GREENFIELD — Dr. Yves Sa-

GCC holds 58th

HOLYOKE — Holyoke Veterans’

College fetes 15 valedictorians

By LILY BEAVIS
For the Gazette

HOLYOKE — Yusef Kuruca left her single mother and everything she knew in Istanbul, Turkey in 2016, following her dreams of becoming a lawyer and judge in the United States. On Saturday, she graduated with honors and an associate degree from Holyoke Community College, joining the rest of the classes of 2020 and 2021 in a dual virtual commencement ceremony.

The graduation honored 703 stu-
dents from the class of 2020 and 767 from the class of 2021, with students and family members tuning in from across the globe. Almost all HCC
courses were taught remotely this year, with graduates from the two classes representing 35 different countries, according to the college.

Students and faculty spoke with pride about the difficulties students overcame during their time at HCC. Kuruca, the class of 2021 student or-
tor, told her story of immigration and education to the virtual audi-

cence of hundreds. “Suddenly, I was in the United States, and I was start-
ing American high school as a senior with no English whatsoever,” she said, remembering her first experi-

ences in the U.S. five years ago.

The transition was painful and dif-
ficult. Kuruca, of Chicopee, said that she felt lost without her mother and spent every day studying and crying. She said that she thought about leav-
ing school and going home many times.

Then she enrolled in HCC’s En-
glish as a Second Language Pro-
gram, where she has spent the past two years. Through the program, she met and bonded with other stu-
dents and explored her passion for human rights. Despite the struggles and hardship she faced as a first-
generation and immigrant student, Kuruca said that she learned skills in leadership and confidence at HCC that she wouldn’t have formed else-
where.

“I wish HCC was a four year school,” Kuruca told the audience Saturday. “As a student, I consider HCC to be my home, and I know it is home to many others.”

Kuruca graduated with honors, having served as a member of the Student Senate, Green Key Honor Society, Pathways Program and TRIO Support Student Society. Her story was just one of many that were shared during HCC’s graduation ceremony Saturday morning.

In her opening speech, HCC Pres-
ident Christina Royal extended con-
gratulations to one member each of the class of 2020 and 2021, sharing their stories of resilience with the audience.

Alexandra Santiago, a 2021 gradu-
ate, moved to Massachusetts from Puerto Rico with her family after Hurricane Maria struck in 2017. On Saturday, Santiago became the first student to graduate from HCC with an associate degree in Latinx stud-
ies.

“Getting involved in college pro-
grams, leadership opportunities and volunteering in her community helped Alexandra overcome feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty,” Royal said during her speech.

Royal also congratulated 2020 graduate Samary Ramos, a first-generation student and mother of two who originally left school in eighth grade.

“The 36-year-old Springfield resi-
dent completed her studies at HCC last spring, earning high honors and her associate’s degree in visual arts,” she said.

The speeches were interspersed with artistic performances from members of the graduating classes. The college chorale performed a Zoom rendition of “Oceans and Stars” by Amy Rosin and directed by faculty member Ellen Cogen, who told the graduates to “cross many oceans and reach for the stars” dur-
ing the ceremony. Class of 2021 grad-
uate Chan Collins performed Bach’s Suite No. 1 Prelude on the cello.

Raul Gutiérrez, an associate pro-

dessor of Latinx studies and Spanish at HCC, shared his own story of im-

migrating and academia. He ex-

plained that he came to the U.S. as an 11-year-old and that his greatest lessons were learned from his grandmother.

“Mi güelita María would always end our conversations with ‘porque bien,’ which roughly translates to ‘behave well,’” Gutiérrez said.

He urged the new graduates to enter the world with kindness and empathy, forging new commitments to social understanding and change.

“If ‘behave well’ is to know that in life, there are causes, and people come and go, but the causes stay,” he added.

After a video of congratulations from the different HCC departments played, HCC Board of Trustees Chair Robert W. Gilbert, Jr., offi-
cially announced the classes’ 15 vale-
dictorians, all of whom earned at least 36 credits and completed their academic programs while maintain-
ing a perfect 4.0 grade point average. Ammarie Arzoukas, Lauren Bailey, Abigail Brown, Robert Datz, Jaymie Hensson, Nicole Lehndorfl-Schuster, Ryan Kokoski, Aundrea Marschoum, Vanessa Oquendo, Emilia Selyukova, Xu Bao Han Ton, Kristen Tzambazakis, Melina Tzambazakis, Rona Tae Kyung Uson and Zadia Valencie all graduated as HCC valedictorians.