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PEOPLE

Life comes full circle for accomplished alumna

By Emily Demirjian, Gazette staff writer on April 27, 2016

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Life has come full circle for Regina Calcaterra, starting with her success as a student at SUNY New Paltz. After writing two books, an illustrious career in state government, and being named a partner at a law firm, Calcaterra is returning to New Paltz to be the commencement speaker at this year's graduation.



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Calcaterra's life was not always easy. Throughout much of her early life, she and her four siblings struggled in and out of the foster care system after being abandoned by their single mother. They were often homeless, with Calcaterra serving as their sole caregiver. Many children in foster care don't attend college, but fortunately, she had a support system that encouraged her to do so.

While pursuing a degree in political science at SUNY New Paltz, Regina had an internship through the university for the Democratic senator out of Rochester in 1987. She credits a lot of her success to this internship and to SUNY New Paltz.

"My light could have been dimmed if I had gone to college elsewhere, but this college kept my light burning," Calcaterra said.

While studying political science, Calcaterra had many professors that made a strong impact on her, and made her believe in herself. Three professors, Lewis Brownstein, Nancy Kassop, and Gerald Benjamin, stand out most to her.

"At New Paltz I figured out that I wanted to be involved in public policy and the law," she recalls. "SUNY New Paltz and these professors put me on the path that I haven't strayed from."

Immediately after graduating from college, she was hired at the Eastern Paralyzed Veteran Association, where she advocated for veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars. She credits getting this crucial first job directly to her internship with the state Legislature that New Paltz arranged and sponsored.

She then started working at New Jersey Transit to help write a plan to comply with the American Disabilities Act. During her time there, she decided to attend law school at Seton Hall, taking night classes to earn her law degree.

Calcaterra has held many important positions over the years. She was the director of intergovernmental relations for the New York City Comptroller, chief deputy to the Suffolk County executive, partner at a law firm in Manhattan, and executive director of two Moreland Commissions under Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

In 2011, while she was serving the Suffolk County executive, she had the opportunity to assist the homeless population after Hurricane Sandy.

"This was really ironic for me because I had to find homes for newly homeless families in the county that made me homeless," Calcaterra recalls.

At a young age her and her four siblings were abandoned by their mother, leading them to fend for themselves. They would steal food, whether it was from the supermarket, farms or digging for mussels and clams from the ocean.

When Calcaterra was 12, her two older siblings began living on their own, leading her to raise her two younger siblings by herself. At 14, the authorities found out about this, leading to Regina being sent to one foster home and her two younger siblings being sent to a different home.

Calcaterra's book, *Etched in Sand*, talks about the challenges she overcame and how it has made her the person she is today. The book, which was published in 2013, was a New York Times best seller three separate times. One of those times it was listed as number two after

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

“During the 14 weeks where my book remained on the New York Times best seller list, the themes in *Etched In Sand* of perseverance, resilience and optimism were worth sharing because it was resonating with so many,” Calcaterra said.

She received a lot of positive feedback from *Etched in Sand*, impacting some readers so profoundly that they decided to adopt foster children. In addition, a food bank in Smithtown, Long Island changed some of their rules about children needing a permission slip to eat there after they read Regina's story.

“I was writing this book for two reasons. One, there are 400,000 foster kids in the United States; I wrote it for that population. The kids that are dealt the bad hand — if you learn how to harness the resources in the U.S. you can pull yourself up and out of poverty. They have to believe in themselves to do this,” said Calcaterra. “Two, as I moved around to all different places, teachers, friends, and parents built up my self-worth [which] allowed me to actually think I should get a college degree. The only way out of poverty for me was to get a college education.”

She is writing another book, *Girl Unbroken*, with her sister Rosie Maloney, about Rosie's story. The book will be released in October. Calcaterra said that this book was much harder to write.

“Learning of the atrocities that she was subjected to was heart wrenching to hear as her older sister,” said Calcaterra.

Regina has been an active alumni of SUNY New Paltz, participating in a distinguished speakers event, speaking at a women's summit, serving on the New Paltz Foundation's board, and now delivering the 2016 commencement address.

“Every time I go back to campus, it's surreal. I was there and I was struggling, not knowing what my future was going to be,” said Calcaterra. “Now being back there and encouraging other students about how valuable their degree is at New Paltz is a wonderful experience to me. I enjoy reminding the students that a New Paltz degree prepares them, and they are well-equipped once they graduate.”

New Paltz President Donald Christian asked Calcaterra to be the commencement speaker in January, and she was incredibly honored. Without giving away too much of her planned speech, she says wants to tell the graduates how important earning a degree is and stress the importance of working with others for the common good.

“Getting a college degree takes you out of the stand and puts you on the field. When you're on the field now playing, you are on a team,” said Calcaterra. “You can never operate on your own. How you treat and support other people matters, and will come back to you three-fold. Be open to every opportunity that's around you, and then you will be a champion.”

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Calcaterra



Emily Demirjian, Gazette staff writer

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