



HCC Gateway to College coordinator Vivian Ostrowski and HCC student Mayerlies Diaz, of Westfield.

# 'I am now from hope'

## HCC student selected as national 'Dream Scholar'

By her own account, Holyoke Community College student Mayerlies Diaz was once the kind of hopeless teen who struggled in school and hated being there.

"I have been angry as long as I can remember ... behind from Day One, kept inside during recess to learn English, never being in school long enough to learn math ... no one wanting to help,

putting in no effort. I was the bum buried in the hoodie, smoking a lot of weed, trying to disappear."

She grew up poor, the daughter of a Spanish-speaking, single mother who was often sick and in and out of hospitals while raising two children. Her family moved a lot, sometimes living in shelters, and there were trips court in pursuit of protection orders against a family member.

"I am from the sorrow and confusion that comes from that kind of hurt. That's how I

felt for a long time. I assumed I would live in rage and depression and be behind, forever."

"But somehow, miraculously, I am now from hope. I'm from the miracle that happens when just a few key people actually see you, believe in you, push you and love you."

Diaz offered the comments above in a spoken word poem called "I Am From" that she delivered in February in Maryland at the annual conference of Achieving the

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## 'Hope'

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Dream, an organization that supports student success initiatives at community colleges across the U.S.

The 17-year-old Westfield resident was one of only eight students in the country selected to participate in the conference as 2020 Dream Scholars. In addition to that, she is poised to graduate next month from Westfield High School.

The key to her success, she says, was HCC's Gateway to College program, which she completed in January 2020 with a GPA of 4.0. Gateway is an alternative high school program in which students take college classes and earn credits toward both their high school diplomas and a college degree. Since 2019, HCC's Gateway to College program has been part of the Achieving the Dream network.

"Nothing about my life led me toward college — yet I have been successful there," Diaz wrote in another speech she prepared for the conference about her experiences so far at HCC. "Gateway to College transformed how I think about school and my future."

Diaz was the first-ever Dream Scholar from one of Achieving the Dream's Gateway to College programs. The Dream Scholars initiative is designed to help community college students develop their leadership, critical thinking and networking skills. They share their personal stories during plenary sessions at the conference, participate in panel discussions, and receive coaching before, during and after the conference, which was attended by about 2,500 people.

"I am so proud of Mayerlies," said HCC Gateway to College coordinator Vivian Ostrowski, who accompanied Diaz to the conference along with Diaz's mother, Mari-

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Mayerlies Diaz

bel Perez, and aunt, Raquel Avila. "From the moment we spoke about the application process and the experience, she rose to the occasion with courage, creativity, seriousness, humor, and an incredible openness to the kind of transformative learning that comes from a huge opportunity like this. She was the youngest person at the entire conference, and one of just a handful of Dream scholars who were always in the spotlight."

For Ostrowski, the highlight of the conference was the session where Diaz read her "I Am From" poem.

"It was incredibly powerful," she said. "The room leaned in for every word, then just wept when Mayerlies and her mom embraced at the end."

Diaz plans to continue her college journey at HCC in September to major either in human services or criminal justice.

"High school wasn't for me, but college is for me," Diaz said. "I want a degree so I can get the kind of job where I can help other people see their lives differently, to find their own confidence and power. ... I want to be that person for the next kid in a hoodie trying to disappear."