

HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

HCC honors 1,470 students from 2 classes in online ceremony

College fetes 15 valedictorians

By LILY REAVIS
For the Gazette

HOLYOKE — Tugce 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 students 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 classes 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 orator, told her story of immigration and education to the virtual audience of hundreds. "Suddenly, I was in the United States, and I was starting American high school as a senior with no English whatsoever," she said, remembering her first experiences in the U.S. five years ago.

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

Then she enrolled in HCC's English as a Second Language Program, where she has spent the past two years. Through the program, she met and bonded with other students 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 elsewhere.

"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 President Christina Royal extended congratulations to one member each of the class of 2020 and 2021, sharing their stories of resilience with the audience.

Alexandra Santiago, a 2021 graduate, 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 studies.

"Getting involved in college pro-



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Tugce Kuruca of Holyoke Community College's class of 2021.

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 resident 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 Bonin and directed by faculty member Ellen Cogen, who told the graduates to "cross many oceans and reach for the stars" during the ceremony. Class of 2021 graduate Chan Collins performed Bach's Suite No. 1 Prelude on the cello.

Raul Gutiérrez, an associate professor of Latinx studies and Spanish at HCC, shared his own story of immigration and academia. He explained that he came to the U.S. as an 11-year-old and that his greatest lessons were learned from his grandmother.

"Mi guelita Maria would always end our conversations with 'portate 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. "To '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 Chairman Robert W. Gilbert, Jr., officially announced the classes' 15 valedictorians, all of whom earned at least 30 credits and completed their academic programs while maintaining a perfect 4.0 grade point average. Annmarie Arduino, Lauren Bailey, Abigail Brown, Robert Datz, Jaymie Hession, Nicole Leheld-Schlueter, Ryan Kokoski, Aundrea Marschoun, Vanessa Oquendo, Emilia Selyukova, Nu Bao Han Ton, Kristen Tzambazakis, Melina Tzambazakis, Rosa Tae Kyung Ueon and Zadia Valenze all graduated as HCC valedictorians.