

THE CONNECTION

SPRING 2025

ALSO INSIDE

Brandon Towle '19 is founder of Camp Words Unspoken, New England's first sleepaway camp for stuttering youth

Community engagement inspires 'Helping Hands' scholarship

A Family Affair

New HCC program boosts support for adult learners, student parents

“ While I was met with more animosity than benevolence in this life, it was, and is, those small acts of kindness that have contributed to my resilience and strength.”

— HCC scholarship recipient Maddy Gray



Your gift to HCC is the act of kindness that can make all the difference, helping students like Maddy believe in themselves rather than feeling their degree will always be out of reach.

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President George Timmons

Dear Alumni and Friends,

As I reflect on the stories featured in this issue of *The Connection*, I am struck by a common thread that weaves through each one: passion. The spark that ignites when a student discovers their calling is truly one of the most rewarding aspects of our work at Holyoke Community College.

In these pages, you'll meet alums like Brandon Towle '19, who found his path through meaningful connections with our dedicated faculty. These relationships — forged in classrooms, labs, and hallways across our campus — have transformed lives and launched remarkable journeys. Our graduates are making significant contributions in countless fields and professions, and what unites them is that it all began right here, where someone recognized their potential and helped them cultivate it.

While we celebrate these success stories, we remain focused on innovation and growth. We continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of our students and community. New programs like eSports, enhanced support services like the Marieb Adult Learner Success Center, and expanded opportunities

for experiential learning are just a few ways we're building on our legacy of excellence. As you turn these pages, you will discover how we are honoring our traditions while boldly stepping into the future.

Each of us has a story about how Holyoke Community College has touched our lives. For some, it provided essential skills for a career change. For others, it offered a supportive environment to explore our passions. For many, it served as the crucial first step toward dreams that once seemed unattainable.

As you read this issue, I invite you to consider your own connection to HCC and how you might help create similar opportunities for today's students. Whether through mentorship, financial support, or simply sharing your story, you can help ensure that our college continues to be a launchpad for dreams and aspirations for generations to come.

With gratitude,,

George Timmons, Ph.D.
President

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**Vice President of
Institutional Advancement**
Amanda Sbriscia, Ed.D.

**Director of Marketing
and Strategic Communications**
Jane Johnson Vottero

Editor-in-Chief
Chris Yurko

Layout and Design
John Devanski, Guy With Glasses

Contributing Writer
Doug Scanlon

Photography
Chris Yurko, Chris Evans

Class Notes/Change of Address:
Please contact the Alumni Office
413.552.2253 or alumni@hcc.edu.

Alumni Council Officers

President
Trudy Monson '97

Vice President
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**HOLYOKE
COMMUNITY
COLLEGE**

report

THE CONNECTION

SPRING 2025



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On the cover: Raisa Kvashchanka and her son Joseph visit the new HCC Parent Learning Center.





Paul Rogers '81, '13

“My first time here, I studied communications and mass media. I had a great group of teachers who sorted out my qualities and told me what I needed to work on.

I was 28 when I started. I had just been laid off from a job as a third shift worker at a textile mill.

The college had a big impact on me in a lot of ways. As a work-study student, I had a campus job in the animal science lab for a year and a half. I worked in the drama department as a box office manager. I was on Student Senate. The doors at HCC were wide open, and I had enough common sense to realize that there was this quar-

ter million-dollar radio station here I had access to for free, and I took full advantage of it.

One day, Herb Michaels, my communications teacher, brought a tape into class and made everybody listen to the recording. We concluded that this was the worst DJ on the planet. Even I said, “I don’t know who that guy is, but he’s bad.” At the end of class, Mr. Michaels pulled me aside and said, “Paul, that’s you.” I was shocked. It was a wake-up call.

He told me to go back to the station and read the news from the Associated Press teletype exactly as it was written, word for word. No uhs and ums. No hesitations between words. I practiced every single day for several months, and I was able to get my diction up, and the quality of my show improved.

When I graduated, he sat me down and said, “Paul, you’re not the best writer in the world, and you’re not the best DJ in the world, but you have a fantastic personality. Why don’t you get into advertising? You would make a great salesman.” I immediately got a job at a local newspaper, selling ads. Within three years, I was the owner and publisher of the *Chicopee Herald*.

Before HCC, I had worked a lot of entry level jobs, and I was not necessarily thinking

of being successful or career minded. I had a desire, but I had personal limitations that told me, this is the most you’re going to get.

My family was very poor. We moved a lot. I went to 11 different schools before I graduated high school in Chicopee. I never had an opportunity to develop relationships with teachers like I did at HCC. I’ve had tremendous success from the things I learned here and the support I received. I never felt unwelcome. I never felt insecure. I never felt like I couldn’t do it, and when I did not put my best foot forward, I was always treated with respect.

Later I suffered some health problems and was out of work for 20 years. In 2008, I went back to work part time and decided to get another degree. My first thought was to come back to HCC. In 2013, when I was 60, I got my second associate degree, this one in addiction studies. I transferred to the University of Massachusetts, graduated with a bachelor’s degree in applied mental health and was hired as a treatment counselor for Behavioral Health Network. I got laid off after COVID hit and retired.

I have two sons and a daughter with Jean, my wife of 49 years. My children all came here as students, along with a couple of nieces and nephews. We have a long connection to HCC.

In 2020, I joined the Alumni Council. Two years ago, I started doing my weekly radio show, “Coffee Hour with Radio Paul.” I also attend weekly meetings of the HCC Radio Club. I wanted to show my appreciation, to reciprocate. There are things I’ve learned that you can’t put in a study guide. It’s worth it to me to stay connected to the place that helped me get where I got.” 🟢

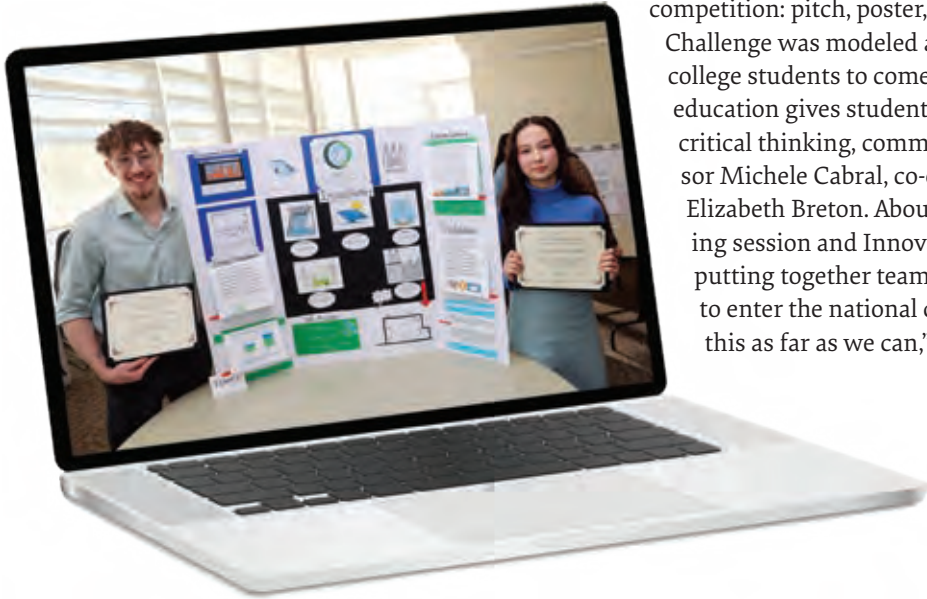
Paul Rogers hosts a weekly radio show on the HCC college radio station, WCCH 103.5 FM, Wednesdays from 9 to 10 a.m. My HCC Story narratives are adapted from interviews with HCC alumni conducted by Connection editor Chris Yurko.

« “Radio Paul” Rogers, in the WCCH studio



Challenge Accepted

HCC students **Jacob Bissonnette** and **Anjou Edwards** took home the top prize at the first-ever HCC Innovation Challenge on Saturday, Dec. 7, for Green Computer Processing, their idea for a net-zero-energy computer processing system. A panel of four outside, independent judges declared their team the “Ultimate Achiever,” recognizing the pair for excellence in all aspects of the competition: pitch, poster, feasibility, and overall creativity. The HCC Innovation Challenge was modeled after a national competition that encourages community college students to come up with solutions to real-world problems. “Innovation education gives students the ability to showcase their coursework as they apply critical thinking, communication and presentation skills,” said accounting professor Michele Cabral, co-organizer of the Innovation Challenge with BSTEM dean Elizabeth Breton. About two dozen students attended a STEM Week brainstorming session and Innovation Challenge kickoff event in October with about half putting together teams for the HCC competition. Edwards and Bissonnette plan to enter the national challenge this spring. “With the right guidance, we’ll take this as far as we can,” said Bissonnette.



« Innovation Challenge Ultimate Achievers
Jacob Bissonnette and Anjou Edwards

Award-Winning Work

Two stories about HCC alumni earned awards for the HCC office of Marketing and Communications at the Fall 2024 District 1 conference of the National Council for Marketing & Public Relations. HCC won the top two awards in the category of Excellence in Writing – Short Form (800 words or less words). Taking gold: “Name That Tune,” a story about HCC math major **Tom Dulac '23**, who won a national award for musical composition he submitted under the pseudonym “Zac Dune.” Taking silver: “Ready

to Go,” a Commencement feature about **Tatiana McKnight '23**, who suffered from agoraphobia during her high school years and transferred to Mount Holyoke College after graduating from HCC. Both stories were written by HCC Media Relations Manager and *Connection* Editor Chris Yurko. “Name That Tune” was published in the Alumni Out & About section of the Spring 2024 issue of *The Connection*, “Ready to Go” in the Spotlight section of the HCC website in July 2023.



⌘ Tatiana McKnight





Igniting Workforce Success

HCC received the Igniting Workforce Success Award from MassAbility for a cybersecurity training program it runs in partnership with the agency, formerly known as the Massa-

MassAbility

chusetts Rehabilitation Commission. Specifically, the award recognizes HCC for its CyberOps training program, a free,

nine-month remote program that trains MassAbility consumers to be cybersecurity analysts. MassAbility works with people with disabilities to empower their lives through counseling and career and employment programs. Kermit Dunkelberg, assistant vice president of adult basic education and workforce development, accepted the award on behalf of HCC last June. "We just completed our fourth year of our partnership,"



✦ Kermit Dunkelberg, HCC assistant vice president for adult basic education and workforce development, center, accepts the "Igniting Workforce Success" award from MassAbility Commissioner Toni Walsh, right. Also pictured: Salvador Pina, dean of workforce and business development at Roxbury Community College.

he said. "MassAbility brings as much to the table as we do in terms of innovation and attentiveness to student success." The pilot program, launched by HCC and MassRehab in 2020, was the first of its kind in Massachusetts. Since 2020, about 60

MassRehab clients have gone through the program, many emerging with paid internships that have led to full-time, benefitted positions as cybersecurity analysts.

FRESH SPACE FOR THRIVE

On Sept. 10, HCC celebrated the re-opening of the Thrive Center in a new location on the second floor of the Kittredge Center for Business and Workforce Development. Thrive (formerly known as the Thrive Student Resource Center) helps students address nonaca-

demic issues that often interfere with their studies, such as food and housing insecurity. The center also manages the HCC Food Pantry, which is right next door in a dedicated space more than four times the size of the old food pantry and just steps away from the HCC Campus Center and

cafeteria. "What I always tell folks is that our first impression is our first intervention, so the first impression we make with students is pretty critical," said Ben Ostiguy, coordinator of the Thrive Center and Food Pantry. "I think having a fresh space with updated equipment and designs sends the right message to the students. It shows the campus cares, that this is a priority, and that we are prepared to help them in meaningful ways."



« Naylani Collazo (student), Gary Rome (donor and member of HCC Foundation Board of Directors), President George Timmons, Alicia Beaton '25 (student), Amanda Sbriscia (vice president of institutional advancement), and Ben Ostiguy (Thrive Center coordinator)

Itsy Bitsy Expansion

The Itsy Bitsy franchise continues to expand at Holyoke Community College as students in Professor Sheryl Civjan's Psychology of Women class have again taken up the "Itsy Bitsy" theme for a campus-based community service project. In 2023, Civjan's students created the Itsy Bitsy Closet, transforming a storage room



next to the college's Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Center into a family-friendly resource room full of donated books, clothes, and other children's items — all free to HCC student-parents. Last semester, they put together five Itsy

Bitsy Play Stations — containers of children's books, games, small toys, art supplies, and other items — that student parents can access to occupy their children when visiting campus offices, including Financial Aid, Admissions, Advising, English as a Second Language, and the HCC Library. "Some college offices can be difficult to go to for appointments when you have kids," said Civjan. "These boxes will give kids something to do while their parents are waiting." The idea for using "Itsy Bitsy" as the title for early childhood programs



⌘ (From left) Students Lauren Williams, Elle Platanitis, Sarah Schrijn, and Victoria Guilmette hold a few of the items selected for an Itsy Bitsy Play Station in the HCC Advising Center.

at HCC started in 2020 during the pandemic, when HCC educators created a series of video interviews for early education students and professionals (the Itsy Bitsy Zoomcast). The theme grew into a title for a new suite of early education classrooms modeled after pre-school and kindergarten facilities (the Itsy Bitsy Learning Lab). The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch opened in 2022, followed last year by the Itsy Bitsy Closet, and this year by the Itsy Bitsy Play Stations.

STAR POWER

The topic could not have been larger — the universe — but it was one the presenter was uniquely qualified to discuss. On Oct. 9, W. Lowell Putnam visited HCC to

talk about the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, the oldest private astronomical research center in the

United States. The observatory was founded in 1894 by Putnam's great-grand uncle, Percival Lowell. Putnam, a Springfield native and the observatory's sole trustee,

shared images of past discoveries, which include the discovery of Pluto and the first proof of the expanding universe. "I was entranced," said Jalen Cortes, an HCC physics major who wants to be an astronomer. "I have a telescope myself, and am still very much inexperienced. However, even with their technology, it still takes an incredible amount of time and patience to look at the night sky. Hearing about it just made me feel a sense of pride and kinship." Putnam, a frequent HCC donor, has strong ties to the college, with his family having established the Roger and Caroline Putnam Scholarship Fund in memory of his grandparents. The Putnam scholarship is for transfer students who continue their educations beyond HCC. "Once we start supporting you," he said, "we will continue to support you — as far as you go."



« HCC physics major Jalen Cortes talks to presenter W. Lowell Putnam.

Talking

the

TALK



✧ HCC student Joe Black speaks at the national Stavros conference in October.

For the second year in a row, HCC sent two students to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Ithaca National Student Dialogue, an annual conference held at the University of Delaware's Joseph R. Biden, Jr. School of Public Policy and Administration. The event brings college students together from across the country to engage in discussions that promote civil discourse, civic engagement, and democratic principles. Seventy-six students from 32 colleges in the United States participated in the 2024 conference. HCC was the only community college in the country invited. **Joe Black** and **Jessicalee Heredia** were selected to represent HCC at the fourth annual conference in October, alongside other undergraduates from colleges and universities ranging from Harvard to Stanford. Based on their experiences, Black, Heredia, and 2023 conference participant Sunrise Iaim Sanchez, created CIVIC – “Connecting and Inspiring Vital Innovators through Collaboration” – a campus forum to get more student involved in public discourse. “There is a certain skillset that’s required to have a constructive dialogue,” said Black. “But once you learn the skills, it’s a lot easier for ideas to flourish.”

The logo consists of a blue rectangular box containing the white text "ISN / SNF".

ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ ΝΙΑΡΧΟΣ
STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION

HCC adding eSPORTS

HCC is adding a new athletics team to its roster of intercollegiate sports. Along with soccer, cross country, golf, volleyball, basketball, track and field, and baseball, HCC will soon be offering eSports. In eSports – short for electronic sports – participants play online video games against individuals or other teams. Some of the more common collegiate-level eSports are Overwatch (a multiplayer, first-person shooter game), League of Legends (an arena-style battle game), and Rocket League (a vehicular soccer game). According to HCC Athletics Director Tom Stewart, HCC is just the fourth community college in Massachusetts to create an eSports team, joining Mass Bay, Northern Essex, and Bunker Hill community colleges. The HCC team will be co-ed. “We’re the only community college west of Worcester that has it,” he said. Last summer, a former classroom on the second floor of the Bartley Center for Athletics and Recreation was converted into an eSports center and outfitted with 10 high performance computer stations designed specifically for eSports competition. Competition is expected to start this spring. 🟢

» HCC Athletics Director Tom Stewart sits at a gaming station in the new eSports room at the Bartley Center.





⌘ HCC student Helen Gorovenko and her son Alex visit the Parent Learning Center.

A Family Affair

New HCC program boosts support for adult learners, student parents

By CHRIS YURKO

Seven years ago, Elizabeth Busker '21 started college classes at HCC. She was 32 years old, a Marine Corps veteran, and a single mom to a three-year-old daughter — the textbook definition of an “adult learner” (those of nontraditional college age).

Despite the inherent challenges of being an older student and a parent, she found great success at HCC, graduating with high honors, an associate degree in psychology, and a Frances Perkins Scholarship to Mount Holyoke College.

Even so, during her time at HCC, she used her position as Student Senate president to advocate for more support services for student parents.

“That became my personal mission,” she said.

Busker returned to HCC in December to attend the grand opening celebration of the Marieb Adult Learner Success Center and Parent Learning Center — support services designed for adult learners and student parents.



⌘ Elizabeth Busker '21 and her former HCC advisor Irma Medina attend the grand opening of the Marieb Adult Learner Success Center and Parent Learning Center.

Even though she will not personally benefit from these programs, Busker '21, now a graduate student at the Smith College School of Social Work, thought it was important to show up.

That day, she shared a photo of her daughter, Vivian, now 10, and the memories came flooding back. In particular, Busker recalled the first time Vivian tagged along with her to classes because her pre-school was closed, making for some uncomfortable and awkward moments.

“On a typical day, most student parents experience this disconnect,” she said.

After a few speeches and a ribbon-cutting ceremony, Busker stood amid the crowd in the Parent Learning Center — a combination study space and children’s playroom — and cried.

“It’s just so nice to be in this space,” she said, choking out the words. “It didn’t happen on my watch, but it is happening now. It’s really a space for future selves,” she added, looking at the photo of her daughter. “Today, we’re seeing a new reality.”

• • • • •

That new reality was more than five years in the making.

Before her death in December 2018, Elaine Marieb '80, a longtime HCC biology professor and acclaimed textbook author, designated a legacy gift to the HCC Foundation for \$1 million, the money earmarked for HCC programs that support nontraditional age students.

Six years later, the large ceremonial check from the Elaine Nicpon Marieb Foundation remains on the windowsill in the Marieb Center, home base for the Marieb Adult Learner Success Center program and the office of coordinator Amy Woody, herself an HCC alum.

“It’s our way of honoring Elaine Marieb and her generosity,” said Woody '09. “She made all of this possible.”

Continued on next page



A FAMILY AFFAIR *Continued from previous page*

✧ Amy Woody '09, coordinator of the Marieb Adult Learner Success Center, right, greets HCC student Shawna Schuster and her son, Soren, in the Parent Learning Center.

To be clear, the Marieb Center itself, a study area, lounge, and office space located in Frost 264, is not a new facility. It was established in 2008 as the Elaine Nicpon Marieb New Pathways Center through a previous bequest from Elaine Marieb. Its purpose, according to a hallway plaque: to assist “non-traditional women students on their path to educational success.”

For years, the Marieb Center served two HCC programs that supported adult (mostly women) learners: Pathways, a transfer program, and New Directions, (later called New Directions for Adult Learners). In 2023, Pathways, guided since its inception by coordinator and HCC alum Irma Medina '97, was relocated to the second floor of the Donahue Building,

where it is part of HCC's newly reimagined Integrative Learning Programs (Honors, Community Based Learning, Learning Communities, Academic Internships, and Pathways) — all now overseen by Medina in a new role as director.

“Elaine Marieb and her generosity... made all of this possible.”

— Amy Woody '09

Meanwhile, the functions and services previously administered by New Directions have been assumed by the Marieb Adult Learner Success Center program (Marieb ALSC), which provides academic advising, career planning services, and other supports to students 24 and older and to student parents of any age.

The Marieb ALSC program debuted with a soft launch in early 2024.

“New Directions was relatively small, with only one academic advisor running the whole program,” said Woody. “Now we have three full-time staff members, and we’ve been able to scale up significantly.”

In its first year, Woody said, the Marieb ALSC more than doubled the previous program's enrollment from 80 to 200, with close to 800 scheduled appointments. Those numbers are expected to increase with the hiring of the third staff member late last fall, Danielle Clough, as academic counselor, joining Woody and Momina Sims, the career planning and placement coordinator.

“With three full-time staff, we’ll be able to serve many more students,” Woody said.

The timing could not have been better.

After years of enrollment declines, including pandemic-related drops, overall college enrollment has been on an upswing for the past two years due in part to the state's new free community college programs, MassReconnect (launched in fall 2023 for state residents 25 and older without an associate degree) and MassEducate (new in fall 2024 for all state residents without a bachelor's degree).

» Olga Klykova and her son Timothy take a play break in the Parent Learning Center between her HCC classes.

"We started to see an influx of older students just as MassReconnect was launching," Woody said.

This comes on top of a general increase in the adult learner student population at HCC. Over the past five years, the percentage of HCC students in the 24 and older bracket has risen from 35 percent to 42. In fall 2014, the average age of an HCC student was 21. Today it is 25.



Woody understands the lives of adult learners and student parents better than most because she was both. Her son, Eric, was a toddler when she was a student at HCC. She went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees from Westfield State. Eric, now in high school, recently completed his first class at HCC as a dual enrollment student.

"I think watching me as an adult learner made a big impact on how he approaches education," Woody said. "Here, we really believe that education is a family affair, so we're trying to create spaces and programming that bring the whole family in, not just the student."

For adult learners, especially those with young children, the biggest issue Woody sees — and remembers — is a sense of being overwhelmed by how much they have to do. In addition to managing schoolwork and children, students — of all ages — are often juggling jobs as well.

"They're really trying to figure out a class schedule that makes the most sense," said Woody. "We work with them on that."

Some haven't been in a classroom in decades, have never taken a class online and don't understand new technology or how to access online resources that are critical to their coursework.

"Classes are taught differently today," she said, "so students not only need to learn the course content but also rebuild their educational skills."

The Marieb ALSC offers what Woody calls "holistic advising," a term that describes counseling and support services that address issues not limited to academics.

Continued on next page



✧ Elaine Marieb '80 talks to a student in the Marieb Center during a visit in 2009.

The Marieb Effect

The grand opening celebration for the new Marieb Adult Learner Success Center and Parent Learning Center at HCC began with the reading of a quote from the late Elaine Marieb '80, whose \$1 million posthumous donation made both centers possible:

Education lifts people up into a new life stage and enhances their quality of life. I can't tell you how much my degrees added to my life — beyond gaining knowledge, they gave me the self-confidence that enabled me to say, yes, I can do that.

Marieb had been an adult learner herself, starting college in 1960 as a married mother with two young children. She earned a bachelor's degree from Westfield State at 28, later adding a master's degree from Mount Holyoke College, a Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts, and a nursing degree from HCC, where she taught biology for 24 years before becoming a world-renowned, best-selling author of anatomy and physiology textbooks. She died in December 2018.

"Elaine believed in the power of adult learners and student parents to overcome the unique challenges and barriers they face," said Anne Morales Medina '13, HCC associate director of recruitment and enrollment management, who oversees the Marieb program.

During her lifetime, Marieb donated more than \$1.5 million to HCC, much of it to support adult learners, especially women. The \$1 million posthumous donation was also earmarked for adult learners.

"This is a major moment for us as an institution," President George Timmons said during the Dec. 11 celebration. "Every student who walks through these doors and is successful is a testament to her legacy and commitment." 🟢



✧ Meeting weekly with Marieb coordinator Amy Woody “gives me motivation to keep going,” says student Ralph Mariani, 60.

✧ Marieb Adult Learner Success Center staffers, Momina Sims, Amy Woody, Anne Morales Medina, Danielle Clough, and HCC alum Elizabeth Busker '21 hold a ceremonial \$1 million check from Elaine Marieb '80.

“It’s not just about, can you turn in your work on time, but how do you manage that with your entire life — your kids, your family, your cooking, your cleaning and all of it,” said Woody. “We try to do programming that really recognizes the adult learner as an entire person, not just a student.”

For Ralph Mariani, the hardest parts of being an older student are time management and technology. Mariani, 60, returned to college a few years ago to complete his prerequisite classes before applying to nursing school. After years as a railroad conductor, the former U.S. Army medic now works as a nursing assistant at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Northampton.

“I always wanted to go back to school,” he said. “I never had the chance before. I had family, two kids, and I was working.”

He meets with Woody at least once a week.

“Sometimes when I come to her, I say I want to quit,” said Mariani. “But she says, don’t quit. Just keep going. She gives me motivation to keep going. I get a recharge.”

Beyond individual advising sessions and tech support, the Marieb ALSC offers a wide variety of workshops that address the most common challenges experienced by older students and parents: tips for success, time management, test anxiety,





✧ Kayla Dagenais and her son Amari sit at the art table in the Parent Learning Center.

task paralysis, career change — “subjects that help students build study and life skills that will help them be successful,” said Woody.

“We want students to feel comfortable coming to us no matter what issue they’re having. We are just trying to do everything we can do make it easier for them.”

— Amy Woody '09

Last fall, the Marieb ALSC co-sponsored its first family story night during Hispanic Heritage Month, in conjunction with El Centro (HCC’s support program for Latinx students), with President George Timmons reading Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Among other new programming, Woody introduced a monthly student-parent support group.

“We want students to feel comfortable coming to us no matter what issue they’re having,” said Woody. “We are just trying to do everything we can do make it easier for them.”



This leads back to The Parent Learning Center, a centerpiece of the Marieb ALSC program.

While the Marieb Center (Frost 264) is meant to be a quiet space, where adult learners can study, relax, grab a free snack, or meet privately with Woody, the Parent Learning Center (PLC), just down the hallway in Frost 269, is not meant to be a quiet area at all. It’s a place where parents can study while their children play close by under their supervision.

In part, the brightly decorated room looks like a preschool. There is an art table and a play corner filled with blocks, games, puzzles, toys, picture books, a beanbag chair, and collapsible tunnel. In another area, a pack and play and a changing table. And for students, a wall of study carrels, a conference table, a sofa, armchair, and a specially designed desk with an attached playpen.

“The Parent Learning Center is a workspace where students can bring their laptops, sit and work on group projects, or just kick back and relax for a while,” said Anne Morales Medina '13, HCC associate director of recruitment and enrollment. “It’s a place where they can have their

Continued on page 24

Serving ‘Nontrads’ Since 1946

Since its creation in 1946, HCC has had a tradition of serving nontraditional age students. In its earliest days, as Holyoke Graduate School and then Holyoke Junior College, these “nontrads” were generally men returning from service in World War II, Korea, and later Vietnam. But specific programs to assist “adult learners” (older than traditional college age) began in earnest in the mid ‘70s with an influx of retirees, displaced workers, and women looking to change careers or to start one. Those included:


Displaced Homemakers Program, (mid-to-late ‘70s), a free 15-week program offering courses in typing, shorthand, business communications, and secretarial accounting

Women in Business Program (1979), offered services to women who wanted to pursue degrees in accounting and business administration

Women in Transition Program (1984), a continuation of the Women in Business Program with the addition of liberal arts

New Directions, formerly **Women in Transition**, which later became **New Directions for Adult Learners**, adding services for male students and veterans

Pathways (2006), a transfer program for adult learners and student parents

Marieb Adult Learner Success Center (2024), continues and expands the work of **New Directions** 





FREEDOM TO SPEAK

BRANDON TOWLE '19 IS THE FOUNDER OF NEW ENGLAND'S FIRST SLEEPAWAY CAMP FOR STUTTERING YOUTH

By CHRIS YURKO

Brandon Towle '19 rarely passes up an opportunity to talk, even if speech itself hasn't always been easy for him.

We first met in 2018 when he was in his last year at HCC. A business major, he introduced himself in an email. His purpose: to share news that he had started a nonprofit with the help of some of his HCC professors.

"I am a lifelong stutterer who has always been challenged by fluent speech," he wrote. "My mission is to help others that stutter just like myself. I would be very grateful if you would provide me with the opportunity to talk to you about my plans."

As a teenager, Towle had attended a summer sleepaway camp for stuttering youth in the Midwest. The camp combined speech therapy with the same kinds of recreational activities found at a typical summer camp. The experience had made a profound impact on Towle's speech and life.

Growing up in Westfield, Mass., he knew no such camp then existed in New England (few in fact in the entire country). He hoped that his, Camp Words Unspoken, would be the first.

"As stutterers, our words often go unspoken," he told me. "We want to say something, but we just can't, or we change the wording from what we really want to say or express. There were times when I wanted to say something, and I just couldn't do it."

By the time we got together, Towle and Camp Words Unspoken had already been written up in the *Springfield Republican* and the *Westfield News*. As the camp's founder, president, and, essentially, its only "employee," the responsibilities of marketing fell to him, and it's hard to imagine a better pitchman for the cause.

Although Camp Words Unspoken existed only on paper, Towle, then 22, had already set up a website. He had a logo, branded gear, and a board of directors. He was actively fundraising and working to secure a camp site, hire staff, and enlist speech and language pathologists throughout New England to help him spread the word. He was doing all this while working full time as a sales merchandiser for Coca-Cola in Connecticut and taking classes to complete his associate degree at HCC.

Camp Words Unspoken was initially scheduled to open in Goshen, Mass., in August 2019. I wrote a short item about Towle and the camp for the Spring 2019 issue of *The Connection*. Soon after, though, Towle told me the opening would be delayed a year. He needed more time to firm up the financing and business plan.

"As stutterers, our words often go unspoken. We want to say something, but we just can't, or we change the wording from what we really want to say or express."



✧ Brandon Towle '19, founder and executive director, at Camp Words Unspoken in August 2024.

Then, in March 2020, as we all remember, the world stalled. COVID-19 put Camp Words Unspoken on indefinite hold. Towle had doubts about whether it would ever open:

"I asked myself, is this really what I want to do? When you're starting a business, sometimes it works out and sometimes it fails. It was a dream, and sometimes dreams don't come true."

Continued on next page



⤴ Campers Milos, left, and Jonathan play Ping Pong outside their cabins at Camp Words Unspoken.



⤴ Towle reviews some administrative details with camp staff.

1 The chants begin before Towle has even committed to play.

“Bran-don! Bran-don! Bran-don!”

The cheers come from all directions, players on the field and those lined up behind the dugout fence. Everyone here knows who he is.

“Bran-don! Bran-don!”

Towle finally bows to the pressure and grabs a red plastic bat, smiling as he steps up to home plate. His younger brother, Nate, the camp’s recreation director, is on the mound, the Wiffle ball game already underway when Brandon arrived on the scene.

If there’s any sibling rivalry, it’s not apparent. No one strikes out at Camp Words Unspoken. Towle takes a few pitches, swings a few times — until he puts a ball into play. He runs out a grounder to reach first. A few batters later, he scores from third, thrusting his fists into the air after crossing home plate.

“Woohoo!”

As the camp’s executive director, Towle tries to attend every activity, but running them is his brother Nate’s responsibility.

“I’m more of a behind-the-scenes guy at camp,” he says. “And when camp is not in session, I’m the only guy.”

Soon, clipboard and walkie-talkie in hand, he hops back in a golf cart — the camp’s only one — and speeds off to check on the improv group meeting in the gymnasium.

After a two-year delay, Camp Words Unspoken finally opened in August 2022 and has run for one week every summer since on the grounds of Camp Winadu, a family-owned, 88-acre facility on Lake Onota in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

At the Camp Winadu entrance, a temporary sign staked awkwardly in the grass tells visitors they are in the right place: “Camp Words Unspoken, New England’s first overnight camp for youths and teens who stutter.”

Earlier in the day, Towle meets me there with the golf cart. For late August, it’s unseasonably cold, in the low 50s, and damp. Towle is wearing a gray and green Camp Words Unspoken-branded pullover — and shorts. He didn’t pack any long pants for the week.

“I feel bad for the kids,” he says. “Summer camp should be in the 80s.”

A nametag hanging from his neck identifies him: “Brandon. Founder & Director.” An add-on sticker elaborates: “Change Maker.” Another says, “It’s OK to stutter.”

Camp Words Unspoken lawn signs line the pathway leading to a row of rustic camp cabins:

“Welcome”

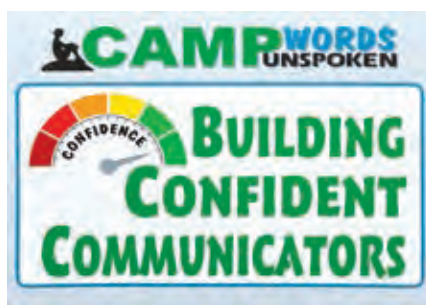
“Building Confident Communicators”

“Friendships, Memories Forever”

“You Can Change the World”

“Your Voice Matters”

“I view our camp as a place where campers can come, build friendships and self-confidence,” he says.



"Many of our campers come never having met another child who stutters. Here, they don't have to worry about the stigma, the fear of speaking. There's no isolation here, and they know they're not alone."



✧ Brandon Towle takes a turn at bat during a Wiffle ball game at Camp Words Unspoken.

According to statistics, only 1 percent of the general population stutters, but 5 percent of children. Often, stuttering worsens in adolescence because of hormones and the general anxiety of being a teenager.

"Many of our campers come never having met another child who stutters," says Towle. "Here, they don't have to worry about the stigma, the fear of speaking. There's no isolation here, and they know they're not alone."

In 2022, the camp's first year, Towle exceeded his goal of attracting 30 campers. For 2023, he expanded his marketing territory beyond the six New England states to include New York and New Jersey. Earlier in the summer of 2024, he also ran a four-day Camp Words Unspoken in Paisley, Florida.

"We're doing exciting work," he says. "Camps like these are needed."

This summer, 2024, there are 37 campers in Pittsfield ranging in age from 7 to 17, with 24 returning, 13 new, and 10 who had never before met another child who stutters.

"If Camp Words Unspoken was not around, these kids might feel isolated and alone forever," says Towle.

The progress he sees in new campers is dramatic, as he describes it. On day one, they're shy, heads down, unsure how to interact. At meals, they sit apart and eat in silence.

"By day two, it's the total opposite," he says. "They're running out of their cabins like they've been friends for years. They're sitting next to each other at meals. They're eating. They're talking. They're laughing."

2 Towle, now 28, first became aware of his own stuttering around the age of 5.

"I knew I had a problem speaking," he said. "I didn't know how severe it was."

In his hometown of Westfield, the public school system paired him with a speech pathologist. About the age of 7, he visited a specialist in Boston who fit him with hearing aids for a kind of speech therapy intended to help with auditory feedback. He hated it.

"I got picked on and bullied," he said. "I used to wear a Santa Claus hat just to cover it up, even in summer."

Continued on next page



⤴ Towle offers instructions to golfers during a fundraising tournament at Southampton Country Club in September 2024.



⤴ Towle, with campers Jonathan, left, and Milo.



⤴ Towle offers some guidance to a camper.



⤴ Towle, center, with his younger brother Nate, left, and twin brother Zach '18.

FREEDOM TO SPEAK *Continued from previous page*

He developed his own coping strategies, keeping quiet in class and guarding his social interactions.

Athletics became an invaluable outlet for self-expression and building self-confidence. He grew up playing sports with his twin brother Zack '18 (also an HCC alum and previous Camp Words Unspoken counselor), excelling in basketball, track, and cross country.

Even so, in middle school, he said, his stuttering was still quite severe. Transitioning to high school for freshman year did not help.

"I always avoided going to school on the first day," he said. "In every single class we would go around the room and have to introduce ourselves. As stutterers, sometimes the hardest part is saying your name."

Despite continuing therapy, his speech declined in his junior year. His mother suggested he try a summer camp for stuttering youth she'd found in the Midwest. Before that, he had known only one other student who stuttered.

"My fluency was very important to me, so I went to the camp and received great therapy and made great friendships and really had a blast," he said. "My senior year, I was really much more fluent and relaxed and really came out of my shell and engaged a lot more in school."

He liked it so much, he went for four years, two as a camper and two more as a counselor.

"I was invited back to be a role model and inspiration for the campers," he said, "and it was a great learning experience for me, not only as a person who stutters, but I was working with youths and teens to build their fluency as well. I began to think, wouldn't it be great to open a camp like this in New England?"

Towle says he learned a lot about business from summer jobs working at Shaker Farms Country Club in Westfield. He started out washing pots and pans there during high school before being bumped up to the banquet room, and later managing the golf cart barn.

"My thought coming out of high school was to come to HCC and learn about business, 'cause I've always wanted to own my own small business or work in a larger business and have a small business on the side," he said.

HCC appealed to him because it was close to home and the school and class sizes were smaller than those at the state universities he had also considered.

"I wanted my professors and my peers to know who I was," he said.

He found inspiration and guidance for his camp idea in his business classes, especially marketing, with Professor Kar-

en Hines, and business law, with Professor Kelly O'Connor.

"All my business classes helped me," he said. "I still hold onto all of my notes and books, and I look back at them."

O'Connor, a former lawyer, helped him fill out the paperwork to make Camp Words Unspoken an LLC (limited liability company) and a charitable nonprofit, 501(c)(3).

"Out of all my schooling, kindergarten through now, she has been my most influential teacher," Towle said.

As graduation approached, he never considered transferring to a four-year school. His goal was to keep working – and keep working on Camp Words Unspoken.

3 After consulting with his brother, Nate, Towle reviews the day's schedule. Due to weather, water balloon games have been postponed to the afternoon, though swimming is still on for 10:30 (the pool is heated), followed by a choice activity (Wiffle ball or improv), lake games after lunch, scavenger hunt after dinner, and a campfire to end the night, with lots of free time in between. In addition, campers have speech therapy groups every morning and afternoon. Each day is a full one, with a different mix of activities, including frisbee, mini golf, basketball, kayaking, volleyball, art, archery, and a lot more.

There are also special events. The previous night, they held an all-camp Family Feud match. (Towle notes that the TV game show host, comedian Steve Harvey, stuttered growing up, adding further that there is no cure for stuttering, only mitigation.)

Outside the cafeteria, Towle introduces me to a couple of campers I'd seen earlier playing Ping-Pong outside their cabins, Jonathan, from Mahwah, New Jersey, and Milos, from Stonington, Connecticut, both 11. They had met at Camp Words Unspoken the previous summer.

I ask them what they like about the camp. Clearly nervous at first talking to a stranger, they quickly warm up.

"It's fun," says Jonathan. "There's a lot to do."

"It's just a nice place overall," says Milos.

Then, without further prompting, they reveal more.

"I came back here to have just one week where I'm not worried about my talking," says Jonathan.

"Here," says Milos, "I can feel free to talk openly."



The previous day, Towle had hosted a guest speaker in the camp theater, Amanda Mammanna, a semifinalist from Season 17 of "America's Got Talent." During her initial TV appearance in 2022, Mammanna introduced herself to the audience and judges as a person who stutters. Towle had seen the original broadcast.

"It brought tears to my eyes," he says. "When she sings, she doesn't stutter."



✧ Second-year counselor Alex Picone, himself a stutterer, talks to a camper.

Mammanna readily accepted his invitation to visit the camp. She brought her guitar, told her story, and sang.

"The whole camp sang along with her," he says. "It was very touching to see someone who is such a good role model for our campers."

Having those role models is critical, says Towle. Of the eight cabin counselors, four are stutterers.

"Campers look up to the counselors who stutter and see that they can do anything in this world," he says.

One of them is Alex Picone, a 2022 graduate of Temple University, who now works as a paraplanner for a financial services company in Pennsylvania. This is his second summer at the camp.

"The camp is incredible," he says. "These kids are very brave. Seeing all the progress the campers have made in their own speech journeys is really inspiring."

Before Camp Words Unspoken, Picone had never attended an overnight camp of any kind – in his life.

Continued on page 25

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It started with candy. JoAnne Wrobel '02, an HCC clerk, would keep sweet treats in a bowl on her desk in the main lobby of the Kittredge Center. She quickly noticed how many students were dipping in and realized it wasn't an afternoon sugar rush they were after. These students arrived on campus hungry, and they left hungry. Wrobel was happy to supply them with snacks but wanted to offer something more nutritious.

After a series of conversations with her supervisor, Arvard Lingham, now HCC executive director of community education and corporate training, the two started operating a "grab and go" food cart of ready-to-eat items, such as cereal bars and instant oatmeal, among other things.

SILENT
HERO

By DOUG SCANLON

Eventually, the cart evolved into a full-fledged food pantry with shelves of canned goods and other non-perishables that Wrobel maintained in a corner carved out of the HCC Career Closet close to her desk on the second floor of Kittredge.

She did that until 2019, when, in dire need of more space, the food pantry was moved to the second floor of the Frost Building inside the Thrive Student Resource Center, which had itself evolved from an initial focus on financial matters to concentrate more on students' basic needs, such as housing and food insecurity.

For years, Wrobel remained a beloved figure at HCC, continuing to support students however she could. When she passed away in 2022 at 68, the campus community mourned the loss

of an alum and staff member who had touched countless lives through her compassion. And yet, the fall 2024 semester proved that her legacy remains very much alive at HCC.

First, HCC Registrar Allison Wrobel '00, JoAnne's daughter, pledged to raise \$15,000 toward a new scholarship through the HCC Foundation in memory of her mother. Once endowed, JoAnne's Helping Hands Scholarship will be awarded annually to an HCC student involved in community service or whose career or life plans include serving their community — values that her mother lived every day.

To aid in her fundraising efforts, Allison partnered with the Visual Art Department and Visual Art Club to promote their Empty Bowls fundraiser. In the past, proceeds from the event had gone to the Thrive Center and Food Pantry, but this year the students decided to direct their efforts toward supporting the new scholarship after learning about the role JoAnne played in addressing food insecurity on campus.

EMPTY BOWLS

Throughout the fall semester, the Visual Art Department held a series of ceramics workshops called "bowl throwdowns," where volunteers (students, faculty, and staff) stopped by the ceramics studio to shape, paint, and glaze about 250 bowls.. Tickets sold out in advance for the Dec. 11 event, and the line to get into the ceramics studio on the third floor of the Fine and Performing Arts Building stretched down the hallway long in advance of the 11 a.m. opening. For \$10, participants received their choice of a beautiful handmade bowl that they could also fill with any of a dozen or so hot soups and stews made by members of the HCC community.

Continued on next page



⌘ JoAnne Wrobel '02



Allison Ranger, a work-study student in the ceramics studio, was there. She had made more than a dozen bowls herself and was eager to see who would pick them.

"I love ceramics, and I liked the message," said Ranger. "I think it's good what we're doing, that we can put our art toward a good thing."

The benefit raised nearly \$3,000 for the scholarship.

"I hope this scholarship provides meaningful support to a student in need," said Allison Wrobel. "With the rising costs of living, many people are facing tough times, and some may hesitate to ask for the help they truly deserve."

A NEW FOOD PANTRY

The second reminder of JoAnne's legacy came in September 2024 when the college celebrated the expansion of the Thrive Center and Food Pantry and their relocation to the Kittredge Center, just a few steps from the same desk where JoAnne once sat in the building's main lobby and across the hall from the pantry's original location in the Career Closet.

The new food pantry is more than four times the size of the old one in Frost and much more robust, with black wire shelving units holding rows upon rows of non-perishable food, as well as school supplies, baby supplies, and personal care items. There is also a freezer for frozen food items and a refrigeration unit for drinks and perishable items.

The college's commitment to overcoming food insecurity has come a long way since Wrobel and Lingham first started managing the food cart nearly 10 years ago. Early on, Lingham noticed that students were more willing to ask for food, and took more generous helpings, when JoAnne was there.

"JoAnne just had that soft, soothing mom approach that made people more relaxed," he said. "And very quickly, I had said to Joanne, 'I'm going to let you run with this.' And she ran with it and that thing grew so much that it had to find a bigger space."

A NEW START

After a 40-year career working as a logistics manager, JoAnne came to HCC looking

for a change that would give her more flexibility to care for her ailing mother. She found a new home working in the Admissions office, then later in Kittredge with the Business and Community Services division.

JoAnne brought her number-crunching mind to her new position, keeping track of the food pantry's inventory and holding food drives to replenish supplies when they got low. She also brought to the job her enormous capacity for care and concern, which shone through in her work with the food pantry and the Career Closet, which provides business attire for students who have interviews for jobs or internships.

In her Holyoke neighborhood, JoAnne was known to the youth as "Nana." She was the person kids went to when they were looking for guidance or a friendly ear. She also volunteered for the Holyoke Giants, a summer collegiate baseball team, and kept the neighborhood kids busy in the park to ensure they had a safe place to hang out with friends and stay out of trouble for a few hours.

"She was a silent hero.

She never wanted any accolades for anything she'd done throughout her entire life."

— Allison Wrobel '00






⌘ Karen Jalbert, Joanne Wrobel's niece, left, and HCC student Allison Ranger check out some of the offerings before the Empty Bowls event.



⌘ President George Timmons welcomes guests to the new HCC food pantry just across the hall from the original food pantry started years ago by Joanne Wrobel.

JoAnne spent countless hours caring for her grandchildren, Madison and Nicolas Gutierrez — Allison's children — driving them to sporting events, inviting their friends over to hang out, serving as a Boy Scout den leader for Nicholas and the neighborhood kids, and generally doing everything to earn her reputation as “Nana.”

“She was a silent hero,” said Allison. “She never wanted any accolades for anything she’d done throughout her entire life. However, I wanted to celebrate my mom and keep her memory alive by creating this scholarship. I know she would be proud that our family is doing something positive in her memory by helping others.” 

If you would like to donate to Joanne's Helping Hands Scholarship or establish your own scholarship, contact the Institutional Advancement office at foundation@hcc.edu or 413.552.2182.

JOIN THE FROST SOCIETY

When Joanna Brown was hired at Holyoke Community College, she became the first full-time alumni relations director at any community college in the state. It was, she said, “the job I was meant for.” During more than 15 years, she spoke with countless alumni, listening to their stories, and finding ways to connect them back to the college. Alumni shared with her their diverse experiences at HCC, including stories of being the first in their family to attend college, coming from working-class backgrounds, and struggling with homelessness — some



Joanna Brown, retired director of alumni relations

even sleeping in their cars at night.

When Brown decided to make her estate plans, she liked knowing that a portion would go to HCC and support the next generation of students who will have their own stories to tell one day.

“I’m in the Frost Society, and I feel good knowing that,” she said. “Making your estate plans is not as hard as you think and not as expensive as you fear, and it will bring you great relief when you have it done.”

To learn more about becoming a member of the Frost Society, or if you have already named HCC in your estate plans, please contact John Sieracki, leadership gift officer, at plannedgiving@hcc.edu or 413.552.2746.

kids with them and feel safe and welcome, not like they are a distraction.”

Before that, the only space on campus specifically designated for children was the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Center. Itsy Bitsy opened in 2022 and is generally the go-to option for student parents who need short-term daycare while on campus. However, Itsy Bitsy is available on a first-come, first-serve basis for children when their parents are in class or meeting with advisors. Slots are limited depending on demand. The PLC addresses the gaps in student schedules.

Such was the situation Kayla Dagenais found herself in recently. A 22-year-old student in HCC’s BayState LPN

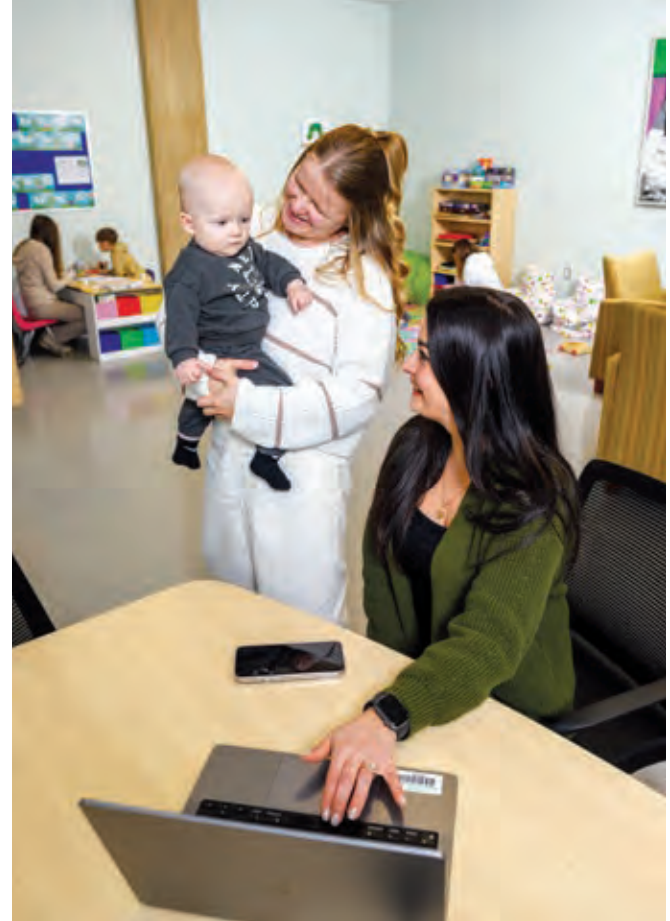
Pathways Program, Dagenais took advantage of the PLC during the second week of the spring semester when her 2-year-old son Amari’s daycare center was closed for the day. He’d been to child watch in the morning and was going back later in the day. In the meantime, she had a three-hour window between classes and wanted to get some homework done.

“It’s good to have a space where I don’t feel like he’s a bother to other people. We’ve gone to the library before, but he’s kind of loud.”

— Student Kayla Dagenais, 22

“This is the first time we’ve been here,” said Dagenais. “It’s lovely. He’s liking it already. He’s been playing with everything. It’s good to have a space where I don’t feel like he’s a bother to other people. We’ve gone to the library before, but he’s kind of loud.”

The PLC opened to students in December so barely gained any traction with students before the winter holidays.



✧ Mariia Leiderman, seated, with her classmate Raisa Kvashchanka (holding her son Joseph) in the Parent Learning Center

The first week of the spring 2025 semester, though, the PLC hosted its first event — milk and cookies — and saw its first guests. Among them were three HCC students and their children: Helen Gorovenko, 29; Raisa Kvashchanka, 23; and Olga Klykova, 41. They came for the cookies, but also because they needed somewhere to bring their boys for an hour between their ESL Level 3 classes. In the past, they might have gone to the cafeteria, where there is not much more than food to keep young children occupied.

“This is a very good place for us,” said Kvashchanka, who had come in earlier pushing a stroller for her 8-month-old son, Joseph.

A couple of days later, they all returned.

“Yes,” said Gorovenko, as her 4-year-old son Alex busied himself with a toy truck. “Every week, we’ll be back in the future.”

“I love it,” said Woody. “That’s exactly what we’re hoping for. A little home away from home on campus.” 🟢

◀ A prospective student takes a tour of the new Parent Learning Center.



"I wish I had had the confidence these kids have when I was their age," he says. "I'm definitely learning a lot, not only about the campers, but about myself and my stuttering journey."

Picone gave up his only paid time off for the year to work at Camp Words Unspoken for the week — unpaid.

"I support Brandon and everything he is trying to achieve," says Picone. "I'm really happy to be a part of it."

And he is not the only volunteer. Of the 20 camp staff members, all but three are volunteers, a testament to their commitment. The only paid positions are the camp director (Nate, who took a week off from his own job as an aerospace engineer to be here); Debbie Bennett, the head speech and language pathologist; and Towle.

Bennett runs a private practice in Nottingham, New Hampshire, and also teaches at the University of New Hampshire. This is her third year at Camp Words Unspoken in Pittsfield. She also worked with Towle at the Florida camp. She has been an unflagging advocate and ambassador for Camp Words Unspoken since she first heard from Towle in 2018.

"I thought it was an amazing idea," she said, "because we didn't have anything like this in the whole New England area for kids who stutter. Brandon is the driving force behind the camp. He never gave up on it, even through COVID. I'm so grateful he decided to do this and that he gave me the opportunity to join it. I want this to continue and be successful."

Already, she says, one former camper returned this summer as a junior counselor, and several others have expressed interest in doing the same.

"They ask me, 'when I'm old enough, can I come back to be a role model for other kids who stutter?' That's exactly what we want."

» Brandon Towle, at the entrance for Camp Words Unspoken in Pittsfield. The camp runs for one week every summer on the ground of Camp Winadu in Pittsfield, Mass.

4 As executive director, Towle handles all the administration and paperwork throughout the year. He writes grants, organizes fundraising events, such as an annual golf tournament, and solicits private donations. He recruits staff and campers. He uses the funds he raises to help defray the cost. For a six-day, all-inclusive, sleepaway camp, the price is a modest \$775 a week, and \$725 for returning campers, with financial aid also available.

After Coca-Cola and a brief stint working for U.S. Postal Service, Towle settled into another job as the golf course manager at Rolling Meadows Country Club in Ellington, Connecticut, where he manages golf operations, runs tournaments and manages the pro shop and golf cart shed. More than just time, he invests a lot of his own money in the camp. To keep his own expenses down, he still lives at home in Westfield with his parents, who work as volunteers at camp fundraising events throughout the year.

"The camp is certainly a family endeavor, and one we have all supported from the very beginning," says Brandon's twin brother, Zack '18, now a senior purchasing analyst for a security systems manufacturing company. "Along with immediate family support, such as brothers, mom and dad, our uncles and aunts, and even girlfriends, have also supported the camp in different

volunteer roles. It is truly a blessing what Brandon has created."

Towle's long-term plan is to open more camps and build Camp Word Unspoken into a full-time career for himself.

"Because I'm passionate about it," he says. "I enjoy it, and not many people can say that every day when they go to work. And I'm so proud of myself for keeping on with this dream and making a positive impact on children's lives."

Throughout the week, Towle takes every opportunity to tell his story and the story of the camp. At the opening ceremony, on day one, he introduces himself, welcomes campers and their parents, and tells them what to expect.

On the final day, at the closing ceremony, Towle recognizes all the campers individually, third-year campers, then second-years, then first-years. He invites them up on stage. Counselors hand out certificates. They pose for photos. They sing a camp song. Everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak, campers included.

Towle goes first. "It gets emotional," he says. He looks around and sees proud parents in the crowd and happy kids with their new friends.

He talks for just a few minutes, then passes the mic. 



IN GEORGE THEY TRUST

A Springfield newspaper once described **George Bitzas '77** as the “Agawam city councilor who won’t take ‘No’ for an answer.” He does not dispute the characterization. “Yes, yes, yes,” he said recently. “It’s true. Because I go and accomplish a lot. I tell it like it is, and I make my decisions based on what is better for the town.” The people of Agawam seem to agree. Bitzas, 79, has been a city councilor there for 36 years, making him the longest serving councilor in Agawam history. “I never lost an election,” said Bitzas, a native of Greece who emigrated to the United States at 24 after serving as a second lieutenant in the Hellenic Army. “It was difficult at the beginning because I could speak no English,” he said. At HCC, he studied English and art, graduating with

honors before moving on to Westfield State College for a teaching degree. “I got a good education from Holyoke Community College,” he said. “We have a lot of fun there.” Bitzas taught art in West Springfield before embarking on a career as an interior designer. Now retired, he enjoys photography and had a two-month show last fall at the Agawam Public Library titled, “This is Greece,” a collection of photos and artifacts from his home country, including a photo of the house in Dolo where he was born. “In the room right there,” he said, pointing to a first-floor window. “No doctors at the time. They just have a lady that comes in.”

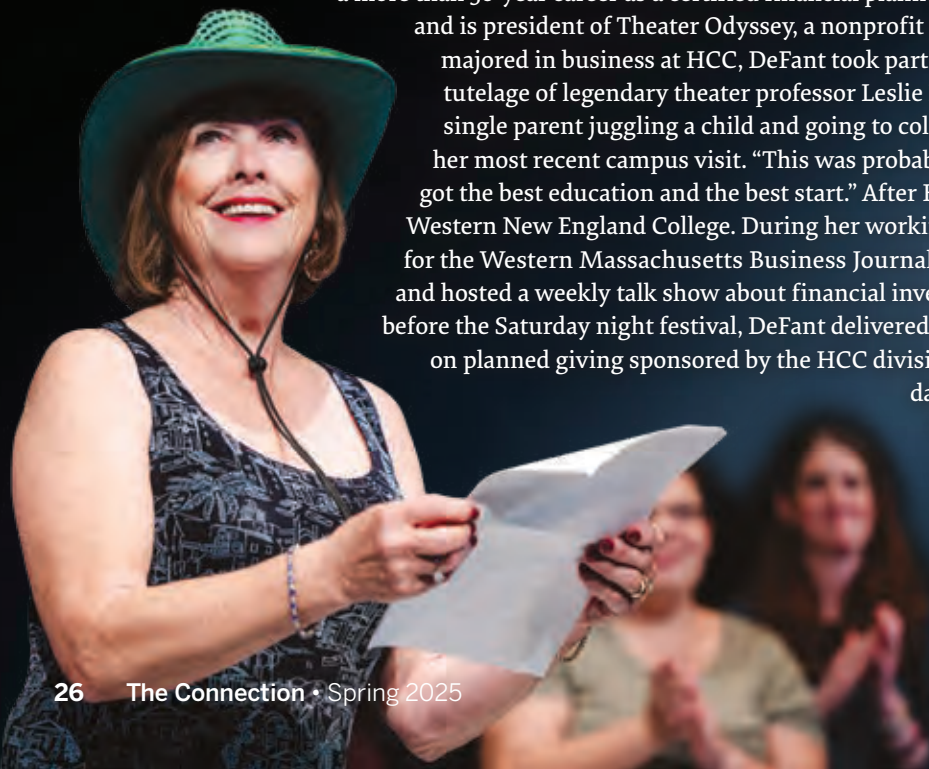


⌘ George Bitzas holds his HCC student ID card from 1977 during a tour of his recent photography show at the Agawam Public Library.

Direct to Stage

Each September, **Donna DeFant '77** makes a pilgrimage north from her Florida home to western Massachusetts, where she participates in the college’s annual Leslie Phillips 24-Hour Theater Festival. Now retired from a more than 30-year career as a certified financial planner, DeFant devotes her time to theater arts and is president of Theater Odyssey, a nonprofit theater company in Sarasota. While she majored in business at HCC, DeFant took part in many HCC plays and musicals under the tutelage of legendary theater professor Leslie Phillips. “I was a nontraditional student, a single parent juggling a child and going to college at the same time,” she recalled during her most recent campus visit. “This was probably the best place I could have been. I think I got the best education and the best start.” After HCC, DeFant earned a bachelor’s degree from Western New England College. During her working life, she wrote a monthly financial column for the Western Massachusetts Business Journal, reported financial news for WWLP-22News and hosted a weekly talk show about financial investments on WHYN radio. Last fall, the day before the Saturday night festival, DeFant delivered an on-campus and Zoom-cast presentation on planned giving sponsored by the HCC division of Institutional Advancement. The next day, she directed “Souvenir,” one of the festival’s six short plays. “I feel very attached to this school,” she said.

« Donna DeFant '77 dons her director’s hat during rehearsals for the 2024 Leslie Phillips 24-Hour Theater Festival on Sept. 28.



100 Percent Jazz



As the program director of Jazz in July — an intensive two-week student program run each summer out of the UMass Fine Arts Center — **David Picchi '04** gets to share his love of jazz with aspiring musicians, many of whom are HCC students. Picchi first learned about Jazz in July when he was a student in Bob Ferrier's jazz improvisation classes at HCC. He loved the program and, after graduating from HCC, transferred to UMass to study music. After UMass, Picchi hit the road, spending three years touring nationally with the Leah Randazzo Group while working part-time, under-the-table jobs to pad his income. Today he serves on the adjunct music faculty at Amherst College and Mount Holyoke College, in addition to serving as program director of Jazz in July and performing professionally. "If you're going for a degree in jazz music performance, a lot of what you study is rooted in Western European music from the 1500s to 1890s," he said. "But Jazz in July is 100 percent jazz. It's focused on improvisation and current music." Over the years Picchi, who plays electric and double bass, has been a regular volunteer, instructor, and performer at the HCC Jazz Festival. He continues to act as a liaison with the HCC Foundation, which provides annual scholarships to HCC students enrolled in Jazz in July.

« David Picchi

Supporting Early Childhood Education

Janis Santos '74 chose Holyoke Community College for its acclaimed early childhood education program. That decision led to a 48-year career with Head Start, the federally funded early childhood education program for children from low-income families. Since retiring in 2021 as CEO of Holyoke Chicopee Springfield Head Start, Santos has stayed connected to the organization by establishing the Janis Santos Scholarship. The scholarship is available to HCS Head Start staff, alumni, and parents interested in pursuing a degree in early childhood education. The first scholarship was awarded in 2023 and the second in 2024. "The problem that we have is recruiting teachers, so I worked with our new CEO and we developed a scholarship committee, got some sponsors, and we were able to give out the first scholarship for \$2,000," Santos said. Although there are many local institutions where scholarship recipients can enroll, Santos always encourages them to go to HCC, remembering how encouraged she felt when she started there as a young adult. "I had a wonderful experience at HCC," she said. "From the director down to the secretary and the instructors, everybody supported you." Santos' unwavering belief in her alma mater has not



» Janis Santos '74, center, during a recent visit to HCC with her granddaughters Victoria Santos '19, left, and Amanda Santos '13.

only inspired those around her but also taken root within her own family. Her son, Jeffrey Santos, works at HCC as an accountant. Her daughter, **Kim Santos '77**, and granddaughters, **Amanda Santos '13** and **Victoria Santos '19**, are also alumni.

Moving On

Over more than three years, TV journalist **Melissa Torres '19** made frequent trips to HCC to report on news and events for WWLP-22News in Springfield, Mass. Originally from Puerto Rico, Torres paid special attention to stories about the Latinx community in western Massachusetts — and at HCC. In early October, during Hispanic Heritage Month, for one of her final stories at the station, she covered the college's annual Latinx Fiesta. On Oct. 9, she was on campus again for an astronomy presentation about the famous Lowell Observatory in Arizona. The next day, she announced she was leaving WWLP for a new job at KRQE-News13 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "It's truly been such a dream to tell the stories of the incredible and vibrant communities here in

western Massachusetts," she said in her parting statement. "Representation matters, and I'm grateful to have been a role model for others who look like me, come from a similar background as me, or speak the same language as me." Torres studied communication at HCC and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2021. "Thank you for welcoming me into your homes every morning, every afternoon, and every night," she said. "It has been a journey filled with learning, growth, and unforgettable memories."



⌘ TV journalist Melissa Torres '19 reports on a story about HCC's holiday Giving Tree campaign in November 2023.

The Shape of Things

For those who don't remember geometry — or perhaps never learned — a Platonic solid is a polyhedron (3-D shape) where every face is a regular polygon (2-D, equal sided). Think of a cube (six-sided, all squares) or a pyramid (tetrahedron, four sides of equilateral triangles). There are only three more: octahedron



(eight faces), dodecahedron (10), and the icosahedron (20). As a graduate student in mathematics at Western New England University, **Lucien Dalton '16** learned a special folding technique to make such shapes out of paper without the use of tape or glue. For Dalton, the activity has become much more than a learning tool. "We were shown at a basic level," said Dalton. "I went much further with it." Dalton, an HCC

math tutor and engineering pathways coordinator, brought his origami math skills back to campus in October for a couple of STEM Week workshops. He taught visiting middle school students how to fold tetrahedrons, while exhibiting some of his more sophisticated paper creations, including a dodecahedron. "Plato and his Platonic Solids are famous, sacred geometry," Dalton said. "This is just another way to learn about this area of math while also doing it. It's very kinesthetic, and it's a lot of fun." 🟢

« Lucien Dalton '16 holds a dodecahedron he made using a folding technique he learned in an Origami Math class at Western New England University.

Class Notes

1976

Bernie Marois (business administration) served in the U.S. Army from 1966-1969 and was stationed in Korea and Germany before being honorably discharged as a specialist 5 (E5). He worked for several years as a cost accountant and later as an accounting manager before becoming owner and operator of the largest microfiche duplicating facility on the East Coast with revenues over \$4 million per year. He now works as a realtor for ERA M. Connie Laplante Real Estate in South Hadley, Mass.

1989

Dawn Bryden received a special surprise during a Nov. 21 alumni happy hour event at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute, where she was presented with an alumni service award in recognition of her



Dawn Bryden

tenure as president of the HCC Alumni Council, a position in which she served until last year. "HCC has always been a part of my life and always will be," said Bryden, the associate dean of student development at CT

State Community College Asnuntuck. "I'm really proud to serve and to continue promoting how strong an HCC education is." Bryden was just the second ever to serve in that role, succeeding **Gloria Lomax '75**, the original council president. Bryden, who remains on the council, was herself succeeded as president by **Trudy Monson '97**.

1991

Michele (Champigny) Mariani (visual art) joined the HCC President's Office as staff assistant. Prior to HCC, Mariani was the lead coordinator for the office of Academic Affairs at Springfield College. In addition, she holds an associate degree



Michele (Champigny) Mariani

in court reporting from Springfield Technical Community College and a bachelor's degree in human services from Springfield College.

1992

Former Holyoke City Councilor **Todd McGee** is the latest alum to take a seat on



Todd McGee

the HCC Board of Trustees. McGee, a tax attorney and director of estate and business planning for MassMutual Insurance, was appointed to the board last fall by Gov. Maura Healey. "I loved Holyoke Community College," said McGee. "It has been part of my life for a very long time. Anything I can do to help out, I will, because Holyoke Community College is really a family to

me." McGee represented Ward 7 on the Holyoke city council for 18 years until 2023. As council president, he briefly served as acting mayor in 2021. He joins fellow alum **Nayroby Rosa '10**, who was appointed to the board in 2023. Rosa is director of community engagement and resident services for OneHolyoke CDC.

1998

Erik Lesniak (business management) is the business liaison in the economic development office for the city of Manchester, New Hampshire. Before that, Lesniak worked for 23 years in professional base-



Erik Lesniak

ball, including 18 years with the Double AA New Hampshire Fisher Cats. He has received several recognitions, including the *Manchester Union Leader's* 40 Under 40 Award in 2015, Pastoral Counseling

Services Good Samaritan of the Year in 2019, a Paul Harris Fellow for Queen City Rotary Club, and was named to the New Hampshire 200 List for 2025.

2001

Megan Parnell-Gregoire (arts and science) has been named vice president, credit manager at Florence Bank. Parnell has served as a chief lending officer, senior financial product manager, business lending manager, and commercial credit officer. She was previously treasurer of

the Holyoke Community College Foundation and was named to the *BusinessWest* 40 Under Forty class of 2014.

2003

Shawn Lucas (math) completed a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a master's degree in math education from the University of Phoenix. He is now a math teacher and department coordinator at Conant Middle High School in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

2005

Ruth Amador (nursing) works as a registered nurse at Hartford Hospital and is a conference coordinator for the inaugural conference of the New England Minority Nurses Association. Additionally, Amador is a contributing writer to *Latinas in Nursing*, a compilation of firsthand stories by Latinx nurses about their experiences working in healthcare.

2006

Rachel (Barnard) Tillman (nursing) has been named director of nursing at Pioneer Valley Health and Rehabilitation. Tillman also works as an adjunct faculty member at HCC.

2009

Susie (Callahan) Howard (graphic arts) is the nurture marketing manager at the University of Arizona Global Campus. She is also the owner of Walton Read, a creative services agency in Westfield. Howard was a recipient of Bronze and Silver Awards from the Ad Club of Western Mass, and the 2024 recipient of the Daniel J. Gallivan Award presented by the St. Patrick's Committee of Holyoke. She showcases her passion for photography on her website, susieread.com and on Instagram: [@susiereadphotography](https://www.instagram.com/susiereadphotography). Additionally, Howard, welcomed her first child, Gigi, in May 2022.

Aly (Sutton) Putnam (biology) recently completed her Ph.D. in organismic and evolutionary biology at UMass Amherst. She is a research assistant at DOI Northeast Climate Adaptation Science Center and a part-time instructor at Smith College.



Aly (Sutton) Putnam

2010

Sergio Vicente (liberal arts) was recently hired as an early college counselor at Hope for Youth and Families in Springfield.

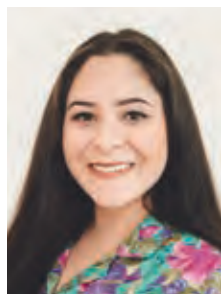
2012

Efrain Ramirez (criminal justice) has been hired as an educator at Veritas Prep Charter School in Springfield.

2015

Billy Fellows (retail management) is the new general manager of Amelia Park Ice Arena in Westfield. Fellows previously served as the arena's assistant general manager.

Shelby Kreiger (liberal arts) completed a bachelor's degree in English from Mount Holyoke College in 2018, a



Shelby Kreiger

master's degree in English from the University of Connecticut in 2024, and a graduate certificate in human rights from the University of Connecticut in 2024. Kreiger is an adjunct instructor of first-year English at the University of Connecticut and at HCC. She recently went to Iceland for a week.

Carly Myers (liberal arts) is currently a senior research technician at the Carnegie Institute of Science at the California Institute of Technology. After HCC, she completed a bachelor's degree at Mount Holyoke College in 2018 and a master's degree in ecology and evolutionary biology from UCLA in 2022.

Brittany (Washington) Walas (liberal arts and science) has been hired as a staff assistant for the Office of People, Culture, and Equity at HCC. Walas previously worked as an office manager at Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School of Excellence in Springfield.

2016

Denis Khamasi (criminal justice) recently graduated from the Holyoke Police Academy as part of his training to join the Amherst Police Department. He is still serving as a segreant in the U.S. Army and previously worked as a correctional officer at the Worcester County House of Corrections.

2018

Jay Eveson-Egler (psychology) received a bachelor's degree in psychology and education from Mount Holyoke College and now works as senior manager at the Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE). Eveson-Egler has given multiple speeches and trainings, including trainings that have been accepted and certified by the American Psychological Association to provide professional education credits. "I have bought a home and had a daughter, gotten married, and we will soon be one of the first polyamorous families in Massachusetts to have all four parents listed on my daughter's birth certificate," Everson-Egler writes.

2020

Banen Mustafa (secondary education) works as an ESOL instructor at HCC. After graduating from HCC, Mustafa completed a bachelor's degree from Westfield State University in English and secondary education, and a master's degree from UMass Amherst in bilingual, multilingual, and multicultural education.

Lindsey Pare (foundations of health, liberal arts, medical assistant) was recently promoted from clerk to student engagement coordinator at HCC. Pare has been working at HCC since 2020. As a student, she was vice president and secretary of the Student Senate, a New Student Orientation leader, a founding member of the



Lindsey Pare

COMMITTED Club, former secretary of the Military Club, an Admissions ambassador and tour guide, a peer advisor, and a member of both the Phi Theta Kappa national honor society and HCC's Green Key Honor Society.

2021



Todd Cummings


currently enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

Todd Cummings (hospitality management) is a sous chef at Miraval Berkshires in Lenox. He completed a bachelor's degree in hospitality and tourism management from UMass Amherst and is currently enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

2021

Wyatt Jensen received a bachelor's degree from the University of Kansas and is currently working as a client specialist associate for Mariner Wealth Advisors, in Overland Park, Kansas.

2024

Carissa (Batura) Raymond (elementary education) is working as a paraprofessional in the Holyoke public school system. As a student, Raymond was a member of the Student Senate. Her proudest achievement has been getting a job in her field since "it took a lot of interviews and time," she writes. 



Carissa (Batura) Raymond

In Memoriam

We are saddened to learn of the passing of the following members of the HCC community:

Maurice J. Ferriter '52*

Robert N. Robitaille '74

Owen C. O'Connell '92

Patricia A. Baxter '58

Linda A. Murphy '76

Gail A. Karol '93

James J. Wachala Sr. '62

Diane M. Hearn '78

Rebecca A. Pava '11

Ann M. Geeleher '64

Charles M. Cognac '82

Jeffrey P. Lenkowski '12

Joceline A. Kwapien '64

Matthew J. Farr '85

Manuel V. Sanchez, retired staff

John H. Robert '67

Janice M. Murphy '85

*Past member, HCC Board of Trustees and HCC Foundation Board of Directors

Jeffrey M. Rathbun '72

Christopher T. Maher '87, retired staff

Joanne H. Darcy '73

Roberta E. Perotti '90

Maurice J. Ferriter '52, 1930-2024

Attorney Maurice J. Ferriter, a 1952 graduate of Holyoke Junior College and up until last year the oldest known living college alum, died at his home on Christmas Eve after a short battle with brain cancer. He was 94 years old.

Born in Holyoke, where he lived until his death, Ferriter grew up during the Great Depression. The family business included selling coal and wood for heat, something that would inform his work for the rest of his life.

Ferriter attended Saint Jerome grammar and high school in Holyoke, where he met Peggy Hennigan, his future wife. While he was at Saint Jerome High, Holyoke Junior College President George Frost, on a recruiting visit, first approached him about attending college. "My father always impressed me with the fact that if you want to get anywhere in life, you better get a college education," Ferriter said in a March 5, 2024, interview for a video promoting the June 2024 Holyoke Junior College Reunion.

Ferriter decided to enroll at Holyoke Junior College because he believed he was going to get an education "second to none" because of the distinguished faculty. "In my book," he said, "there was no other choice. If I had had an offer from Harvard, I wouldn't have gone because this place had much better education and much more opportunity."

After graduating from Holyoke Junior College, Ferriter received a bachelor's degree from the University of Massachusetts and a law degree from Western New England College School of Law. He was sworn in as an attorney in 1957.

Ferriter served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, receiving several medals and commendations for his service. He was an active member of the Korean War Veterans Association, the American Legion, and more.

After the Korean War, he founded Begley & Ferriter Law Firm in Holyoke and Boston with William E. Begley Sr. He went on to serve as Holyoke city solicitor, write legislation creating the Massachusetts Municipal Wholesale Electric Company, and served as the electric company's general counsel for several decades. He was a founder of the Municipal



Maurice J. Ferriter '52

Electric Association of Massachusetts and the Northeast Public Power Association. He was an active member of the American Public Power Association in Washington, D.C., where he regularly spoke at training seminars, and which honored him with its Person of the Year Award.

Every year, he marched proudly in the Holyoke St. Patrick's Parade. He had been a founding member of the parade committee, which honored him with its O'Connell Award, its presidency, and named him grand marshal.

His other accolades for leadership and community service included the William G. Dwight Award, the Louis Oldershaw Community Service Award, the Greater Holyoke Chamber of Commerce Business Person of the Year Award, and the Holyoke Community College Distinguished Alumni Award.

He was a lifelong communicant of Saint Jerome Church, taught CCD at Blessed Sacrament Parish and Holy Cross Parish, and, with his wife, Peg, served in the Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulcher. Ferriter was a Third Degree Knight of Columbus and served meals at Providence Ministries for the Needy.

In 1992, he was appointed by Governor William F. Weld to a seat on the HCC Board of Trustees, serving until 2002, including as its chair. He also was a director on the HCC Foun-


ation Board beginning in 1985, and served as chair from 2007-2010. He remained active as a director emeritus.

"Maurice was one of the first HCC Foundation Board members I met when I joined this community in 2017," said Amanda Sbriscia, vice president of Institutional Advancement. "He shared, with great passion and pride, the history of Holyoke Community College as well as that of his beloved city. I sought his advice on so many matters, knowing he wanted the best for HCC and would always give me straight answers."

In addition to involvement with numerous other community boards, he, along with dear friends, served on the committee that organized the first-ever Holyoke Junior College Reunion, in 2024, bringing together dozens of graduates from the 50s and 60s for cocktails and dinner at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

"Maurice was generous in sharing his passion and pride for both HCC and the city of Holyoke," HCC President George Timmons wrote in an email to the HCC community. "Just last year, he invited me to join him as his guest for the Holyoke St. Patrick's Day weekend festivities; I do not believe I could have had a better host. He embodied HCC values of kindness, collaboration, and trust. He played a crucial role in lifting up and strengthening a reputation for academic excellence at HCC, and for ensuring our students were supported and inspired."

Ferriter was predeceased by his wife, Margaret Hennigan Ferriter, their son, Attorney Maurice J. Ferriter Jr., his parents John and Aldea Brouillet Ferriter, and brothers John, Robert and Thomas. He is survived by his children, Attorney John J. Ferriter, Attorney Mary M. Ferriter, and Joseph P. Ferriter M.D.; daughters-in-law, Rosalie Mengel Ferriter Moore, Attorney Deborah Desmarais Ferriter, and Jennifer Trauscht VanHorn M.D., and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

His legacy, and that of his late wife, Peggy, continues through the Maurice '52 and Peggy Ferriter Scholarship they established through the HCC Foundation. 

Send News

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Name While Attending HCC _____

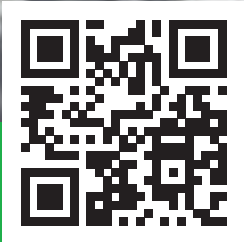
Spouse/Partner Name _____ Class Year _____

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Telephone (Residence) _____ (Business) _____

Email Address _____

Your News _____



Share news of your wedding, retirement, promotion, travels, children/grandchildren, awards, academic achievements, military honors, whatever!

Send news and photos to alumni@hcc.edu or to The Connection, c/o Alumni Relations, 303 Homestead Ave., Holyoke MA 01040.

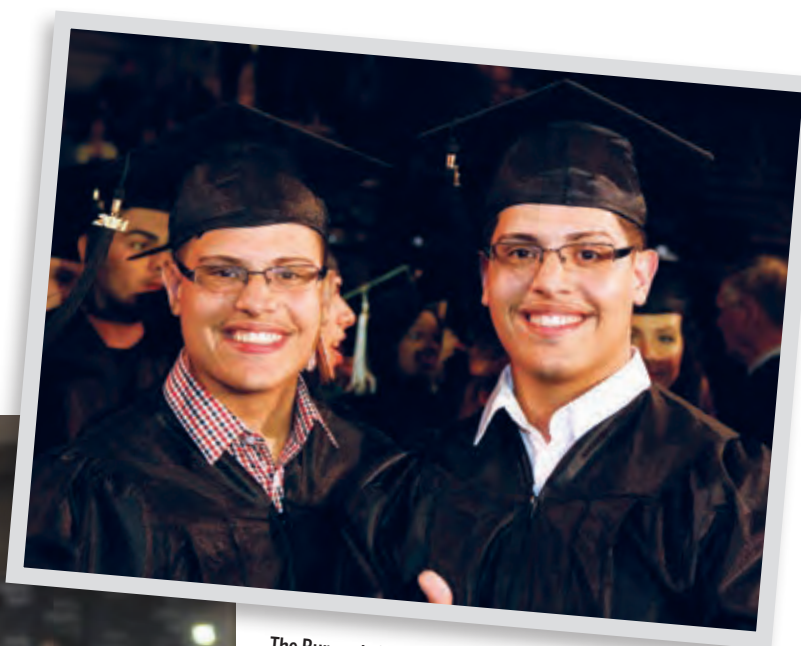
THE CONNECTION

Holyoke Community College
303 Homestead Avenue
Holyoke, MA 01040

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Remember your days on the campus of HCC?

Where are you today? Share your Then and Now pictures by posting on social media and tagging @Holyoke Community College and using #HCCThenandNow or by emailing them to lburgos@hcc.edu.



The Burgos twins at Commencement 2014, above, and at the 2024 Alumni Reception at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute



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