

HCC students earn Grinspoon awards

HOLYOKE – Holyoke Community College student Heather Reynolds Labonte grew up in an old farmhouse in Granby, Mass., in the shadow of Long Mountain, not far from the Robert Frost Trail.

The historic home dates back to the late 1700's and had once been a stop on the Underground Railroad. In the early 20th century it was owned by

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Professor Burlingham Schurr, a curator for Holyoke's Wistariahurst Museum whose collection of butterflies from around the world still lines the walls of the dining room.

After her parents died, Labonte and her sister inherited the house and the 52-acre plot that was once one of the largest cattle farms in Granby and is now an idyllic landscape that includes mature gardens and a pond.

"I was married here, as was my cousin," said Labonte, 51, who is studying marketing at HCC. "It's such a beautiful and special place, and I want to share the love of this property with others."

If all goes according to plan, Labonte will do just that.

She was one of three HCC students and one HCC alumna to earn entrepreneurship awards this spring from the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. Labonte's business plan calls for creating Harris Mountain Estate, an outdoor venue for weddings, corporate events, graduation parties, reunions, and other special gatherings for up to 175 guests.

"I want to carry on my parents' legacy and share this amazing space," Labonte said.

Also earning Grinspoon awards for their business concepts was HCC culinary arts student Nicole Ortiz of Holyoke and business/culinary arts student Alexandra Clark of Huntington,



HCC culinary arts student Nicole Ortiz serves lunch at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute in February.

Submitted photo

who both plan to launch food truck operations. Clark's is called Lettuce Eat, a mobile organic salad business. Ortiz will focus on serving bright, healthy breakfast items to busy commuters with her

Crave Food Truck.

Each year, the Grinspoon Entrepreneurship Initiative recognizes promising entrepreneurs with monetary awards of up to \$1,000 to assist

them as they get started. Typically, the awards are announced at the Grinspoon Entrepreneurship Initiative banquet, held each spring at the Log Cabin in Holyoke. But because of COVID-19, the banquet was cancelled, and awards announced online.

"This has been a dream of mine for a long time," Ortiz said in February after being selected to participate in Holyoke SPARK's Entrepreneurship for All (E-for-All) Initiative, for which she earned a first-place prize of \$2,500 for her food truck idea. "I've seen a need in my hometown for a wider variety of food options and I can't wait to do my best to bring some fresh, new options to my neighbors in Holyoke and Springfield."

Labonte also participated in Holyoke's E-for-All program this year and earned a second-place award of \$2,000 for Harris Mountain Estate. She said she is now working with town officials in Granby to get the necessary permission to make her business dream a reality.

"I believe it will happen," she said. "It will just take time. I hope to be running by 2021."

Michaela Konig of Westfield received a Grinspoon Spirit Award, which is for revenue-generating businesses. Konig graduated from HCC in 2016 with her associate degree in Visual Art and is the owner of Bloom Aesthetics, a skincare business in East Longmeadow that she opened in December 2019.