

Library Student Employees Honored



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Two students who work in the library are among the first recipients of a new university award recognizing their contributions. Jaster Francis '20 is a work leader in collections maintenance at Sterling Memorial Library. Raffi Donatich '19 is a student research assistant at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Francis and Donatich were among ten students who received the inaugural Y-Work Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Student Employees at an April 30 reception hosted by Yale College Dean Marvin Chun.

Nearly 60 percent of Yale undergraduates work part-time on campus, and the library is one of the biggest student employers, hiring hundreds of students. "Students support our full-time staff in many different areas, and we are grateful of their contributions," says Stephen F. Gates '68 University Librarian Susan Gibbons. "We always hope the experience will be valuable for them, too."

Finding friends and mentors

When he was looking for a campus job in Fall 2016, Jaster Francis wasn't sure exactly what a student library assistant in collections management would do, but the \$12.50 hourly pay was a big step up from the \$7.25 minimum wage he had been earning at McDonald's back home in Marietta, Georgia. He was committed not just to paying his own college expenses, but also to sending money back to his mother, Rene Francis, a physical therapist who has raised him and his two younger siblings as a single parent. "Everything I have, I owe to her," he says. "She works so hard for us. Without her, I wouldn't be at Yale."

Soon, the Branford College student was working nineteen hours a week in the labyrinthine basement and chilly bookstacks of Sterling, learning the meticulously organized processes for getting books back on the shelves, in exactly the right spot, as quickly as possible. As Francis soon learned, "If you misplace a book on the shelf by just a few places, it can be missing for years."

He took the job for the paycheck, but he has stayed for the people. "There's always someone there to greet you with a smile," he says. "The people I work with in Sterling Library have become my best friends."

Before the end of his first year, Francis was promoted to work leader, helping to schedule and coordinate projects with the student work force.

"I've had a lot of work leaders over the past twenty-three years, but Jaster is special," says Collections Maintenance Supervisor Anthony Riccio, who nominated him for the Y-Work award. "He embodies gentleness and pleasantness, and he has an incredible work ethic."

Over time, Riccio (pictured at the award ceremony with Francis and Dean Chun) has become a mentor and friend.



“We talk a lot about a lot of things,” Francis says. “Anthony knows the best way to teach and how to get people energized and excited about the work. He tells us to treat every book like it’s the most important book in the world because, for someone, it might be.”

This year, Francis has been named a Bouchet Fellow and will be researching and writing on racial capitalism and the American criminal justice system. He won’t be giving up his library job, though. “My favorite part of being an undergraduate at Yale is working inside Sterling and helping with the system that helps so many people on campus,” he says.

Delving into legendary collections

Raffi Donatich sums up her work at the Beinecke in a sentence: “It’s my job to dig through the boxes and find whatever they’re looking for.”

“They” are the Beinecke’s American literature curators, including Nancy Kuhl, curator for poetry, Yale Collection of American Literature, who nominated Donatich for the Y-Work award. Kuhl praises her student assistant for proposing “creative and compelling research projects” that have helped expose and celebrate the Beinecke’s collections to students, library visitors, and visitors to the Beinecke’s website.

“It was wonderful to have an opportunity to call attention to her good work, the ways in which she’s helped us with outreach ... to educate people about our collections and to draw attention to them and to celebrate them,” Kuhl says.

Working at the Beinecke has given the Berkeley College senior a chance to get to know the collections in unusual depth—which has enriched her understanding of American literature. One of the best parts of the job is the opportunity to connect with original documents and artifacts. “It never gets old to pick up something that Ernest Hemingway spilled coffee on,” she says. “It’s really that real.”

Photo credit: Mara Lavitt

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