

Holyoke Community College celebrates commencement

HOLYOKE – Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal offered her congratulations as well as some advice to the Class of 2023 Saturday as she presided over her final HCC Commencement before her planned retirement next month.

“Every Commencement is special because it is the realization of intentions you set forth when you first became an HCC student,” she said during the June 3 event at the MassMutual Center in Springfield.

For some, earning a college degree was a two-year dream; for others, she said, a two-decade dream.

“Don’t stop dreaming big for your life,” she said. “As we celebrate you today, you get to finally put a gold star or checkmark next to your dream of becoming a college graduate. This is huge.”

HCC conferred associate degrees and certificates upon 686 graduates from 72 different Massachusetts cities and towns, states as far away as Florida and Texas, and countries including Uganda, Colombia, India, and China. Their average age is 28, with the oldest being 69.

“Diversity is our strength as an insti-

tution,” Royal said. “And your uniqueness is your strength as an HCC graduate. I encourage you to embrace your unique gifts and leverage them to help you accomplish your goals in life.”

Biology professor Joseph Bruseo of Palmer, recipient of the 2023 Elaine Marieb Chair for Teaching Excellence Award, led the procession of graduates into the MassMutual Center arena and

gave the faculty address. He talked about the importance of life-long learning and how the acquisition of knowledge is the first step on the path to wisdom.

“Your educational experience is based on the accumulation of facts or other important information,” he said. “This is the initial step in the transition from knowledge to wisdom. Wisdom comes from the application of those facts, being able to assess what is true or right, and to apply the knowledge you have gained. As our knowledge base expands, our wisdom grows.”

Henry Zucco ‘23, an environmental science major from Holyoke, delivered the student address to his classmates, acknowledging how the community of his peers and HCC faculty and staff helped him overcome self-doubt.

“For each of you here graduating and attending today, you are all part of the process of building a better future for yourselves, for your families, your communities, and the world,” said Zucco, who will continue his education at Bowdoin College. “You all are the hope



Eileen Gates (Veterinary and Animal Science) celebrates her graduation from HCC June 3.

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that we so desperately need.”

“Holyoke Community College has become more than just a college to me,” he added. “It has become like a home to me, and the community has become my family. I will feel the impact that HCC has made on me for the rest of my life.”

Other Commencement highlights included the recitation of an original poem by Latinx Studies major and student-poet Mishie Serrano of Westfield titled “Lessons from Redirections,” about growing up in a Spanish-speaking household and going to college during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On behalf of the college, Royal handed out Distinguished Service Awards to two area professionals for their dedication to and support of the college and community: Mariah Levine of South Hadley, director of Preschool at the Holyoke YMCA; and Jason Pacheco of Ludlow, manager of Workforce Planning and Compensation for Baystate Health.

In her own remarks, President Royal talked about the challenges she faced growing up as a queer, bi-racial woman

and shared her experiences of self-realization.

“Be authentically you,” said Royal,

who was not only the first woman to serve as president of HCC but also the first gay and person of color to be president of the college. “We spend so much time in life trying to please others. I’m encouraging each of you to be proud of who you are. The messages about what I couldn’t be or do – when I was younger – were louder than the ones telling me that anything is possible.”

She wanted to play baseball, she said, but was encouraged to play softball; wanted to wear pants, but was asked to wear dresses; was encouraged to omit she is half-Black because she could pass for white; was told to not to “be so assertive” as it wasn’t becoming of a woman; was told not to display a picture of her girlfriend on her desk at work if she wanted to get promoted.

“Somewhere along the way, I started listening more to my inner voice rather than these outside voices, and I realized that I had to become an example of the authenticity I wanted to see in others,” she said. “All you can be is you, and as long as you are authentically you, it is enough. You are enough.”



Members of the HCC Class of 2023 celebrate as they enter the MassMutual Center for Commencement.

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