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Leaders of Today

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By Jaclyn Lansbery
and Robin Florzak

➤ Four student
leaders creating
positive impact:
Rebeca Mitrea,
Kevin Felisme,
Olena Cruz and
Bevon Joseph
with Business Dean
Misty Johanson



Leaders of Tomorrow Today

Bringing Immediate Value to Campus, Business and our Community

Whether they are millennials or members of Generation Z, DePaul business students and recent graduates were born to lead.

Ninety-one percent of millennials aspire to be leaders, the Millennial Leadership Study survey conducted by WorkplaceTrends.com found, and nearly half of those surveyed define leadership as “empowering others to succeed.” Meanwhile, according to Forbes magazine, surveys of Gen Z (those born after 1995) show that this latest generation to hit campus wants to “make their mark, in part, by making our society better than past generations have managed to do.”

Grounded in Vincentian values, DePaul provides opportunities for students to exercise their interest in socially responsible leadership from the minute they come onto campus as first-year students. Campuswide initiatives

like New Student Service Day and the annual Vincentian Service Day, and projects led by the Steans Center and Campus Ministry, allow students to become changemakers in the Chicago community DePaul calls home. In 2018 alone, DePaul students completed hundreds of thousands of community service hours.

At the Driehaus College of Business, students develop their leadership talent through classroom lessons, experiential learning, student organizations, mentorships, internships and even their own businesses ventures founded with the help of the Coleman Entrepreneurship Center and other resources. These opportunities produce young leaders who get to work immediately at solving marketplace and societal problems, inspiring peers to reach new heights and pushing the boundaries of achievement on campus, in business, in sports and in the community.

In our cover story, we highlight four soon-to-be and recent DePaul business graduates who are pursuing different paths but have one thing in common—they use their business acumen to lead and empower others.

A Leader for Career Access

An immigrant from Trinidad, graduate business student **Bevon Joseph** has forged his own path in tech, finance and nonprofit management since coming to the United States at 18 years old.

Joseph is founder and CEO of Greenwood Project, a nonprofit he launched three years ago to help academically talented youth from underresourced Chicago communities gain access to the finance industry. Thanks to Joseph's connections with firms in New York and Chicago, the Greenwood Project has collaborated with about 30 financial and tech companies, including Goldman Sachs, NASDAQ, Google and LinkedIn.

Joseph joined the world of finance in 1996 when he began working as an IT services provider on a New York trading floor, and later worked for some of the city's largest Wall Street exchanges and financial services firms. He moved to Chicago, eventually working his way up to be a chief technology officer for a hedge fund—all with just an associate's degree in computer electronic technology and a high school diploma from Trinidad.

Fascinated by the passion he witnessed on trading floors, Joseph noticed the lack of diversity among employees. "Most of the time I would be one of (a few) or the only person of color at a firm," says Joseph, who runs the Greenwood Project with his wife, Elois. "I was always curious why other students who look like me weren't given that opportunity."

In 2014, Joseph enrolled in DePaul's School for New Learning and became the first in his family to earn a bachelor's degree. Joseph developed the idea for the Greenwood Project through a class assignment that challenged him to create a social media campaign around a social cause. After his professor encouraged him to pursue the idea, Joseph approached top-level financial executives he knew to gauge their interest in funding internships for students from low-income communities. His nonprofit began taking shape as interest from companies grew.

"They (students) are smart, they're doing well in school, staying out of trouble, getting good grades, but they don't know anyone who works in finance," says Joseph, who now is enrolled in the Driehaus College of Business's combined bachelor's and master's in entrepreneurship program. "The



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The nonprofit works with high school juniors through recent college graduates. High school students attend, free of charge, the Summer Financial Institute, a six-week program that helps them build soft skills and financial literacy. The students also visit a different company each day of the program, in both New York and Chicago. In addition, Greenwood hosts Women in Wall Street student networking events in Chicago that feature panel discussions by female executives at top firms.

To help fund the nonprofit, Joseph manages a for-profit arm of Greenwood that charges companies to have access to recruit students who have been involved with the Greenwood Project.

"Running your own business, whether it's nonprofit or for-profit, is a 24/7 job," Joseph says. "But for me it doesn't feel like work, just because we see the results and the impact that it's having. And it's changing the lives not just of the students, but their family and community. So I think that's my motivation to keep doing this."

A Leader on Campus

Marketing, chess and salsa dancing are disparate talents Olena Cruz pursues with the diligence and boundless curiosity that has made her a force to be reckoned with.

Cruz, who graduates in June with an MBA in marketing, has been instrumental in turning the Kellstadt Marketing Group (KMG) into one of the most active student organizations in DePaul's business school. During her one-year tenure as KMG president, the organization sponsored 16 events that collectively attracted participation from more than 1,000 students, faculty members and Chicago marketing professionals.

She is most proud of convincing Microsoft to work with KMG to create a new case competition at DePaul. "Our idea was to get a real-world business scenario that would allow students to pitch their strategic recommendations and apply business concepts they have learned in class," she says. "We had such great engagement. Microsoft came to campus, and students, professors and the president of the university all came together to support this event, which showcased the talent of students here at DePaul."

Cruz says her drive comes from her mother, Lubov, an immigrant from Ukraine. "She helped build my work ethic. She started her own cleaning business in Chicago, not knowing the language or many people. She's not only an entrepreneur; she put me and my brother through college as first-generation graduates in the family. I am very proud of my mom." Cruz's father died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis when Cruz was 20, and every year since she has participated in fundraising walks to find a cure for the neurodegenerative disease.

During her undergraduate years at Northwestern University, Cruz, who speaks four languages, studied international relations. "Originally, I thought I would go into diplomacy. But I soon realized that I can apply those skills to business, because now every company has a global presence." After graduating, she worked as a sales strategy coordinator at Beam Suntory, a premium spirits company. At DePaul, her curiosity led her to the field of big data analytics. She now works as a solutions analyst at IRI, which uses predictive analytics to help clients develop customer strategies.



"I love building excitement among people and bringing them together to do more than they would have been able to do individually. I am a big believer that together we can succeed even more than on our own."

Olena Cruz

Cruz knows how to make the right moves not only in her career, but also on the chessboard and the dance floor. She played chess competitively in high school and won the National Girls Chess Championship in 2006. A semiprofessional salsa dancer, Cruz won first place with her partner at the Chicago International Salsa Congress two years ago.

Cruz uses her dancing talent to empower others as a founding member of Inspiración Dance Chicago, a Latin dance organization that seeks to enrich the lives of young people through dance. "We teach youth to express themselves in a healthy way, to collaborate in teams, and to find creative outlets for mentorship and development."

Of her wide-ranging success as a leader, Cruz says, "I love building excitement among people and bringing them together to do more than they would have been able to do individually. I am a big believer that together we can succeed even more than on our own."

A Leader in the Community

MBA student Kevin Felisme has been living in Chicago for just four years, but his passion for improving the community in his adopted hometown runs deep.

A native of Manchester, N.H., Felisme delivered the TEDxDePaul talk “Reimagine Chicago: Power to the People,” in which he proposed using economic development to revitalize the city’s low-income communities. He hopes to develop programs, supported by either public or private dollars, that will allow neighborhood residents to own and operate businesses within the community.

“When I look at low-income, African-American communities in Chicago, I see a lack of economic development and businesses that are owned by the people within those neighborhoods,” Felisme says. “I believe that if we have the ability to control the economics in our communities, they should have businesses that are run by us, who cater to us and who will inspire people to start somewhere and say, ‘Hey, this is our foundation.’”

Growing up in a single-parent household where money was tight, Felisme first visited Chicago in 2014 during an alternative spring break trip as an undergraduate student at American University. The trip took students to tour various organizations, including Mercy Home for Boys and Girls, a therapeutic residential facility for youth. Despite having a full-time job waiting for him in Washington, D.C., Felisme was moved by the organization’s mission and decided to relocate to Chicago and work for the organization as a youth care worker.

“I’ve always thought that it was important that if you want to work with people in the community, you actually have to live there,” says Felisme, who lives in one of the city’s South Side neighborhoods. “It’s important to know who your neighbors are, not just to come in and help and then leave. You should get to know people because you’re in kinship.”

Now, Felisme is a coordinator for Mercy Home, where he manages the nonprofit’s volunteer program. In 2016, he launched an open basketball gym program through the Port Ministries, a nonprofit on the South Side that serves those in need. He’s also one of the basketball coaches for Mercy Home’s Hoops to Homework League, which part-



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Kevin Felisme

ners with the Chicago Bulls to boost young men’s sportsmanship.

DePaul’s Vincentian values and connection to the city inspired Felisme to enroll at the Kellstadt Graduate School of Business in the fall of 2017. Earning an MBA degree in entrepreneurship and management moves him closer to his goal of creating businesses in low-income Chicago neighborhoods, he says.

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A Leader on the Court

When Rebeca Mitrea moved to the United States to play on DePaul University's women's Division I tennis team, she was thousands of miles away from home. Mitrea was born and raised in Romania, where she began playing tennis at just five years of age. At 16, she was the No. 1 ranked tennis player in Romania and ranked 22nd in Europe.

After she joined DePaul on a full tennis scholarship, her list of accomplishments quickly grew. Mitrea became the all-time DePaul record holder for most overall tennis wins, most singles wins and most singles wins in one season. While serving as the team captain for two years, she earned several awards, including the Intercollegiate Tennis Association Cissie Leary Award for Sportsmanship, which is given to an NCAA Division I women's player who displays inspiring dedication and commitment to her team.

Mitrea originally majored in health sciences but then transferred to the Driehaus College of Business to study finance. In 2016, she graduated summa cum laude with an undergraduate finance degree, and last year she completed her DePaul MBA in finance and international business. She now works as a credit risk analyst at HSBC Bank in Chicago and is active in its employee group, Balance, which advocates the recruitment, development and engagement of a gender-balanced workforce.

Despite living far away from her family, Mitrea says DePaul came to feel like home. "It would help that I would go home to Romania in the summers and the winters during the breaks, but for me DePaul was family," she says.

Mitrea credits the Athletics Department with fostering a welcoming and supportive environment for its student-athletes to become leaders. Staff members, who knew all of the athletes by name, would frequently ask Mitrea how she was doing. The department also offered a team of academic advisors, as well as other resources, to help student-athletes balance their academic workload with the demands of playing tennis.

"One of the greatest things that tennis has helped me achieve is being a higher performer, doing a number of things at the same time and doing them to the best of my abilities—not just doing 70 percent of one thing, but giving



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Rebeca Mitrea

it my all with everything I did," says Mitrea, who graduated valedictorian from high school in her home country. "It really forces you to do your best."

Mitrea now plays tennis whenever she can and hopes to help DePaul's tennis team as much as possible. She also plans to become a mentor in DePaul's Alumni Sharing Knowledge Network, which connects DePaul students with alumni.

"By being a leader, you really have more avenues to help people," she says. "As long as it's reflected in helping others and making an impact in the community, I think really that's what inspires me. As long as I could help all of the other girls on my team, that's what really made me feel fulfilled and happy with all that I was doing."