



The Daily Free Press

The Independent Student Newspaper at Boston University

 MENU



COMMUNITY, FEATURES

BU first-gen student shares her motivation to succeed, shares other graduates' stories online

April 28, 2020 10:11 pm

by [Angela Yang](#)

The first in her family to make it through a U.S. college, Boston University's College of Communication senior Josee Matela juggled multiple jobs to make it through four years at one of the most expensive institutions in the country. The 21-year-old is determined not to let a global pandemic overshadow the accomplishments of those in her shoes.

As BU's commencement is postponed with no definite date in sight, Matela said she is lucky BU has committed to holding a physical graduation. But she said she found herself "heartbroken" after speaking to other first-generation seniors.

"It just felt like a big gut punch," Matela said. "My diploma is not just my own. It's a culmination of all of the time and effort and help that my family and my community have made for me."

Thus, Matela created The First-Gen Graduates of 2020, a digital yearbook sharing the stories of others who broke barriers to excel as they pursue higher education. Her passion project is interviewing first-generation college graduates from various universities and chronicling their experience on the [website](#).



Josee Matela, a senior in the College of Communication, is the creator of The First-Gen Graduates of 2020, a digital yearbook profiling first-generation graduating seniors inspired by her own experiences as a first-generation college student. COURTESY JOSEE MATELA

A little more than a month after its launch, the site has accumulated views nationwide and reached numerous countries. Matela said she hopes the project will allow a younger generation of students to see what's possible despite their backgrounds.

"I wish I had a website like this when I was growing up as well," Matela said, "because maybe I wouldn't be as worried or as unsure as I was."

Michael Holley, an associate professor in COM who developed a friendship with Matela when she was in his sports journalism class, said the project strikes a familiar chord. A low-income, first-generation college student himself, Holley said he had overwhelmed himself with classes in an attempt to graduate in three years because he didn't think he could pay for a fourth.

"I think we need to tell these stories at places like BU," Holley said. "I think it's good for professors to know that there are students like that in their classrooms."

BU had been on Matela's radar since early childhood. She sported BU sweatshirts at age four and her aunt, whom Matela said was a great inspiration in her life, had always told her about the school.

"It just seemed like BU was that place of opportunity, the place where I could really go and explore what I wanted to do and figure out who I was," Matela said. "It's always been a dream."

Before applying for Early Decision, Matela said she placed it on the backburner when it came time to apply four years ago because she did not want to get her hopes up in case she wouldn't be able to afford attendance. Now, she is pursuing a dual

degree in journalism and international relations.

COM Professor Mitchell Zuckoff said he met Matela in his news writing course, where the two formed a close bond.

“No matter what’s going on — and she’s always got a million things going on,” Zuckoff said, “[Matela] finds a way to look on the bright side of things, even when I think there would be plenty of reason not to.”

More than the quality of work she produced in his class, Zuckoff said Matela also stood out in the way she looked out for others.

“I think it really makes her a very special person,” Zuckoff said. “I love teaching at BU in large part because of students like [Matela].”

While Matela now takes self-care days when needed, her lifestyle has not always left room for mental health care, she said. Her worst burnout came freshman year of college, when she felt overwhelmed with new surroundings. Throughout her time at BU, she had to overload on classes while holding multiple jobs to meet tuition while being part of multiple extracurriculars that are important to her.

Come senior year, however, Matela has learned to better alleviate stress in spite of higher-level classes and a heavier job load.

“The biggest thing to prevent burnout... is the idea of being present, so that you don’t feel like you’re somewhere without a cause or somewhere just because you have to be,” Matela said. “Rather, you can really take time to cherish the moment you’re in and the people you’re with.”

One of the most memorable moments of her college career, Matela said, was co-anchoring Midterm Mandate, BUTV’s two-hour live program on the 2018 midterm elections. She said she cherishes most the relationships she has built.

“A line on the resume only means so much... I could care less about that,” Matela said. “It’s more about just finding times where you feel present and you feel like this is worth it, despite all the hard stuff.”

Matela said graduating will be her greatest achievement at BU. Being able to finish college meant a lot of sacrifice from her family of Filipino immigrants. Her family placed heavy importance on education and framed it as a pathway to a better life.

“I always held that [message] really close to my heart,” Matela said. “Reaching a point where that education is somewhat tangible, and it’s two bachelor’s degrees at a U.S. university, it really is something that isn’t just for me. It’s with my family as well.”

Author: Angela Yang