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'Superhuman determination' defines HCC's class of 2017

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SPRINGFIELD — Cheering friends and family packed the 8,000-seat MassMutual Center on Saturday morning as Holyoke Community College's Class of 2017 took the final steps toward an educational milestone.

As approximately 1,000 graduates streamed into the arena for the school's 70th commencement, whistles and applause echoed throughout the building as the students eagerly awaited the awarding of degrees and certificates with wide smiles and bedazzled mortarboards.

Commencement speaker Vivian Leskes who is retiring this year after teaching English as a Second Language at HCC for 25 years, said in her address that she had "witnessed superhuman determination" in her students to pursue their degrees.

Many worked a full-time job or cared for multiple family members while they were juggling school assignments, she said. What's more, many were the first in their families to attend college.

"Nobody said education would be easy," Leskes, of Ashfield, said.

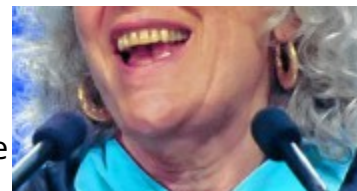
Quoting a line from Sandra Cisneros' novel "The House on Mango Street," Leskes urged the graduates to use what they had learned to better their communities.

"Come back for the ones who are left behind, for the ones who cannot act," said Leskes, quoting from the book.

Leskes was bestowed with school's highest honor, the Elaine Marieb Faculty Chair for Teaching Excellence. The award comes with a small stipend for professional development and recognizes a full-time member of the faculty who



"exemplifies the characteristics associated with outstanding classroom teaching."



State Sen. Donald Humason, R-Westfield, also addressed the graduates saying, "There's nothing wrong with America that what's right with America can't fix."

Leskes had reminded the crowd of the darker side of American history, referencing slavery and the exploitation of low-wage workers and immigrants. She said, "You cannot forget whose shoulders we all stand on."

Graduate Charlene Johnson, a Holyoke native, took this message to heart. She said she started at the journalism department at the University of Massachusetts and plans to pursue a law degree so she can dismantle what she described as the systematic oppression she sees in her community.

"I want to tackle things that are going on in our own backyard," she says. "This is a great stepping stone for something further."

Jonana Luisa Gutierrez-Barnes, a senior at Northampton High School, was dual-enrolled at HCC. Next year she will study social justice at Bridgewater State University. While studying at HCC, she said, she appreciated the opportunity to take classes with people of all ages and backgrounds.

She added that HCC helped her "lift the economic burden" of paying for college and likes being able to leave high school with two years of college under her belt.

"I like to get things done," she said.

Thanks to HCC's strong relationships with many of the surrounding colleges and universities, many graduates will go on to four-year programs.

Among them are Isabelle Griffin, of Belchertown, who graduated with high honors and an associate's degree in computer programming, and is heading to Mount Holyoke College to study computer science. In the days leading up to the commencement, Griffin was one of five students profiled for their excellence while studying at HCC.

Griffin described HCC as "a really inclusive and accepting community."

"I made friends with a lot of older women who had kids my age," she said. "You still have to work for it, but they'll (HCC) give you a shot to work for it."

Eight students graduated as valedictorians with a 4.0 grade-point average, including Lisa Koster Lane of Southampton and Maija Lee Orlovsky Nagels of Sunderland.

