

The Republican. PLUS

MASS LIVE
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HOLYOKE

HCC delivers 'higher powah'

To hear him tell it, Keith Hazel was sitting in Holyoke Community College's Leslie Phillips Theater one morning two years ago with tears streaming down his cheeks.

On stage was Frances Rivera-Diaz, a Holyoke Community College student and the keynote speaker at "College for a Day," an annual event that brings close to 200 adult basic education students to campus each spring to sample classes and learn about college programs.

Rivera-Diaz talked about her life as a high-school dropout who had persevered through homelessness and dead-end jobs to earn her GED and ultimately found success in college as an engineering major and national STEM scholarship recipient. At the time, Hazel, then 37, was a student with the Literacy Project in Northampton, preparing for his own high school equivalency test, the HiSET.

"Her story was so inspirational, so profound and touching to me that I cried my eyes out," Hazel said recently in his thick Brooklyn accent. "I'm a big mush, bro."

Fast forward to this year, Hazel found himself standing on that same stage just a few weeks ago, giving the keynote speech at this year's "College for a Day" and hoping to inspire others the way Rivera-Diaz had inspired him.

"School was once something I dreaded, but then I came to realize how much I love it," he said. "Her speech reaffirmed my decision to further my education."

The Easthampton resident is now in his second semester as a fully enrolled, degree-seeking liberal arts major.

At that "College for a Day" event in March 2016, Hazel learned about "Transition to College and Careers," an HCC program for adult learners who have either never been to college or who have been away from traditional classrooms for a long time. "Instinc-

SEE **HCC**, PAGE P3



Holyoke Community College student Keith Hazel, of Easthampton, gave the "College for a Day" keynote speech in March.



WILBRAHAM

Juniors support Boston organization

The Wilbraham Junior Women's Club recently collected items for the Women's Lunch Place of Greater Boston, an organization offering food, shelter, health and wellness assistance and office services to help guests searching for employment or housing. The project was brought to club by member Maria Ardolino, third from right, who attended an event at the Boston facility. Club members collected personal care items including soaps, shampoo, toothbrushes and lotions, clothing staples including socks and undergarments, and rain ponchos for the women who use the facility. The Women's Lunch Place strives to restore a sense of dignity to its guests, providing basic necessities, emergency seasonal clothing, hot showers, nutritious meals, immediate and unconditional support. It also provides guests with a chance to express their creativity via art therapy, drawing, jewelry making, knitting and crocheting, dance, music and other outlets. For more information, go to the organization's website, womenslunchplace.org. The Wilbraham Junior Women's Club supports dozens of charitable causes in Wilbraham, across the state, the U.S. and around the world through its local and state membership and parent organization, the General Federation of Women's Clubs. For information on how to join contact Ann Mathews at 413-949-0920 or Nancy Piccin at 413-599-1695.

HCC

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...tually, I knew (Transition to College and Careers) was my next step," he said.

On his first day, a quote on a hallway poster grabbed his attention: "If you want something you've never had you have to do something you've never done."

"I truly identified with that quote because that's what I had begun to do with my life," he said. "I had always tried to take the easy way out in life and never got anywhere. I was exhausted doing the same things over and over again."

Through the transitional program, Hazel learned about computers and career building. He studied math and English. He met people who cared about learning and the power of education. He gained confidence.

"My whole life I thought I was too stupid or not good enough because that's what I was taught ... but going back to school changed all that," he said.

Hazel had an "unconventional" upbringing in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, he said. Life at home was rough, he told the crowd, fueled with drugs, abuse, neglect, crime, violence, and divorce. It took a toll. School was hard. He



HCC student Keith Hazel, of Easthampton, gives the "College for a Day" keynote speech last month.

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Keith Hazel, HCC student

attended a lot of them and finally dropped out in 10th grade.

About eight years ago, he moved to Western Massachusetts to help his father and brother run two family stores in Northampton, the Vault and Shop Therapy, where he still puts in 30 to 40 hours a week. He's fortunate, he says, that he has resources to help him pay for school and support his two children.

Knowing that he had long wanted to go back to school,

some friends referred him to the Literacy Project.

"That inspired me to elevate my mind and myself through the learning process," he told the "College for a Day" audience. "For the first time I realized I could change my circumstances through learning."

During his first semester at HCC, Hazel earned all A's and B's and finished with a 3.67 grade point average.

"Now, after not being able to form a correct sentence,

I am in Honors English. My math scores have risen ... exponentially," he said, laughing along with the crowd, then adding in his thick Brooklyn accent, "which is a math term that means positive, positive, positive, raised to a higher powah."

This spring he's also taking "Introduction to Latino Studies," to learn about his Latino heritage. "Yo soy Puerto Rican," he said.

But the most important

reason he wanted to go college, he said, was to study American Sign Language with the intention of become a professional interpreter for the deaf.

"So," he said in conclusion, "if you are willing to do something you've never done then you too can have something you've never had. I hope my experience and story has served as an inspiration to you all, because if I can do it, anyone can."



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