The 2016 Hartt Alumni Award recipient, Jimmy Greene ’97, is considered one of the most respected saxophonists of his generation. Greene’s 2015 album, “A Beautiful Life,” is a celebration of the life of his daughter, Ana, whose life was tragically taken on December 14, 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. The album garnered Grammy nominations for Best Jazz Instrumental Album and Best Arrangement, Instruments, and Vocals for Greene’s arrangement of his composition “When I Come Home,” featuring vocalists Javier Colon ’00 and Latanya Farrell M’97, M’98.

The College of Engineering, Technology and Architecture (CETA) presented its 2016 Alumnus Award to Joseph A. Sylvestro ’90. (shown on right with CETA Dean Lou Manzione on left). Sylvestro is vice president, Aftermarket Operations at Pratt & Whitney. He is responsible for leading the company’s global network of 17 large engine maintenance, repair, and overhaul facilities in nine countries.

The 2016 Hillyer Distinguished Alumnus Kenneth Vecchione ’74 rose through the ranks of CitiCorp to become Chief Financial Officer of their credit card business and then CFO of credit card giant MBNA. Today, he is the President and chief executive officer of Encore Capital Group, Inc. This year’s commencement was especially meaningful to Vecchione because he able to present honors student Alexander Vecchione ’16, his son, with his Hillyer College degree. Alexander will continue his studies in finance in the Barney School of Business.

The 2016 Distinguished Alumni Award was presented to Brett D. Gerstenblatt ’94, vice president and executive creative director at CVS Health. At CVS Health, he is responsible for CVS’s campaign to remove cigarettes and tobacco products from its inventory. He works with executives and senior leaders to ensure the company’s purpose, strategy, and values are being expressed properly and consistently every day.
Blind alum Chaz Davis ’16 has a vision for his life and is representing the United States at the Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

In early July, after a few exhausting, but exhilarating, days participating in the U.S. Paralympic Track and Field tryouts in Charlotte, N.C., Chaz waited with eager anticipation for the men’s team that would compete in Rio to be announced on July 3. When he heard his name, he almost could not believe it.

“It was just an unbelievable feeling that I made the team and I get to represent my country in Rio,” says Chaz, a native of Grafton, Mass., who ran track and field and cross country at UHart.

The Paralympic Games is an international multi-sport event involving athletes with a range of physical disabilities. Chaz will be competing with a visual impairment. About midway through his first year at the University, he was stricken with Leber Hereditary Optic Neuropathy (LHON), a rare, incurable genetic disease that causes vision loss. At first, the disease only caused deteriorating vision in his right eye, but by the end of the school year, he lost the vision in his left eye as well. When it first happened, Chaz thought he would never run again. “I thought my college days were over,” he says.

After a summer of up and down emotions, Chaz resolved that, with help and support from family, friends on the team, and professors, he would continue his criminal justice studies in the University’s College of Arts and Sciences and start running again. “I was able to get back on track just three months after I became legally blind,” Chaz says. He started running first on the
treadmill and began slowly working with teammates to run outdoors.

Chaz especially relied on teammate Kyle Hamel ’16 who was also his roommate. Kyle helped Chaz feel comfortable running again.

“I am so grateful to be a part of Chaz’s story. He is such an inspiration and a great role model for all young runners,” says Kyle, a native of Southington, Conn. who earned his degree in mechanical engineering in the University’s College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture.

Chaz is not able to make out details of objects and says what he sees looks like pixelated colors. When he walks around he uses a cane to detect objects. When training on roads for cross country, the two friends ran together and Kyle would point out potholes and other obstacles that Chaz should be aware of. Kyle also would act as Chaz’s guide in cross country meets. In the fall of 2015, Chaz competed in his first cross country event after losing his vision and completed the 8K course in 27:04.26 for 59th place. He was the third Hawk to cross the finish line in that event. Kyle, as his guide, finished right after Chaz in 27:04.28.

In May 2016, Chaz concluded his collegiate career with a standout performance in the 5,000-meters at the New England Championships. He took eighth in the race, finishing in a time of 14:48.61. He also graduated with his degree in criminal justice that month.

At the Paralympics qualifiers in Charlotte, N.C., Chaz took top billing in the 5,000-meter run covering the track in 15:25.32. He also won his section of the 1500-meter run, leading the field in 4:05.90.

Chaz may not be able to see but he has a vision for his life that is clear. “I set this goal three years ago, when I first lost my sight,” Chaz says. He will compete in the 1,500-meter run on September 11 and the 5,000-meter run on September 15.

Having supported him throughout the whole process, Kyle could not be more proud that Chaz made it to the Paralympics. “I am just so excited for him and I wish I could go to Rio to support him,” says Kyle.

After the Paralympics, Chaz is planning to attend a 10-month program at the Colorado Center for the Blind where he will learn basic skills for independent living. Then he plans to pursue a master’s degree in social work to help people who have gone through similar experiences to his.

“The blindness has not kept me from my goals and what I want in life. I have found a purpose and I want to work with other people like me,” he concludes.