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HCC celebrates milestone

HOLYOKE – The party was well worth the wait.

After delays and uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Holyoke Community College finally celebrated its 75th Anniversary on Thursday, May 5, as the oldest two-year college in Massachusetts.

Throughout the day, HCC hosted a series of events on campus and online showcasing the work of HCC students, faculty and staff. WCCB 103.5 FM, the college radio station, welcomed alumni into the studio as guest DJs. Teachers, alumni and students met over Zoom to discuss the programs that have most impacted their lives, in particular honors, transfer, service learning and STEM. There were tours of the college's early childhood education suite, art demonstrations, theater and literary exhibitions, free cupcakes in the courtyard, music, salsa dancing, and more.

The daylong festivities concluded with a community reception on Race Street at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute catered by students in the college's culinary arts program.

"This has been an extraordinary day," said President Christina Royal, welcoming the crowd at the college's downtown facility. "Seventy-five years – that's a lot to celebrate."

HCC was founded in September 1946 as Holyoke Graduate School, later changing its name to Holyoke Junior College, and finally becoming Holyoke Community College when it joined the state college system in 1964.

"A lot has changed in 75 years," Royal said, "but what hasn't changed is our core and

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Holyoke City Councilors, David K. Bartley, left, and Will Puello, right, present HCC president Christina Royal with a proclamation in honor of the college's 75th anniversary during a May 5 celebration at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

Submitted photos



Staff from HCC's Office for Students with Disabilities and Deaf Services celebrate with free cupcakes in the HCC courtyard in honor of the college's 75th anniversary.

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central purpose. HCC was created by faculty from prestigious four-year colleges who wanted to make education more accessible and bring it to the working class so that everybody who wanted an education could get one.”

Holyoke City Councilors David K. Bartley (son of HCC’s second president, David M. Bartley) and Will Puello presented her with an official resolution from the Holyoke City Council: “Congratulations to Holyoke Community College, in recognition of their Seventy-Fifth Anniversary educating thousands and stands today at a Pioneer of Higher Education.”

“We recognize that there’s a lot of different ways that we can make a difference in the community, but there’s no better way than improving the lives of our citizens through the power of education,” Royal said. “It is still today one of the most transformative ways that we can increase social and economic mobility for people, their families, and communities at large.”

Royal, who had met with a group of alumni over lunch earlier in the day, noted how moved and humbled she was to hear stories of those who could speak first-hand about the origins of the college, its founding president George Frost, and the great fire that consumed the original downtown campus building in 1968.

“They didn’t have to rebuild HCC,” Royal said. “There were other options, other colleges. But there was something distinct enough that the community decided to fight for HCC and to ultimately to buy the Sheehan dairy farm on Homestead Avenue to rebuild it in a space that would allow the college to grow and become what it is today.”

Several HCC alumni and students were also invited to take their turns at the mic.

Matthew McMahon, a cybersecurity analyst from the class of 2006, talked about the importance of HCC’s interdisciplinary Learning Community classes in his education and career trajectory.

“HCC gave me the tools to imple-

ment lifelong learning and a growth mindset,” he said. “The Learning Communities taught me that I can approach complex topics from different perspectives. I have implemented this cross-discipline strategy repeatedly throughout my life. It has been a big factor in my success, especially now with my work in the field of emerging technologies. I’ve taken classes at six different colleges. I’ve got several degrees. I’ve never seen anything that really compares to HCC.”

Yannelis Cruz, a biology major, STEM scholar, and student trustee from Springfield, came from a family where, as a woman, she was not expected to go to college. “HCC gave me hope for me and my family, so that in the future I can make an impact,” she said. “HCC allowed me to become a leader.”

Harry Hill graduated from HCC in 2013 with his degree in graphic design. He now works as a graphic designer in the college’s Marketing Department.

“I want the world to know that HCC is as liberating as you make it,” he said. “Today’s themes and that of the past 75 years are academic excellence, innovation and opportunity, themes that HCC has embodied completely. Without these foundational ideas, HCC would be just another institution where performative measures outweigh impactful actions. I crafted my future using the skills I learned at Holyoke Community College.”

Soon after graduating in 2021 from HCC’s culinary arts program, Brianni Couture started a business called Brinny’s Hand Pies in Agawam. Along with several other culinary arts alumni, Couture spent much of the night behind the scenes, helping to prepare appetizers in the kitchens.

“Without the fantastic and supportive staff and instructors at this college, I would not be the chef I am today,” Couture said. “They gave me the foundation to feel confident and secure within myself to explore all different types of food and culinary techniques. I will forever be grateful to this college. It is a community with an indomitable heart.”