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p. 10

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SCHOOLS O

HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

'It's how we finish'

*HCC Gateway to College program
graduates 22nd class*

HOLYOKE, MA – As a freshman and sophomore, Biannca Colflesh was very active in her school community. For the most part, during those two years, she enjoyed Holyoke High. “It’s supposed to be the best time of your life,” she remembers.



Biannca Colflesh of Holyoke celebrates with her family after graduating from the Gateway to College program at Holyoke Community College

Then, she hit “a few bumps.” By the end of her junior year, she was failing all her classes and pretty much stopped going.

“This was unlike me, and I realized I had lost myself,” she said.

With the help of her parents, she found her way to Holyoke Community College and its Gateway to College program. Gateway at HCC is part of a national network of programs that put struggling high school students and dropouts into college classes, where they work toward their high school diplomas and also collect transferable college credits. This counter-intuitive approach has been incredibly successful.

“They accepted me,” Colflesh said, “and I’m thankful for that.”

Colflesh was one of 15 HCC Gateway students who graduated from the program last week (Feb. 1), when she found herself on the stage of the Leslie Phillips Theater, giving a speech to her classmates, family, friends, teachers and Gateway staff.

Thanks to Gateway, Colflesh earned 12 college credits and her diploma from Holyoke High School. She is already enrolled full time at HCC.

continues to page 35

'It's how we finish'*continued from page 10*

Jeysha Vega Colon of Springfield celebrates with her family after graduating from the Gateway to College program at Holyoke Community College

"We are not statistics, and labels don't define us," said Natasha Perez of Springfield, another student speaker and new Gateway graduate who had been a high school dropout. "Here we are doing what everyone thought we couldn't. Was it a struggle? Yea. Was it worth it? Absolutely. It doesn't matter how the journey starts; it's how we finish."

The 15 new graduates from Holyoke, Springfield, Agawam, Westfield and West Springfield finished with a total of 159 high school credits and 115 college credits. They represent the 22nd graduating class since the Gateway program was founded at HCC in 2008.

They are, from Holyoke: Evan Alicea, Bianna Colflesh, Justin Delgado, Oscar Dilone, Johnathan Hodge-Kennedy, Nathanael Mannering, Jaysha Mejia, Britney Moran, Soniah Roque; from Springfield: Maralyse Montuori, Natasha Perez, Jeysha Vega Colon; from Agawam: Rodney Sanders; from Westfield: Gemma Lugo; and from West Springfield: Ryan Stenwick.

With a graduation rate of 76 percent, HCC's Gateway program is one of the most successful in the United States and a two-time winner of Gateway National's Excellence Award.

"Anytime you get to the end of an incredible journey and you have a chance to say, I have finished, I have been successful, I have completed — it's a wonderful, wonderful moment," said HCC president Christina Royal.

As a child, Royal told the graduates, she wasn't a big fan of school, preferring to spend her time on the baseball field. Only later did she learn to appreciate how much education had helped her escape the circumstances of growing up poor and crafting a different life than the one she grew up in.

"Over time I grew to appreciate the fact that college saved my life," she said. "To see all of you sitting here today having made it to the end, it is a phenomenal accomplishment and something that you should not only feel great about, but take time to celebrate. I'm so happy to be here and be able to bask in your success." ■