

EDUCATION

LOCAL COLLEGES IN THE NEWS

'You Kept Going'

Persistence in spite of pandemic theme of HCC Commencement

HOLYOKE – Holyoke Community College celebrated the classes of 2020 and 2021 on Saturday, June 5th, with a virtual Commencement ceremony in which speakers stressed the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fortitude of graduates who overcame them.

"You have accomplished something amazing during one of the most significant times in our world's history," President Christina Royal said in her introductory remarks. "It is my great pleasure to share this moment with you, a moment that celebrates not only an important milestone in your lives, but the resilience and determination you have demonstrated through a truly unbelievable time."

"There were high moments and low moments, and a whole lot of uncertain moments," she said, "But you kept going, and that is why you are here today."

The live-streamed event, broadcast on the HCC website and the college's social media channels, featured pre-recorded faculty and student speeches, musical performances, congratulatory messages, and a virtual procession of graduates.

HCC Commencement was cancelled in 2020 after the pandemic forced the college to transition to remote instruction. Although the 703 members of the class of 2020 received their diplomas last year, they did not receive an official public recognition until June 5th, where they were hailed alongside the 767 members of this year's graduating class.

"I believe the classes of 2020 and 2021 will be recorded in HCC history as two of the most extraordinary," said Royal. "In the midst of earning your degree, you had to pivot to completely different modes of learning. And you did so successfully. You faced uncertainty with compassion and perseverance, and you pushed forward with



Tugce Kuruca of Chicopee holds up a sign announcing her graduation from Holyoke Community College as a member of the class of 2021. Kuruca was the student speaker for Commencement 2021 on Sat., June 5.

relentless spirit."

"There is no question that the last 18 months have been difficult and the losses have been profound," Royal said. "The time that was taken from you was beyond your control. What you take from it, however, that is up to you."

Keynote speeches were delivered by two members of the HCC faculty: Raúl Gutiérrez, of Holyoke, recipient of the 2021 Elaine Marieb Faculty Chair for Teaching Excellence; and Vanessa Martínez, of Holyoke, recipient of the 2020 Elaine Marieb Faculty Chair for Teaching Excellence.

Martínez, professor of Anthropology and coordinator of the HCC Honors Program, encouraged graduates to engage their passions, find like-minded souls, and then "take action," to turn those passions into projects to help improve their communities.

"You are more than just survivors of a pandemic," she said, "ustedes son nuestros soñadores, nuestros innovadores, nuestra familia, nuestra comunidad y nuestro mundo – you are our dreamers, our innovators, our family, our community, and our world."

In his speech, Gutiérrez, HCC associate professor of Spanish and Lat-

inx Studies, invoked wisdom from "mi guelita María" – his grandmother – who always said, "Pórtate bien." The literal translation of that expression is "behave well," but Gutiérrez said it took him many years to understand what she really meant.

"For me now, pórtate bien is to carry yourself with compassion, love and solidarity toward humanity," Gutiérrez said. "Don't fake empathy. Live it! When you learn and embrace that you are sharing the world with other humans, you will truly succeed!"

"To the graduates of 2020 and 2021," he said, "you will be remembered as the class of the pandemic. I challenge you to strive for change. For the next chapter of your life, I challenge you to show up, speak up and stand up in all of your communities and in all of your endeavors – simply GIVE! If everyone 'se portara bien' like my grandmother told me all of my life, the world would be a better place."

Student speaker Tugce Kuruca, of Chicopee, from the class of 2021, talked about being an immigrant "from the slums" of Turkey who started high school in the U.S. without speaking

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any English. She started at HCC in the college's ESL program in 2017 and flourished thanks to the faculty and staff and her classmates.

"I can proudly say that I've created a strong family, not only within the ESL Program but also the Pathways Program, TRIO Student Support Services, the Green Key Honor Society and the Student Senate," Kuruca said. "Each of these programs played a crucial role in my academic success, and I would not be standing here today without their help."

Kuruca graduated with honors and her associate degree in liberal arts.

"I am so excited for the next step," she said. "I can't wait to transfer and then go to law school. It has always been a dream to become a lawyer and eventually a judge. I know I can do it, and I can make it because HCC prepared me very well."

"My fellow graduates, we made it," she said. "Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, we pulled through and showed the world that no obstacle can stand in the way of our success."

HCC's Commencement also included musical performances from Christian Santiago of Holyoke, from the Class of 2020, who played the cuatro (a four-string Latin American guitar); music major Chan Collins '21, who played Bach Suite #1 Prelude on cello; and the HCC College Chorale, singing "Oceans and Stars."

HCC's Commencement 2021 ceremony can be viewed in its entirety on the HCC website: hcc.edu/commencement ■