

Testimony to the Board of Trustees, May 8, 2023

Evelyn Burg, English Department, LaGuardia Community College

Good afternoon Chairperson Thomson and our honorable Board of CUNY Trustees.

Thank you for letting me speak today. My name is Evelyn Burg, and I teach in the English Department at LaGuardia Community College. I am also the college grievance counselor for faculty.

I am not here to discuss grievances or even English classes, though those things are never far from my mind.

I am here to offer a sliver of personal CUNY history.

I am a first generation American. My parents both came here as children (my mother was 9, my father 16) as refugees from Nazi Germany. They were lucky, others in their families were not so fortunate.

When they arrived, my mother and her parents lived in the apartment of friends. Then when they got their own apartment, other friends lived with them. My mother slept in the kitchen throughout her childhood and teen years.

She went to Forest Hills High School but after graduating and marrying my father, which she did at 17, she went to work as a bookkeeper. After I was born, my mother went back to school—to Hunter College. She dual-majored in Sociology and Philosophy and when she graduated from Hunter magna cum laude, she took a job as a probation officer for the City. My father was an industrial designer.

My mother went on to have a career not only in criminal justice but was Assistant Director of several well-known non-profits including Big Brothers of New York.

When I graduated high school in the early 1970s, I was encouraged to go to Queens College. I wanted to go away, but I guess it was fortunate I didn't since my father lost his job while I was at Queens. The college was very crowded—it had 30,000 students and was not equipped for them. We took our classes in barracks. I majored in Philosophy. The year I graduated was that of the famous fiscal crisis. The city defaulted and the colleges closed. Tuition was instituted for the first time.

I went to graduate school at the University of Minnesota returning again during a financial crisis in the late 1970s and did a number of things. I wrote alternative sentencing proposals, I was a professional photographer and shared a studio, but then I got a job at LaGuardia. I went back to school and received my PhD at the Graduate Center. I have now been teaching at LaGuardia for almost 35 years! Much of my life has been spent at CUNY.

CUNY is and remains an experiment in what I will call the most truthful and meaningful kind of democratic equality—the equality of educational opportunity. There is no place like it for size and pluralism,. Though other cities and states have highly respected public institutions, let's face it, CUNY is the most diverse since NYC is one of the most diverse if not the most diverse city in the world. Yes, CUNY is an engine of economic mobility. But that is not its only mission. To me, its mission is to make

available to everyone who has any interest all the fruits of human learning of the last few thousand years. All races, all genders, all ages, all ethnicities can study at CUNY and learn what the generations before them had to say about the universe and human questions, or discover complex beauty in forms of language, in physical or biological structures, in the elegance of mathematics and in the wizardry of cutting edge technologies discovering themselves in the process. As a radical, utopian notion, those who came before us, decided to offer education to people who really wanted it and despite racial and economic disparities and areas of neglect, the United States led the world in quantities of literate citizens.

This institution has only become more democratic over the last 100 years. Financial exigencies arrive frequently and go away slowly; that is everyday political noise. CUNY's mission is tied to the truth about what is best in the democratic faith. We cannot let the inevitable shifts in demographics, politics and lack of preparedness deflect us from a mission that represents us at our best.

"Austerity" is a choice about values. Fight for CUNY funding please!

Thank you,
Evelyn Burg