

Portrait of a Graduate



Margaret Haltom '10

Urban Planner/Research Fellow,
Works Community Development Corporation



8th Grade, GSL

- Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Ph.D. Candidate, '27
- Harvard University Graduate School of Design: Master's degree in Urban Planning with distinction, '20; recipient of Urban Planning Thesis Prize
- University of Virginia: B.A., Political and Social Thought with distinction, '18; Jefferson Scholar, Phi Beta Kappa; William Lee Miller Thesis Prize
- White Station High School '14

Right now I have one foot in Boston and the other in Memphis. I chose MIT because their urban planning program celebrates community-based research and real-world problem solving. My favorite professor comes to class right after speaking to the Boston City Council or working directly with grassroots nonprofits. It's a community of academics who aren't stuck in the ivory tower. They're actively working with and researching alongside residents and community leaders.

When I was in high school, I worked at Shelby Farms; my first job was tending their 40-foot long bison manure pile. I had the chance to teach after school programs in their community garden, and to start a garden alongside classmates at White Station. I'm a horrible gardener – everything I grow dies! But I loved collectively planning the community space and building a coalition of people who could make something grow.

In college, my favorite professor at the University of Virginia also taught classes in a low-income housing development. She brought me along, and I worked with the youth resident leadership team to shape the redesign of their playgrounds and apartment units. I went on to get my master's in urban planning and moved back to start my career in my hometown with the Works Community Development Corporation. I had the opportunity to work on a team that paired 13,000 tenants facing eviction to rent relief and representation during the pandemic, and to assist with a range of anti-displacement affordable housing development initiatives. I'm still with Works now throughout my Ph.D., studying the impact of their affordable housing efforts.

My mom had a saying when I was growing up: "There are no bad days at GSL." I remember being unconditionally supported at GSL to pursue whatever path I wanted. I loved Celebrations, when the whole school gathers to cheer the small and big ways we care for each other. I remember us bursting into applause when a teacher recognized a student who held the door even though no one asked them to. It was a moment of saying "I see you," even for the smallest acts of kindness that we should collectively lift up more often.

Urban planning has a lot to do with that. Neighborhood and affordable housing development is all about celebrating long-time resident leaders who have tirelessly been working to improve their communities in big and small ways. It's the planner's job to lift them up, connect them to resources, and put them at the wheel of decision making. I credit GSL for teaching me so much about celebrating and caring for your community.

So many influential teachers come to mind at GSL – like Leslie Reddick, who taught me acting, public speaking, self-confidence, and pushed our full cast to perform at our best. Lyn Forsyth and Brenda Hawkins, who inspired me to become an educator simply because I could see they found such deep joy in teaching. Kimberly White and Tina Gault, who pushed for excellence and were exceptional mentors.

I would tell current students to learn from people committed to the causes you care about. Chances are, someone is out there trying to solve an issue you're interested in. From volunteering with different nonprofits I learned so much about relationship building, and community resources and needs, which pointed me to the planning field today. Volunteer experiences can be some of your most formative work experiences.

GRACE-ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL SCHOOL
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