

Graduation Essay

My name is Janezka Janine Allado Esposito. I am a wind-resisting 'a'ali'i; no gale can push me over. Even though I wanted to give up on my studies on multiple occasions, I kept pushing through.

Right after graduating from Waimea High School in 2015, I went straight to Kaua'i Community College and graduated with my associate's degree. With the help of the University Center, I was able to go directly into pursuing my Bachelor's of Social Work through the distance education program, and after graduating, I was allowed to continue online in the Advanced Standing Master's Program in Social Work with a specialization in behavioral mental health. That meant I could obtain my master's degree in one year without leaving Kaua'i. While much of my cohort graduated last year, I was actually about two points from passing a core class, and I had to wait for the next year to retake it and complete the program. I mention this because after compromising my summer breaks to take classes and finish each degree right after the other, I was feeling exhausted and I wanted to quit. I questioned if I could just settle with my BSW and if I even needed my MSW. Well, first of all, I would be the first in my family to get a Master's degree, so I did want it. Second of all, I made it this far, so yes, I need it. I spent so many years and used so much time and energy. Third, I thought about the people in my life that helped me get this far.

My Nanang and Tatang have worked hard all their lives, immigrating to Hawaii for the opportunities I've been able to take advantage of. My mom, who has always supported all my choices, did her best to raise my siblings and I, always showing me how to be a strong woman in a hard world. And my best friends, who've given me unconditional support, kept pushing me

even when I almost faltered, and stayed with me until the very end. All the hard work, accomplishments, and honor wouldn't be just for myself, but for these special people as well.

This degree was important for me to complete, so I buckled up for the millionth time and changed my perspective because, honestly, there was so much more I needed to learn and experience to earn this degree. I used this "setback" as an opportunity to challenge myself more and grow. And you know what? I've gained so much more than I thought I would. I was able to keep working with the Waialeale and Kipaipai Program and the Kulia Support Program, which continued to provide me space to grow as a student and a mentor during my entire educational journey. I interned at Kaua'i Community Mental Health Center, making me realize that I'm capable of doing case management and it's not as scary as I thought. Interning at Friendship House also, I was able to get to know and work with individuals living with severe and persistent mental illnesses, learning from them firsthand how living with a mental illness does not define you. I got to work with more experienced professionals in mental health who inspired me and forced me to re-evaluate and reflect on everything. Through all this, I also finally found confidence in my professional skills and feel even more prepared to be a social worker for the community.

It's taken me eight years to get to this moment. I am just one of many graduates who have pushed through life's difficulties. There may have been times we were knocked over and thrust into the unknown, but we are adaptable and strong enough to get back up, to find our place, and to thrive. Being here today proves that. To the class of 2023, if you get anything out of my story, I hope it's that you remember the hard times, the struggles you went through. I hope you remember the hard work you put in, the sacrifices you've made. I hope you remember the good that came out of it all, the lessons you've learned, the experiences you've gained, and the

laughter you've shared. We have earned this moment and deserve to celebrate our successes. And whatever may come our way, we are resilient and we can hold our own and thrive, even in the harshest of times.