

# Diane Grunwald: Head of the Class

HOLYOKE – Diane Grunwald sat in the back and kept quiet, withholding her questions until class was done.

“I was pretty shy,” she says. “I’m usually not. It’s just you’re thrown into a new place and you get pretty shy.”

She was not just new to Holyoke Community College. She had moved all the way from Roy, Utah, to be here, and was living alone in a studio apartment in Chicopee, commuting to campus by bus. She didn’t know anyone.

Ileana Vasu, her math professor, noticed, and she did not put up with her silence for long.

“If you’re confused” says Grunwald, “she’ll actually pick you out and say, ‘what are you confused about?’ She’ll see it in your eyes and try to help you out during class.”

Vasu, though, saw more than confusion. Eventually, the student was the one helping out the teacher.

A math major and recipient of a National Science Foundation STEM scholarship, Grunwald was part of the STEM Scholars program at HCC. Vasu, the program coordinator, quickly enlisted Grunwald as a tutor and lab tech for HCC’s STEM Starter Academy and STEM Starter classes during the summer, fall and spring semesters, and for HCC’s STEM Expeditions program at Dean Technical High School in Holyoke.

She also worked as a tutor in Vasu’s Linear Algebra and Calculus II courses, facilitating study groups and helping to grade homework. This was on top of her own classes in higher math, STEM, and general studies, in which she excelled.

“She is one of the brightest women I have ever seen,” says Vasu, who has been teaching at HCC for nearly 20 years.

Grunwald, 20, completed her degree requirements in just three semesters, finishing in December with a per-

fect G.P.A. of 4.0. She is one of HCC’s valedictorians for Commencement 2017. She received her associate’s degree on May 27, and she has already completed



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her first semester at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she is majoring in math with a concentration in actuarial science.

Grunwald actually found her way to HCC through UMass. She had taken a year off after high school to work as a tutor at Mathnasium, a math learning center near her Utah home. She had considered studying civil engineering to combine her interest in math and physics. During that gap year, though, she decided to concentrate on math and then pursue actuarial science, a field that uses math and statistics to assess risk, typically in financial industries.

Online she learned that UMass had a highly ranked actuarial science program and through the state’s MassTransfer program she could easily transition there from HCC. Plus, HCC offered National Science Foundation scholarships of up to \$10,000 a year to science, technology, engineering and math majors. She got one.

Being a member of the STEM Scholars program turned out to be her favorite part of HCC.

“You meet a lot of people from a lot of different fields in STEM,” she says. “It was fun talking to people from different majors and learning why they’re interested in them.”

She was one of the few math majors in the STEM program, and in her higher-level math courses, she was often the only woman or African American. “She was tutoring everyone,” says Vasu.

“I notice a lot of people struggle with math,” says Grunwald, “and they seem to have negative feelings about it. Some of them have had bad experiences. I like to help people understand that math can be fun, and it’s not actually just boring computations all the time.”

Grunwald said that relocating from Utah was tough, but she is used to moving around. Her father served in the U.S. Army and her mother was in the reserves. She was born in Queens, N.Y., and has lived in military communities in New York City, Wisconsin, upstate New York, Washington State, and South Korea.

She’ll soon be moving again, from Chicopee to Sunderland, where she’ll be closer to UMass.

During her spring semester there, she took three classes: Introduction to Basic Math Concepts, Statistics I and Computer Science, which she is now thinking of adding as a minor.

She’s off to a good start. Her GPA after one semester: 4.0.



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October 7, 2017