

Victoria Sammartino '99 Awarded Visionary Leadership Award

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In a ceremony held at Bennington College, Victoria Sammartino '99 was awarded the Dr. Elizabeth Coleman Visionary Leadership Award. This award recognizes a distinguished Bennington alumna/us, faculty or staff member, or an individual from the larger Bennington community whose innovative and inspirational leadership has advanced civic and cultural life and improved the lives of others.

Sammartino is the founder of Voices UnBroken, a nonprofit dedicated giving vulnerable young people--including those in juvenile justice facilities, group homes, residential treatment facilities, jails, and other alternative settings--tools and opportunity for creative self-expression. Inspired by her experience teaching poetry readings on Rikers Island while a student, she began the nonprofit one year after graduating from Bennington. The organization has now expanded to over ten partner sites. Voices UnBroken has served thousands of young people and become a source of expertise in youth development, community arts, and juvenile justice communities.

A Bronx native--who was brought home from the hospital on the day of the '77 blackout--she returned after college because, she says, "I felt a deep debt to my community."

Tory has been named one of the 25 most Influential Women in the Bronx, a Neighborhood Leader by the New York Women's Foundation, and a Petra Fellow, which recognizes leaders for justice. She is a member of the New York City Youth Board, the Bronx Non-Profit Coalition, the Community Justice Network for Youth, the Juvenile Justice Coalition, and the Prison Arts Coalition. She has served on the committee that provides civilian oversight for the New York City's secure detention facilities.

"I try to use my bad days to do good work," said Victoria Sammartino '99. "I learned at Bennington how to keep revising my writing until I get it right. I think of my Bennington professors every time I write a grant and I use the skills I honed with them to write grants that are beautiful and compelling; to describe the young people in crisis with dignity and respect; to tell stakeholders and people in positions of power what is happening 'on the ground'; to do the work that needs to be done."

She acknowledged that her career grew directly out of her work at Bennington and advised students to "Make your thesis good. You can live it out for years afterward."

Established by the parents of a Bennington alumna from the Class of 2000 in honor of Bennington's ninth president, the \$5,000 award has no restrictions on how it may be used. Candidates are nominated by members of the Bennington College community and selected by a committee of faculty and staff.