Alumni

An Honorable Life

Gac Filipaj '12GS, a former refugee and a long-time Columbia janitor, receives his bachelor's degree.

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Gac Fillipaj (Eileen Barroso)

Gac Filipaj had nearly finished law school in his home country of Yugoslavia when war broke out there in 1992. Facing conscription into the Serb army, he fled to the United States as a political refugee.

He arrived in New York City speaking no English and with no job prospects. He took work as a janitor at Columbia because the position, in addition to paying him enough

to help support his parents and siblings — ethnic Albanian dairy farmers back in a tiny village in Montenegro — would enable him to take classes for free.

This spring, after nineteen years juggling his custodial duties with part-time course work — that's seven years of English-language instruction followed by another twelve of ancient Greek, Latin, poetry, ethics, and philosophy — the fifty-two-year-old Filipaj donned a cap and gown to receive a bachelor's degree in classics, with honors, from the School of General Studies.

"It was the happiest moment of my life," says Filipaj '12GS.

Few people have spent more hours on the Morningside campus in the past two decades than Filipaj. He arrives early most mornings, backpack over his shoulder, to attend class. At 2 p.m., he changes into his blue coveralls to work his shift at Lerner Hall, which runs until 10:30 p.m. And then it's time for homework: he takes the subway back to his Bronx apartment and studies late into the night.

Filipaj became a minor celebrity on campus in the days leading up to Commencement, as ABC News, CBS News, the Associated Press, and National Public Radio dug into his story: how the lifelong bachelor still sends most of his earnings back to his family, how he lived without a computer until last year and wrote his papers longhand, and how he plans to continue working here while pursuing a master's degree in philosophy. "This story is so amazing," wrote the *New York Daily News*, "it's hard to know where to begin."

After receiving his diploma at the School of General Studies graduation ceremony on May 13, Filipaj walked off the podium onto South Lawn to a loud chorus of cheers. Donald Schlosser, the University's assistant vice president of facility operations, along with several of Filipaj's coworkers, were there to embrace him.

Filipaj says he was initially apprehensive about all the media attention. But he gave some compelling interviews. What is the most important lesson he learned in school? "I thought I knew a lot, but I came to know I know almost nothing," he told *Bwog*. His favorite philosopher? "Seneca," he told ABC News. "Because his letters are written in the spirit in which I was educated in my family: not to look for fame and fortune, but to have a simple, honest, honorable life."



Guide to school abbreviations