

FACES AND PLACES

Comp grad earns HCC's Award for Excellence

HOLYOKE – And to think he once needed a math tutor.

Oscar Vidal Rubio, of Palmer, will graduate from Holyoke Community College on June 2 with two associate degrees, one in computer programming and the other, naturally, in math. He has had a perfect G.P.A. of 4.0 in each major.

Rubio received the HCC Award for Excellence in Mathematics on May 23. The faculty chose him as the best math student for the entire academic year.

He holds three math tutoring jobs on campus, with the HCC Math Center, the STRIVE program, and the STEM Scholars Program, to which he himself belongs as the recipient of a National Science Foundation STEM Scholarship.

"I know what it feels like to go into something not knowing anything about it and coming out more than okay," Rubio said. "I came to HCC not really knowing anything, but I'm going out with a lot and I've learned to take advantage of all HCC has to offer."

That includes visiting the Math Center for help with calculus and differential equations. "With the help of tutors," he said, "I was able to succeed in those classes, and now it's my turn to help others."

He's been helping others as a tutor and as a mentor for the STEM Scholars Program, providing academic



Oscar Vidal Rubio

and peer support to his STEM classmates and outreach to area high schools, encouraging younger students to pursue fields in STEM – science, technology, engineering and math.

He didn't intend to study math in college. For four years he was part of the information technology and networking vocational program at Chicopee Comprehensive High School. He knew about hardware, but he wanted to study computer science – programming – and applied to the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He got into UMass, but not the program.

"They wanted me to take some extra classes and come as a different major," he says, "so I figured HCC would be the best option for me – I could see what computer science was like and if I was going to like it. Plus, it was much cheaper."

In the beginning, he struggled with programming but he persisted, adding math classes as he began to understand how they were linked, especially at more advanced levels.

For instance, this spring, in his Java II programming class, he worked on a project testing the efficiency of data structures, dealing with common concepts such as graphs and lists and more esoteric things called cues, heaps, and binary trees.

"It's not as exciting as it sounds," he joked. "It's purely mathematical, but it can be applied to real-world situations."

And for a final project in Discrete Mathematics he examined different algorithms and ran them on comput-

ers to "show them off."

As Rubio progressed, and the A's kept coming, he never took his grades for granted. Originally from Peru, he settled in western Massachusetts with his family when he was six.

"It's the same old American dream story, I guess," he says. "I know the troubles that people have, whether it's finances, not enough support, whatever it may be that doesn't allow them to continue with their education. Being here and being able to keep going and trying to help people – it's what drives me. And I'll always be thankful for what HCC has done by giving me this opportunity to keep going."

And he will keep going. Next fall, Rubio is off to the University of Massachusetts to study computer science.

Beyond that, he says, he originally toyed with the idea of one day working for Google as a software engineer and app developer. Lately, though, he's been leaning toward developing educational software tools to help people learn subjects such as physics, computer science, and especially math.

He's already been talking about such a project with his girlfriend, Maija Lee Orlovsky Nagels, one of his principal inspirations, study partners and role models. Nagels graduated from HCC in 2017 with associate degrees in three majors, business, liberal arts and math. She's now at UMass, studying astrophysics. They met in math class at HCC.

"I always go to her for advice," Rubio says.