

HOLYOKE

Gateway grads get jump-start on college

Unlike most graduation speakers, Gaylord Saulsberry ignored the lectern after being introduced and instead took a position at center stage. Like a conductor, he set down a black music stand and placed his pages on it, then looked out at the audience in the Leslie Phillips Theater and apologized for what he was about to do next — turn his back.

After all, he said, the three dozen soon-to-be graduates from Holyoke Community College's Gateway to College program were on stage, too, in their black caps and gowns, seated, for the moment, behind him. As their teacher of history and education for the past two years, he needed to deliver his final lesson face-to-face.

"That's the way I'm used to talking to them," he said, and then, he turned around.

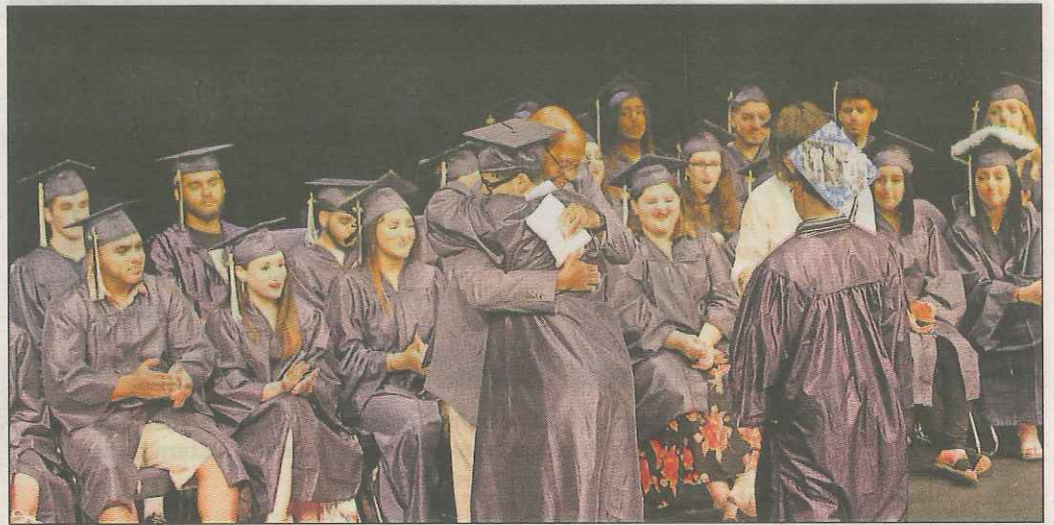
"I have something to say to you, and I have to say it with all sincerity," said Saulsberry, 72, a former high school principal from Amherst who is retiring this year from HCC after a 51-year career as an educator. "The nation we are living in is on fire. It's ablaze."

The flames consuming it, he said, are those of division, racism, concern over climate change, gender discrimination, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, homophobia and selfishness, "possibly the worst combination of nasties that I have ever seen in this country."

"These flames, if left unchecked, will destroy the very promise that your graduation represents," he told them. "You, the class of 2019, must be able to put these fires out."

Graduating Gateway students are used to putting their own fires out. Gateway is an alternative high school program that offers dropouts and struggling teens a chance to earn their high school diplomas by taking college classes.

"Every person graduating today is on this stage for a reason," said student speak-



Keynote speaker Gaylord Saulsberry gets a hug from a student during Holyoke Community College's Gateway to College graduation ceremony June 7. Saulsberry, 72, an educator for the past 51 years, is retiring from HCC, where he has been teaching since 2003.

er Caitlyn Paul, of Holyoke. "The reason we are here, the reason we are so proud to be here, is because traditional high school didn't work for us, but we still made it. We stand before you today wearing a cap and gown, symbols that we overcame the bad, powered through and prevailed."

The 36 students from Holyoke, Springfield, Westfield, West Springfield, Hampshire Regional school district, Palmer and Belchertown represent one of the program's largest graduating classes since it started in 2008.

Collectively, they earned a total of 287 college credits and have a combined grade-point average of 3.1, "the highest we've ever had," said Gateway to College coordinator Vivian Ostrowski. Twenty of them will be continuing their educations as HCC students in the fall, 90 percent of them are "college ready" in English, meaning they will not have to take any pre-college, developmental English courses, and five of them have already completed their general education English requirements for their associate degrees.

"These are remarkable numbers," she said. "I bow my head to the students and



New graduate Caitlyn Paul, of Holyoke, speaks to her classmates at HCC's Gateway to College graduation June 7. Paul will be studying biology at HCC in September and plans to attend medical school one day.

to their remarkable instructors."

Those remarkable instructors include Saulsberry, who reminded the graduates about "what we have learned" in the classroom and in the Gateway program.

We have learned, he said, to plot our individual courses without fear when the course is right and just but not to be afraid to change course when change is needed. "I ask you to think of your own experience," he said. "And John Brown."

"Think about what makes you happy, then do it," he said. "Think of Old Saulsberry and why he taught for 51 years. Because it made me come alive. You made me come alive. You have been my teachers, and I am better, much better as a human being for having known you."

The graduates, by school district, include:

Belchertown: Angie Picardi;

Hampshire Regional: Aliyah Hall;

Holyoke: Marissa Basler, Jazlynn Brown-Pena, Anaisha Camacho, Aisha Gallego, Maqueila Garcia, Nicholas Harris, Roselyn Lopez, Makayla Marty, Nayeli Montanez, Caitlyn Paul, Joel Ramos, Shalimar Scott, Anson Smith, Cameron Smith, Adalberto Torres;

Palmer: Cheyenne O'Gorman, Karrin Rimbald;

Springfield: Safiyah Bey, Melina Conrow, Anthonia Fisher, Ryan Gonzalez, Mykala Guzzo, Cyrah James, Tanishka Polanco, Jacob Turner, John Vidal, Alaija Williams;

West Springfield: Aubree Guilbreath; and

Westfield: Grace Cannady, Chastity Gonzalez, Kylie Morrison, Amber Plante, Samantha Vargas, Olivia White.