

# Republican. PLUS

POWERING **MASS** LIVE



Kaishla Cabrera, a STEM Scholar and chemistry major from Holyoke, is on her way to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in September to study biochemistry. A recent graduate of Holyoke Community College, she graduated with honors and her associate degree. (HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PHOTO)

**HOLYOKE**

## Science 'pathway' to college

Kaishla Cabrera spent her early childhood in New York City. She was 5 years old on Sept. 11, 2001, and in preschool that morning.

She recalls the shock and chaos of the terror attacks on America and the smoke rising from lower Manhattan, visible from her home across the East River in Brooklyn's Sunset Park neighborhood.

After that tragic day, her parents decided to move the family north.

They settled in Holyoke. Cabrera's father found work as a contractor, and her mother became a tutor in the Holyoke Public Schools. She found joy in music, inspired by her dad, then a disc jockey and songwriter.

First she learned flute and clarinet,

and later added other instruments: violin, cello, guitar, bass, keyboards, drums. Shy and timid as a young child, she found music became a way to make new friends.

"I've always been able to read notes and I've always been able to play," she said.

But music wasn't the only subject she cared about. A curiosity about the world and the way things work tugged on her too.

"Growing up, I was deciding between the music way or taking the path through science, 'cause science was really my passion," she said. "Music is my passion too, but I couldn't see myself having a career in music. It wouldn't be as much of an enjoyment

for me as it is now."

When it came time to choose a pathway at Holyoke Community College, Cabrera chose the science way - a major in chemistry - and is glad she did. A STEM Scholarship from the National Science Foundation helped her pay for school, and she graduated with honors and her associate degree on May 27.

"Chemistry," she said, "is something that I can enjoy but I can also see myself doing careerwise."

She will continue along the science path in September at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she plans to study biochemistry.

"I'm really into understanding why

SEE **SCIENCE**, PAGE P3



## Science

CONTINUED FROM PAGE P1

things work a certain way," she said. "I want to know why the body processes something this way as opposed to that way. Why is an acid an acid and not a base? You know when you're growing up as a little kid, you're always asking, why is the sky blue? Why is the sun yellow? That's kind of my mentality approaching science."

As an honors student at Holyoke High School, Cabrera had other college options. The fourth of seven children and the first in her family to go to college, she picked HCC, she said, because it was close to home and also the most diverse. That diversity was reflected in her STEM seminars, special classes for HCC's NSF scholarship winners, who are all part of the STEM Scholars program.

"It's a really diverse group," she said. "We have engineering majors, chemistry majors, biology, computer science, and there is a range of different ages and ethnicities. Being that I'm a Hispanic, first-generation to college, female STEM major, having an education like this is really important."

Cabrera was happy to serve as a STEM mentor and was matched with one of her classmates, another chemistry major, also Hispanic.

"Sometimes you just need to talk to someone and get feedback from someone with your same background or your same mindset," she said before the end of the spring semester. "We're able to push each other to go farther."

Cabrera was also a member of the Phi Theta Kappa national honor society and involved with HCC's Green Key Honor Society. In May, she received a James F. Connors transfer scholarship from the HCC Foundation to apply toward her tuition at UMass.

In Holyoke, Cabrera has been active volunteer, helping with community cleanups, cookouts and festivals, and attending meetings of the South Holyoke Neighborhood Initiative, a group she hopes to get more involved with in the future. "They're trying to help kids find an outlet outside of just everyday life," she said.

At an early age, Cabrera found her outlet through music. For five years, beginning in eighth grade, she participated in the Holyoke Summer Strings, a four-week summer program that offers free violin and cello lessons to Holyoke children. She started there as a volunteer and finished her run as a paid intern. "It's just trying to get kids interested in music and taking the next step," she said.

Her next step is toward a bachelor's degree and closer to a career in forensic science.