The schools in New York City described in Jonathan Kozol’s Savage Inequalities were in very bad shape in the early 1990’s. Out of 32 districts, District 10 was the worst district in New York at that time. While reading Savage Inequalities, I visualized what some of the schools in New York City looked like. The stories about how rundown the schools were reminded me of the movie, “Lean on Me.” This film is based on a true story about a man named Joe Clark who changed an inner-city school called “Eastside High” in Patterson, New Jersey.

P.S. 261 and P.S. 79 were two rundown schools in the city of New York; P.S. 261, is located in the North Bronx. The school, which was originally a roller skating rink, was furnished with carpets that were patched or taped together; very few windows, and low ceilings. P.S. 79, also located in the Bronx, was similarly furnished, with a ceiling both patched up and covered with a garbage bag, as well as broken windows in the nurse’s office. Another school, called “Morris Hall,” had water coming down the stairs, plaster falling from the walls, and huge holes in the ceilings of the stairwells. There was graffiti all over the walls, trash on the floors and drug-dealing running rampant throughout.

P.S. 261 was terribly overcrowded. There were students everywhere, with barely any room to walk. The capacity for the school was 900 students, but there were 1,300 students being educated there. The classes were overcrowded and there were not enough desks for all of the students. Many teachers had to share one classroom at a time. Similarly, P.S. 79 had a capacity of 1,000, but housed approximately 1,550 students. To make up for the space, the library and gymnasiums were misused as academic classrooms.

In “Lean On Me,” Principal Clark was flabbergasted by how poorly the school was doing. He could not believe the filth and chaos that had overrun the school. Later in the film, Principal Clark renewed the school to a more stable and controlled condition. Through his trying efforts to change the school, it became more physically and academically functional.

P.S. 79 and P.S. 269 have improved since the early 1990s. Although it took over a year for the schools to be refurbished, they were, in the end, successful institutions. No matter how physically rundown a school might be, it can be improved with the right staff and support. The first step to improvement is ensuring that there is support from the faculty, staff and school board. Any school can be improved, it just takes time and money.
On January 26, 2006 our class, FSA 101: Introduction to Urban Education, took its first trip to a school in Syracuse for weekly observations. The bus ride was cold but my anticipation in arriving and becoming familiar with the school kept my ambitions warm. My partner, Liz, and I were assigned to Ms. V’s 7-9 year olds in a self-contained special education class.

As I walked into class I was greeted by a smiling teacher named Ms. V. She told us that the kids would be coming back to eat lunch soon. She briefed us about the lives of each student, and the problems she had faced with them and other students from her past experiences. Ms. V told us it was a challenge but she enjoyed herself very much. When the students arrived they sat down and looked at us with open eyes, welcoming us in unison. Ms V. told them that we will be visiting once a week and that they should behave in a respectful manner. Since this was a special education class, most of the students are labeled as emotionally disturbed. This was apparent to me as the day moved on.

Thursdays are one of their less busy days and they mainly have free time during the hours we are there. If it is not free time or lunch, the kids are in other classrooms for specials such as art or gym. Ms. V uses the disciplinary action of giving the children “minutes” when they do something inappropriate, such as acting rude or negatively to her or another student, while attending their specials. These “minutes” are put into effect during lunch hour. The kids eat their lunch in the classroom, and if gradually throughout the morning up until lunch the student’s behavior is not acceptable, minutes are added on. The student with the minutes must wait that amount before eating. Ms. V explained that this method is usually resourceful, and the children understand the consequences.

A key experience overall happened to me during free time. One of the students asked if I would play with him. During free time the kids have to choose between various educational games. The game I played with one boy was a math game, dealing with multiplication. He would get excited every time he would win. When he smiled at me it made me smile and seeing him get so excited that he was playing a game with an older person and winning made his self-esteem grow higher. This game improved his math skills and it was an excellent way to incorporate fun with education.

As I watch the kids and how they responded to Ms. V’s teaching I am beginning to learn that working with children with special needs can take a lot out of you. I am anxious to learn more about the actual techniques that she uses to get their attention and provide them with the education that they deserve.

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On February 1, SUNY Cortland held the Annual Unity Dinner. Nicole Brooks, a Junior, Childhood Education major from Elmhira, spoke on behalf of C.U.R.E. This year’s theme was “What can I do to make a diverse community more united?” These are her words.

Unity is defined as the state or quality of being in accord; or of being in a harmonious state.

There are many aspects of life that create diversity such as, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. The question is: how can we bridge this gap so that everyone despite these differences can live amongst each other in tranquility?

For many people the answer to this question is very simple, but for me it is more complex. I think that there are many things that we can do to make this campus more united. However it is difficult to change people’s opinions on views they have already made their mind up about. One way we can start this process is to take action. Individual people can take action, a single person can make a difference in the lives of others, by sharing, communicating, educating, and listening. The growth of multicultural programs also helps bridge this divide.

Personally, I am reaching out to this issue not only on campus but to the future generation by being involved with the CURE program. As a future urban educator I am committed to working as a mentor for elementary age students. In the classroom I hope to bring in issues of diversity and multiculturalism that are imperative to making a community united. We have to remember that the education of the younger generations is what will change the challenges that past and present generations have fought so hard to overcome, so that one day everyone will live in unity.
Senior Spotlight: Nina Primiano

Adelina ‘Nina’ Primiano, is originally from Syracuse, NY and will be graduating with a degree in Adolescence Earth Science Education. During her career at Cortland, Nina has received two distinguishing awards from the Geology department: the W. Graham Heaslip Award which is given for outstanding achievement and the Darwin Prize which is awarded to students who have demonstrated outstanding performance in the Geology department. She is currently student teaching at Grant Middle School in Syracuse.

Nina chose SUNY Cortland as her preferred college not only because it was close to her hometown, but also for the benefits that the C.U.R.E. program offered her. Long before her educational career at Cortland, Nina knew she wanted to teach in an urban school and believed that the C.U.R.E. scholarship provided a unique opportunity to accomplish her goal. Since the first grade, Nina knew she wanted to be an educator; but it was not until her senior year of high school that she realized that adolescence education was her passion. Nina started college as a Spanish Education major, but soon felt that geology and the sciences were her true academic callings. Soon after, she changed her major to Earth Science Education and has never looked back.

Nina has always known that she wanted to be an urban educator. After growing up in an urban neighborhood, she feels that she would not be comfortable teaching anywhere else. She believes that she can make a true difference in urban schools because students there would greatly benefit from a memorable teacher who is willing to help them, both in and out of school. Nina hopes to inspire her future students to think beyond the classroom, and relate her academic lessons to their lives. The C.U.R.E. program is one of the main influences that Nina attributes to her strong preparation for this semester’s student teaching. She says that hearing past C.U.R.E. graduates talk about their experiences in urban areas at All C.U.R.E. meetings and the extra observation hours for C.U.R.E. courses were among the most helpful facets of her teacher training.

This semester, Nina hopes to be the best student teacher she can be, make an impact on the lives of her students, and stay as sane as possible. After she graduates, Nina will be looking for a teaching job in the Syracuse area. She hopes to make a difference and give back to the community that she grew up in.

Classroom Reflections
Sulema Iriarte, Freshman Childhood Education Major from Staten Island

As I walked into the Pre-K classroom on the first day of observations for my Introduction to Urban Education class, I thought to myself, “this is going to be a walk in the park, I love little kids and they love me”. The first thing I noticed was that there were two teachers in the classroom. I would love to compare this Pre-K classroom and how it is situated to my own experience, but as far as I remember there was only one teacher in my Pre-K class. As Nicole (another C.U.R.E. student) and I approached Ms. H (one of the two teachers in the classroom) the children just continued their routine. It was not until Nicole and I actually walked over to the corner where all the children were playing that they noticed us in the room. This made me laugh a bit and realize how careless and free you are as a young child.

In many instances, students would come over to me and say things like, “look this is a learning calendar and today is January the 27th,” or “those are black bears.” While I would act surprised at the facts that they knew, I was genuinely surprised by how much information these small (CONTINUED ON P. 4)
(CLASSROOM REFLECTION, CONT. FROM P. 3) beings contained. It is fair to say that the one part of my experience at orientation that thrilled me the most was the musical methods Ms. H used to teach the children. At one point, the instructor told the students that Nicole and I did not know what the learning calendar was and that we had never heard the “bear fact” song. The children stared at us peculiarly and said, “they don’t know the ‘bear fact’ song?” And before I knew it I was humming happily to the “bear fact” song watching as the children made the accompanying expressions and clap. Ms. H described her plans of preparing the Pre-K students for the 4th grade science exams early. I thought that was a great idea and I really admired her dedication to making sure that the students were well prepared. Dedication is a big part of being an urban educator.