

HOLYOKE

Mount Tom Academy celebrates grads

By DENNIS HOHENBERGER

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There was a time when graduation seemed unlikely for Autumn Fallon.

At Hampshire Regional High School, she was indifferent to learning and spoke little or not at all in class. “I was afraid to talk in front of people, and a lot of my teachers thought I was mute last year,” she said.

But a year later, after transferring to Mount Tom Academy, she finished at the top of her class, found a love of learning and bonded with her fellow graduates.

Fallon was one of seven new graduates honored at the academy’s commencement ceremony last month at Holyoke Community College’s Kittredge Center.

Barbara Cheney, the academy’s lead teacher, said the center — based at the community college — offers an alternative to a traditional school setting. Students hail from Hampshire and Hampden counties. “The goal of the program is to support them in earning credits toward a high school diploma,” she said.



The Mount Tom Academy Class of 2019, from left, Alyce Devenitch, Sydney Pettazoni, Chloe Roux, Autumn Fallon, Nathan Garcia, David Pantoja and Aisha Sajjad.

The academy also teams up with HCC for a dual-enrollment program that lets students earn college credits along the way. Many of the academy’s students continue at HCC after graduation.

The students meet in a modern-day version of a one-room schoolhouse at HCC. The academy takes an interactive and personal approach to learning, which includes online coursework.

“The approach is extremely effective. Students who have been previously checked out of school, unmotivated, discover their passions in

life and strengths, and also their challenges,” Cheney said. “They have the time, space and support to work on them.”

Fallon said she stepped “out of her shell” at the academy and found her voice. Before the ceremony, the graduates had to present a final project in front of the guests. She spoke about her struggles and how she overcame them.

“I like how I went from not caring about school to caring about school and wanting to do good,” Fallon said. She’s thinking about attending HCC.

At Hampshire Regional, she planned to drop out once she turned 18. She failed all her classes in her junior year.

Fortunately, Fallon spoke with a guidance counselor who recommended the academy. “Now I’m graduating at the top of my class,” she said. An hour later, she donned her cap and gown and marched into a room filled with applause.

Fallon received her diploma along with graduates Aisha Sajjad, Alyce Devenitch, Sydney Pettazoni, David Pantoja, Chloe Roux and Nathan Garcia.