

Nonprofit work meets nonstop purpose: Dean's Medalist looks ahead to law school, advocacy

School of Social Transformation Dean's Medalist graduates with a degree in justice studies and hands-on experience in legal and philanthropic work

By Jennifer Moore, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [fall 2025 graduates](#).

When Maggie Leone left Wakefield, Massachusetts, for Arizona, she wasn't looking for just warmer weather and a change of scenery. She wanted a place where she could dig into the questions that had long pulled her: Why do our systems function the way they do, and how do those structures affect people's lives?

"I wanted to learn why we are the way that we are and how communities are impacted by the failings of our systems," she said.

Leone is now graduating as the Dean's Medalist of the [School of Social Transformation](#) with a bachelor's degree in justice studies, along with a minor in special events management and a certificate in human rights. Throughout her four years on the Tempe campus, she has stood out for her unusual aptitude for complex social theory, historical analysis and, above all, empathy.

Faculty members took notice.

"Maggie Leone is one of the brightest, most curious and most engaged students I have had the pleasure of teaching," said [Jessica Katzenstein](#), assistant professor in the School of Social Transformation. "I am always delighted when she speaks in class, as she reliably deepens the class discussion and propels meaningful conversation."

Leone said two classes — [Death Penalty in the United States](#) and [Prisons, Power and the Punishments of the Past](#) — were especially formative experiences, pushing her to look closely at how people are treated in legal processes.

“I’ve always been really passionate about improving conditions in our society, systemically and on all other levels,” she says. “Those classes really opened my eyes to the ways that we view those around us as a result of these systems.”

That same thoughtfulness showed up in the work she took on beyond her classes. In between waitressing, Leone took on internships at Phoenix-area nonprofits where she connected her academic work to ground-level experience. At Make-A-Wish Arizona, she coordinated with families navigating difficulties, and at the Arizona Bar Foundation, she created outreach materials to help youth understand the legal system and their rights.

At home in Massachusetts, she also had two government-focused internships. At the Middlesex County District Attorney’s Office, she worked under the assistant district attorney preparing case documents, examining evidence and observing court proceedings. And in her hometown of Wakefield, she supported the town clerk’s office with recordkeeping, voter registration and administering a local election.

“These experiences really have inspired me to dedicate more of my life to community service,” she says. “I want to work most of my life in the nonprofit space.”

Leone plans to attend law school in the next few application cycles and hopes to continue her work in justice, community advocacy and nonprofit service. As she graduates this December, she reflects on what she has learned at ASU.

Question: Why did you choose ASU?

Answer: I really wanted to go to a big school with a lot of research opportunities and different cultures — a big cultural melting pot. I also wanted a vibrant community and school spirit to connect with my peers. The sheer size of ASU and the love that people have for the school really drew me, and I fell in love with it the second I stepped on the campus.

Q: Shout out a professor, advisor or someone else who made a big impact on your journey — what did they teach you?

A: [Christine Holman](#) and Jessica Katzenstein taught me how to take all situations with grace and make sure that the way their students see the world is informed. They taught us to consider other people beyond yourself and really understand what it means to be a member of our community. I could not be more grateful, nor could I have received this award and done any of this if they hadn’t been a resource for me these past few semesters.

Q: What’s the best piece of advice you’d give to those still in school?

A: Get involved with literally whatever you can. It can feel scary, but if you don’t go for it, amazing opportunities and people can pass you by. And don’t work too much if you have the privilege not to. I wish I had taken more time to slow down and take everything in.

Q: What's one change you'd love to see in the world — and how would you use your degree to help make it happen?

A: The way we talk about people and situations can be harmful in ways we don't even recognize. We need to focus on empathy, care and morality. As human beings, we all live very short lives, and using that in our systems to discriminate against people and enable suffering is something that really is at the core of why I study what I study. I want to go to the root of the systems we have and try to eradicate these biases.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



"I've always been really passionate about improving conditions in our society, systemically and on all other levels," says Maggie Leone, the Dean's Medalist for the School of Social Transformation. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU