduate school in a new city.

Being a first-gen student comes with challenges and a hidden curriculum to learn, but I wanted to highlight the joyous moments, successes, and my incredible community. Through struggles, there is hope. I am proud and honored to be on this journey.

My family, partner, and the Newbury Center have all carried the sun for me in dark times. Their love and support keep me going, even on the hardest of

days. I pursue my degrees to honor my parents, who didn't have the same opportunities, and to inspire my younger brother. Even though they may not always understand, they have gotten me through so much, even from 210 miles away. My partner's unwavering belief in me reminds me of my worth, and the Newbury Center provides a home away from home. Though this path isn't always easy, I look forward to where it leads. Thank you to everyone who has been part of my journey!



Their Roots, My Wings: The Bridge Between

BY CHARISMA COSTA-MELCHOR, SED '26

At night, when the world turns cold,
when meaning fades and fears take hold,
I beg to go back home.

I am proud of how far I've come,
but deep inside, I'm numb, I'm worn.
Carrying my family on my back,
their hopes, expectations, their weight, a heavy
stack.

When the world is silent, I cry—
not just because I cannot go,
but because I must, because I know
I am the one, the chosen few,
to chase the dream they never knew.

I say it's for me—this fight, this climb,
but truth be told, that's just a lie.
I work for them, I work for pride,
I work so fear won't pull me wide
into the place where they once stood,
where dreams dissolve and fade for good.

And I mean no harm,

No harm, no shame, no blame,
but the thought of stillness fuels my pain.
I know their past is why they yearn,
why every step of mine must burn.
But knowing that won't make it light,
won't let me sleep in peace at night.

I am killing myself to make them proud,
to silence doubts, to hush the crowd.
I overwork, I sacrifice,
but nothing ever feels suffice.

A 'B' was never good enough,
excellence—the only love.
And here I stand in ivy walls,
a first-gen who should stand tall,
but all I feel is something lost,
a mind gone blank, a heart defrost.

I type until my fingers ache,
essays spill and pages break,
because the bare minimum and I
have never met, have never tried.

Rest is foreign, time is tight,
I chase the sun, I race the night.
There's no second, no last, no fail,
no safety net if I derail.

I am generationally cursed—
no trust fund, backup, or reverse.
And I say that bitter,
but also bold—
because even as my spine unfolds,
even as my body breaks,
I am the first to ever raise the stakes.

So I drown in books, in music, in screens, in art, the only
things that slow my heart,
the only things that keep me whole,
that stop the voices, dull the toll.

I am a first-gen,
carrying an inheritance of dreams—
but in the process, losing me.

And I don't think I'll ever be found.

But I raise a toast to that Brooklyn-bound brownstone, that
perfectly curated home—

the one I'll own,
with dogs, with cats, with bunnies too,
the kind of life I always knew
I'd have to chase, to fight, to claim,
to carve in stone beside my name.

Of course, that's after my bachelor's done,
three master's earned, and Ph.D. won.
When I will stand with pride and grace,
own my office, shape my space.
Be my own CEO,
watch my empire start to grow.

Expanding far across the seas,
where side hustles bloom like trees,
no more fear behind closed doors, no more counting what
we lack—
never again looking back.

And neither I nor those I love
will have to bow, will have to break,
will have to fear another tide
rising tall outside our gates.

Because I have built a world anew,
a dream once far, now breaking through. So though I burn,
though I break,
I will not stop—this is my fate

I will be found

one day

My submission is a reflection of the emotional and mental weight that comes with being a first-generation college student at BU. It captures the constant push to succeed—not just for myself, but for my family, whose sacrifices and unfulfilled dreams fuel my journey. The poem speaks to the unrelenting pressure to excel, the fear of failure when there is no safety net, and the struggle to find balance between ambition and personal well-being. Being a first-gen student means navigating uncharted territory, carrying the hopes of generations while battling imposter syndrome, burnout, and the overwhelming need to prove that their sacrifices were not in vain. Yet, it is also about resilience, breaking barriers, and building a future where security replaces struggle. This piece is an honest glimpse into that duality—the pride and the pain, the burden and the breakthrough—of redefining what is possible for myself and those who come after me.

First-gen Focus

BY TENAY MATHIS,
(GR)COM '26



My photo essay documents my first year at Boston University as a first-generation graduate student and photojournalist. During this time, I had the opportunity to immerse myself in the student community, where I captured students' experiences for BU Today. Each image reflects the stories of faculty, staff, and students I encountered. While most of my photographs were never published, they tell stories beyond the polished articles and single moments featured in print. This photo essay brings those untold moments to the forefront, offering a deeper perspective on the student experience.



Dandelion

BY EMMANUEL AGUIRRE GUTIERREZ, CGS '26 / CAS '28

I've had a garden growing in my head

It was once solely dirt
Fertile with expectation
Absorbent to a fault
Born for love and expiation

A dream danced with the wind
Then nestled into my folds
Out came a dandelion
Mistaken for a marigold

Delightful defiances
Define my garden's greenery
Sunflowers that bloom at night
Passions that adorn the scenery

Sadly, a doubt was planted
Foreign in nature, but wholly mine
As I watered it with blind attention
And fed it my wretched brine

A snake of a vine
Surrounded slowly, suffocated sternly
Leaving nothing but dead leaves
And earth to spread wholly

There are hundreds of weeds in my garden
Filling every wrinkle in my brain
Slowly clawing out of my head
Shrouding my eyes and ears

And yet, I only focus on the dandelion
The dandelion that always blooms
The dandelion loved like a marigold
The dandelion that defies

My poem expresses the doubt and self-consciousness I developed during my middle and high school years. As a first-generation student, I felt this pressure since middle school to succeed, go to college, and get a good (meaning well-paying) job for the sake of not just myself, but for my family as well. When that pressure mixed with the pressure of applying to college, it led me to judge myself with unrealistic standards of success in everything I did, from academics to even hobbies like music and art that were meant for enjoyment. I felt like I had to have this set goal of success for everything I did from the moment I entered school just to have a chance at happiness in life, and I'm still working to unlearn that mindset so I can have a healthier relationship with my passions and future goals. I wrote this poem to tell everyone, including myself, that even if your dream isn't clear or your passions may not be what you expect, cultivating and cherishing them for what they are will be more fulfilling than chasing unattainable expectations of success and listening to your inner imposter. For me, being a first-generation college student, searching for the opportunity to try something new, is an act of defiance to your inner imposter.

Scales of Origin

BY VIVIAN NGUYEN, CGS '28

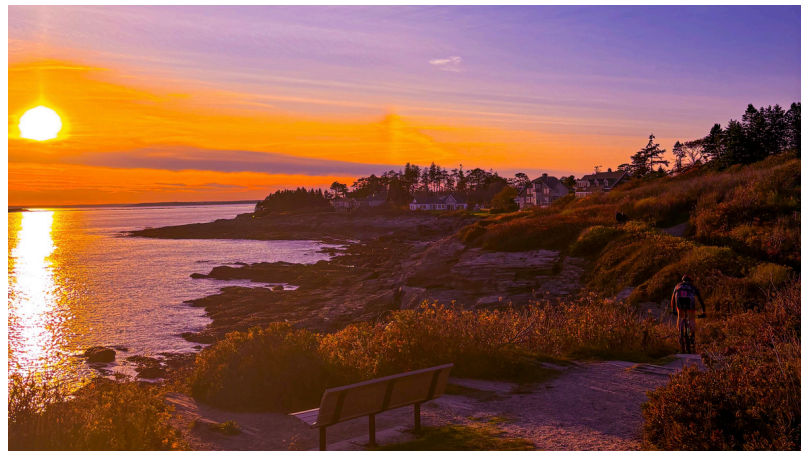


Previously tethered to me was an ailment that clouded my relationship with my identity as an Asian-American. It roughened my ability to connect with my Vietnamese culture in the public world. However, the hands of my family members never failed to guide me out towards the culture they had to share. The celebrations, the food, and the distinct features on my family's faces nurtured that ailment. My Vietnamese identity unfurled a warmth that was tender and gentle enough to overpower the fear I had-- the fear of judgment and humility. But now, I make it my mission to provide the appreciation my culture deserves for its continued breaths of vitality and comfort. In this piece called Scales of Origin, I depict a character that represents me intertwined with a dragon. This mythical creature that gave birth to my country is mine to take care of as I promise myself to love, heal, and value my identity.

The Twilight Pilgrim

BY FEBRIANI SIBI, (GR)MET '26

Standing on this rugged coastline in Maine, I paused to capture a moment that reminds me a lot of my hometown in Jayapura, Indonesia. The twilight sky, painted in fiery orange and soft lavender, reflects the duality of my journey as a first-generation student. The blazing sun symbolizes the burning drive I've carried to succeed, while the calming hues of purple represent the quiet moments of reflection and gratitude. This bench serves as a



reminder of the crossroads I've faced—moments of uncertainty when I needed to pause and choose my path. As I forge ahead with determination, the cyclist in the background reflects my journey—often climbing uphill against challenges yet never stopping. Being the first in my family to pursue higher education feels like navigating uncharted waters, much like the expansive ocean before me. There have been days when the waves of self-doubt crashed hard, yet the promise of brighter horizons kept me anchored. I owe my resilience to my family, who, like the trees lining this coast, stand tall and steadfast, providing shade and encouragement.

Breaking Barriers, Finding Me

BY VAJINDER KAUR, GRS '25

Zeal to prove myself –
Is it the need?
Want to go ahead;
People call it greed.

First from the family,
From the area I hail,
Each step I take, thinking,
What if I fail?

After high school,
Where girls get married,
A sixteen-year-old –
With luggage heavier than her, she carried.

Against the wishes,
Family or the society.
With no one to talk to,
Dealing alone with anxiety.

First to earn a bachelor's,
The girl of the home.
With a lot of hope,
Her parents' eyes shone.

Leaving footsteps for the younger,
Roaming miles away.
A young girl out of home –
What will people say?

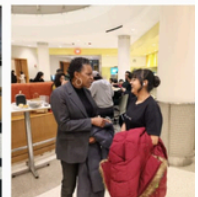
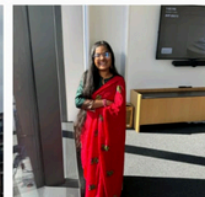
Even for summer camps,
Hard to get permission.
In a fast-paced world,
People still think:
"Women should be in the kitchen!"

On my own,
With meticulous planning,
Failures on the way,
Here I am, standing.

Oceans and continents away,
Exploring me.
A lot to tell,
But to my parents, I am carefree.

Glad to see here,
Many first-gen to talk,
Similar stories to tell,
Somewhat the same road to walk.

Here is my journey,
With joy, cries, and uncertainty,
Stumbling, but with a lot of support
From my fellows at Boston University



Coming from a rural area in India, I am the first in my family—and even among extended relatives—to pursue a master's degree, that too abroad. I am also the first in my immediate family to earn a bachelor's degree, paving the way for my siblings. In my community, girls commonly marry after high school; more than half of my classmates are already raising children. I am grateful that my mother, a math tutor, persisted and that my father didn't give in to societal pressure. She has been my greatest support, convincing him for everything I wanted—whether attending a summer camp miles away or applying to study abroad. Breaking away from that environment and making it to BU has been a long journey and a fight. I appreciate the Newbury Center for supporting First-Gen students. My time at BU has been mostly good, with some struggles, made easier by incredible support from my professors (Haviland, Masanao, and Fotios), program administrator (Ronan), classmates (Jordan, Taha, Qiuyi, Paul), and BU members (Amy). First-Gens often navigate life without parental guidance, making support systems like professors and friends essential. I am extremely grateful to have both at BU.

It's Only a Train Ride Away

BY HERANI HIRUY, CAS '26



I have always had a love/hate relationship with public transportation. Most times I found it overwhelming and found any way to avoid it. The longer I spent on BU's campus, the more I became reliant on the green line; a staple for many BU students and staff. Growing up in the greater Boston area, I'd always hated the Green Line. It's old, always packed, and ridiculously slow. I'd dreaded taking the T and always took a second to complain to any ear that would listen until I found myself ranting to my dad one night as he dropped me back to my dorm. Like all of his classic stories, Babi started with "ya know, when I was your age Herani.." and as I prepared for a new retelling of an old story, I was shocked to find that I had not heard this one. After complaining to him about the inconsistency of the green-line and the packed afternoons spent on them, my dad described his early 20s on the BU campus decades ago. "I always wanted to ride the green line as a college student" he said with a smile on his face, "enjoy it Heranieye". In that moment, any disgust or frustration I had with the Green line or any form of public transit felt silly. I remembered how many stories my friends and I exchanged on the way to class, or the quiet moments I took to read a journal coming back from a late shift. I remembered the awkwardness of falling on someone in a packed train, and overhearing gossip from a stranger I would probably never see again. I remembered the excitement of riding on the Tube during my study abroad in London and learning the importance of wayfinding. A couple weeks after chatting with my dad, I found myself - once again - in a packed train cart, and as I squished between dozens of strangers I couldn't help but smile. I was a college student riding the green-line...and I could not have been more happy.

Thank you ...

to all the first-gen students and professionals who submitted to and read this year's edition of Elevate. Thank you for all of your courage, authenticity, and vulnerability. Navigating the first-gen journey is no easy feat. As we reflect on our journeys, let us welcome wherever our journeys take us next with open arms.



**TERRIER
FIRSTS**



Sincerely,
Malia & Yuna

