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Care Package: Condon Medal winner Michelle Boucher '17 leaves her community a better place

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CONDON MEDAL WINNER
MICHELLE BOUCHER '17
LEAVES HER COMMUNITY
A BETTER PLACE.

Care Package

BY GERRY BOYLE '78

Last summer Michelle Boucher '17 led multiple lives. She went looking for help because she was a homeless woman, because she was a minor who needed counseling, because she was a single mother whose child needed services. She sought help for mental illness, was admitted to a crisis unit, and stayed for 24 hours.

And then she went back to the people who run Sweetser—the Maine nonprofit for which Boucher designed and executed the “secret shopper” project that sent her out in these roles—and reported on her experience with the health care agency’s providers.

“Her internship is legendary,” said Sweetser President and CEO Deb Taylor. “She’ll live on in our minds for a very, very long time.”

Boucher has a way of doing that—plunging into new endeavors with the intent of helping others, and making an indelible mark on people’s minds along the way. At Colby, she propelled efforts relating to sexual violence prevention (she helped write the curriculum); mental health (she coordinated a storytelling program to reduce the stigma attached to the illness); challenges for first-generation students (she helped start an emergency book fund); and global experiences for all students (her serendipitous and life-changing senior Jan Plan in Verona, Italy, was part of the inspiration for DavisConnects, a landmark program that ensures that all students have access to a global experience).

Her contributions to the Colby community were recognized when Boucher’s classmates awarded her the Condon Medal, a prestigious honor recognizing student citizenship—the only award given at commencement. “It still hasn’t hit me yet, to be honest,” she said days later. “I wake up in the morning and I say, ‘Whoa. I won that?’”

Michelle Boucher '17, center, is surrounded by friends and family, including former high school teachers and Colby staff, at a celebration held in her honor after commencement.



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Michelle Boucher '17

Boucher may be the only one surprised by the nod from her classmates. From the students, staff, and faculty she worked with at Colby, to the townspeople of Fryeburg, Maine, the small community where she grew up, those who know Boucher see the award as a fitting culmination to her college career.

“A lot of people were really rooting for me coming in here,” she said. “Now they’re like, ‘Yeah, you did it. I knew you could.’”

But for the first year and more of her Colby career, she wasn’t sure she would come close to living up to the expectations of her Fryeburg fans. The town in western Maine boasts the Fryeburg Fair, Fryeburg Academy, and, until recently, a single stoplight. “They opened a Subway,” Boucher said, “and had to add another stoplight because it was such a big deal.”

For a few years Fryeburg could also boast of Michelle Boucher, who was class president all four years at “the academy” and turned the position into a hub of service to the entire community. As a sophomore she organized a dinner that raised \$3,000 for a family with a young child with a rare cancer. She planned a winter break trip that had students repairing a home for a disadvantaged family in Florida.

“She kept doing one thing after another,” said Jennifer Richardson, Fryeburg Academy science teacher and advisor to Boucher’s sophomore class. “I didn’t have anyone else like that who would just take things like that and run with them.”

Richardson said she and others in the community fully expected that Boucher would continue to contribute at Colby. But, in fact, it was a tough transition for the first-generation college student, whose parents separated early in her freshman year. “I actually really struggled,” Boucher said.

In homogeneous small-town Maine, she hadn’t thought much about issues around race or gender or social class, or heard the term “first-generation student.” Her mother and father are an office manager and arborist, respectively, and solidly middle class in Fryeburg. At Colby, there were students from much more modest backgrounds than Boucher, and others who had access to what seemed to her like unlimited wealth.

Friends and staff who worked with Boucher at Colby knew she was struggling at times. But they also learned that Boucher doesn’t back away from a problem. “If something is intimidating and difficult, she works to get to the point where she knows how to handle it,” said Katie Sawyer, coordinator of alcohol and drug programs at the Garrison-Foster Health Center, who worked closely with Boucher on student health initiatives. “She will invest whatever energy is necessary to figure out how to get over an obstacle. And this is true for her professionally and personally.”

That attitude led Boucher to come up with a strategy in her first weeks on the Hill. “I’ve always been about making a difference,” Boucher said, “so I needed to pick the places where making a difference is the most important to me and go from there.”

A member of the jazz band in high school (she played trumpet and trombone) Boucher learned that Waterville Junior High School was looking for a band tutor. She immediately volunteered, working with music teacher Sue Barre for four years. (Boucher’s Phi Beta Kappa speech in May focused on Barre’s observation that “everyone has something,” and all people need to be treated with empathy and understanding.)

Boucher was hired to work with Student Health On Campus, a group that organizes programs on physical health and nutrition, mental and sexual health, alcohol and drug issues, among others. She went on to help create a program that allowed students to share their experiences with mental health, and, in the process, let others know that they aren’t alone in such struggles. “It’s ubiquitous,” she said, “but everyone thinks they’re the only one.” Students who tell their stories—and those who listen—“feel like they’re liberated,” Boucher said.

While helping to bring mental illness out of the shadows, she also joined efforts to educate students about sexual violence. “She reached out to me out of nowhere,” said Emily Schusterbauer, director of the Gender and Sexual Diversity Program. Soon Boucher was a key part of a team of students



Michelle Boucher '17 leads the Waterville Junior High School band during senior week. Boucher began working with the music students soon after arriving at Colby.

that helped write the mandatory curriculum for peer-led trainings surrounding the difficult issue. By her sophomore year, the group, including Boucher, was facilitating the training for 900 first-years and sophomores. Last year, the number of student trainers had grown from 8 or 10 to more than 40.

“One big change is that students seem much more willing to talk openly about [the subject of] sexual misconduct,”

Schusterbauer said. “That’s largely because of Michelle and the other peer educators.”

Her willingness to give so much may be Boucher’s signature contribution to Colby, said Director of Counseling Services Eric Johnson. “She is just such a role model to her fellow students in terms of her overall commitment to this community,” Johnson said. “I think that would be her biggest legacy.”

“I remember thinking, ‘Why don’t you have some sort of fund?’” she said recalling a particularly expensive semester. “This makes no sense.”

So Boucher emailed President David A. Greene saying, “There’s no fund for books. What can we do about that?” Greene met with Boucher, heard her out, and created the emergency book fund the next semester. “She was right about the importance of it,” he said.



Michelle Boucher '17 in Italy during Jan Plan her senior year. Boucher's embracing of learning abroad was one of the factors that led to creation of DavisConnects, which makes such experiences available to all Colby students.

It's a tough model to emulate, as Boucher's energy and enthusiasm is by all accounts as unquenchable as it seems. Close friend Grace Carroll '17 said Boucher was committed to her many projects and to her friendships, and is quick to reach out to keep relationships going.

Boucher was just as relentless in her determination to fix inequities, Carroll and others said. By sophomore year she found that buying textbooks was taking a large portion of her summer earnings—and knew that other students might not be able to afford to do what was necessary to earn top grades.

Boucher saw the same need for Colby students unable to have a global experience. Although she wanted to go abroad, a full semester wasn't practical for her, and she knew from her own experience that the cost of some global Jan Plan programs put them out of reach for many students.

By fall of her senior year, Boucher feared the opportunity was going to pass her by. And then one day she was eating lunch in Dana when she overheard an administrator, Director of Communications Kate Carlisle, talking about an alumna of modest means who had been determined to find a way to have an abroad experience at Colby. “All of a sudden this young woman

came by and said, ‘Forgive me for listening to your conversation, but I have to know who this person is,’” Carlisle said.

The person in question was Dean of the College Karlene Burrell-McRae ’94, and Boucher made a beeline to her office in Eustis. “She wanted to know if I could help her brainstorm to figure out how she might have this experience,” Burrell-McRae said. “And that’s how our journey began.”

Burrell-McRae’s own abroad experience at Colby included study in Hong Kong, Mexico, and London—opportunities she sought despite being from a modest background. Boucher told the dean that she wanted to do her last Jan Plan in Verona, Italy, with Zacamy Professor of English (Emeritus) Pat Brancaccio. The \$500 deposit was due, and Boucher feared losing her deposit if she couldn’t raise the rest of the funds.

Burrell-McRae told Boucher to pay the deposit and she would commit to finding a way to make the trip happen. “She hadn’t given up,” Burrell-McRae said. “She hadn’t become jaded. She tried to be creative, and she had taken on what was best about being at a liberal arts college.”

Boucher did go to Verona, studied Italian literature, wrote related essays, traveled through Italy, and explored Rome alone, gaining confidence in her abilities to navigate wherever she might land. “It sounds so cliché but it really changed my life,” she said.

And, as it tends to work with Boucher’s projects, the experience also changed the lives of countless others.

Every day Boucher emailed reports to Burrell-McRae, who then shared photos and stories with other members of senior staff. “What I loved to watch was seeing all that she had been building and growing at Colby transformed in a different way,” she said.

Those photos and letters from Italy moved the president, too. “Her enthusiasm for it, the way she jumped with both feet into

that experience and just became immersed in it was to me exactly what we want to see in our students,” Greene said. “She just lit up.”

He said Boucher’s experience shows how students with initiative can leverage a global experience to enrich their future. “They’ll grow and develop and their worldview will broaden,” Greene said. “Michelle was, in fact, part of our thinking when we set out to create universal experiences for people like her, who are filled with initiative but might not have the resources to take advantage of everything that’s available to them.”



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*President David A. Greene on Michelle Boucher ’17
and the inspiration for the concept for what
would become DavisConnects, a program that
supports internships, research, and abroad
opportunities for all Colby students*

That thinking led to DavisConnects, the innovative program established last spring thanks to the generosity of the Davis family and trustee of its charitable foundation, Andrew Davis ’85, LL.D. ’15. The program supports internships, research, and guaranteed global experiences for every Colby student.

Boucher said she congratulated Greene as soon as she heard about the new program. She was flattered to think she might be part of the inspiration, she said, and was gratified to know that in the future students like her won’t need a serendipitous meeting in the dining hall or have to perform financial perambulations to broaden their Colby experience. That she could play any part in making that happen would just be her way of returning the faith that so many placed in her over the years.

“I know I won the Condon Medal and everything ... but I didn’t even know if I would make it through four years,” Boucher said. “It was hard at first, but the support I received and the people who believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself—I get emotional thinking about it because I owe them so much.”

No surprise that she intends to pay it forward. Boucher went on to take a teaching position at Landmark School, a school for children with learning disabilities, in Beverly, Mass. “You know I want to make a difference no matter what I do,” Boucher said. “A lot of people, including myself, are excited to see what’s next.” ©