

Isabelle Griffin: College Connections

HOLYOKE — There's no shame in admitting that HCC is not everyone's first choice for college.

It was not Isabelle Griffin's first choice. As an honors student and senior at Belchertown High School, she had a lot of options, and Mount Holyoke College was at the top of her list.

However, things did not pan out as she had hoped. "I got waitlisted," she said. "I was like, I don't know what to do. I got accepted to other colleges, but I really wanted to go to Mount Holyoke."

An aunt offered some advice.

"She said, 'HCC has great connections with Mount Holyoke College,' and I had a friend who went to HCC, Emily, and she's like, yea, you should go to HCC."

And so she did.

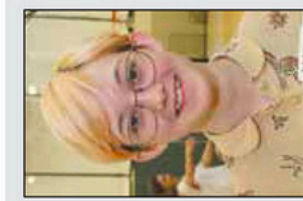
Two years later, on Sat., May 27, the 19-year-old Griffin will receive her associate degree in computer information systems from Holyoke Community College. She is graduating with high honors, a couple of academic awards, including one for Excellence in Computing, and a transfer scholarship from the HCC Foundation.

Here's the best part. In September, she'll be going to Mount Holyoke College as a transfer student to study computer science.

While she is certainly looking forward to that, reflecting on her time at HCC brought tears to her eyes.

"It's nothing bad," she explained. "I'm not a super outgoing person. It's just ... I really liked it here. I liked being able to meet all the people I met."

One of the first people she met was Irma Medina, coordinator of HCC's Pathways Program. An Admissions counselor walked her down to Medina's



Profiles of Excellence

Isabelle Griffin

Age: 19

Resides in: Belchertown

Major:
Computer Information Systems

Heading to:
Mount Holyoke College

Language, completing three levels. She joined the ASL Club and served as treasurer. She joined the Creative Writing Club, participated in flash fiction contests, became a literary editor for Pulp City, HCC's literary and visual arts journal, and wrote short stories.

"Irma has been a great guiding hand and supporter," Griffin said. "She helped me stay on track so that I could finish my associate degree in two years and transfer. Even when I was doubtful I would get into Mount Holyoke, she always believed in me."

Since 2006, 102 HCC students in the Pathways Program have gone on to attend Mount Holyoke College. Most of them were and are liberal arts majors. Isabelle Griffin is only one to major in computer programming.

She's been interested in that subject since she was a pre-teen participating in Gaia, an online virtual world where visitors create avatars and participate in collective story-telling. That's where she took her fledgling steps writing computer code.

Since then she's learned Java, C++, and Python. Her favorite part of programming, she says, is watching the code come to life, seeing how those back-end efforts are represented on the computer screen, and that the applications perform correctly.

"I always did like the visual aspect of coding," she said, "and when I have a problem and I'm trying to do something specific. I've always been the type of person that once I want to do something I want to do it the way I originally thought."

That applies as much to programming as to her intent to attend Mount Holyoke.

"It's an all women's college, and I am in a male-dominated field," she said, "and I always wanted to be in that environment."

Now she will, and HCC helped get her there.

office after a campus tour. "He said, 'You want to go to Mount Holyoke? Talk to Irma,'" she recalled.

Griffin's aunt was right about HCC. The college does have great connections to Mount Holyoke, and they run right through Medina's office. Through Pathways, she helps promising HCC students prepare for transfer to some of the most competitive liberal arts colleges in the country, such as Smith, Amherst, and Mount Holyoke. She attended HCC herself and is also a graduate of Mount Holyoke College.

Medina remembers that first meeting.

"We talked about the importance of academics as well as being well-rounded and part of the campus community, and to be involved," Medina said. "She was calm and open-minded. She just listened mostly. Isabelle liked what she heard."

She chose Medina for her adviser and followed her advice. She took liberal arts courses to complement those in her computer programming major, in particular honor's level classes that stressed critical thinking and analysis.

For a language, she chose American Sign