

Gena-Fae Fillingham

B.A. Urban and Community Studies, *summa cum laude*
Valedictorian, SLU Class of 2020



Gena-Fae Fillingham was born and raised in a small farm town in Nebraska, where her mother taught her to care about the most vulnerable in her community. She worked as a certified nurses' aide throughout her senior year in high school, and later attended nursing school where she graduated with honors and was certified as an LPN. She worked as a charge nurse in a nursing home in Brooklyn, and simultaneously volunteered for the charity "Hope for Kids," which seeks to raise awareness and increase the number of children receiving up to date immunizations. Gena-Fae later changed her career path and worked as a legal secretary in the corporate sector, then decided to return to a field of work that would allow her to engage more with the community and serve others. Gena-Fae found the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies a perfect fit for her ambitions. After completing her coursework at SLU in December of 2019, she completed an online TEFL certification course in April 2020, and was officially certified as an ESL teacher in May. Her internship took her to lower Manhattan, where she worked with Chinese immigrants and tutored a Chinese student online. Gena-Fae plans to move to Asia and work as an ESL teacher.

Here's what Gena-Fae has to say about SLU:

"SLU's Urban and Community Studies program changed my entire understanding of society and the massive needs and disparities in the world. Learning how public transportation actually helps raise families out of poverty because they are able to commute to higher paying jobs elsewhere was a revelation. It helped me to have a better understanding of why there are more public transportation options in Asia, where I plan on being an ESL teacher in the future. I developed a deeper understanding and respect for community-based charities, such as the New Americans Welcome Centers based in YMCA's throughout NYC, and it has inspired me to continue volunteering to teach English to the immigrant community. After starting my studies at SLU I learned how to help friends of mine research and apply for affordable housing when they did not realize they even qualified for it. I gained more knowledge about the economy—such as the democratic economy, cooperatives, and capitalism—after only three weeks during a summer course than I did in all my years working in the corporate world. It will shape how I understand community businesses when I move to Asia and begin exchanging knowledge about how community-based businesses function there compared to American businesses."

Gena-Fae says one of the greatest lessons she has learned in life can be summed up by one of her heroes, Maya Angelou. "*We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.*"