

## HOLYOKE

# Triumph rises from near tragedy

## HCC student earns degree after near-death experience

In 2018, during her second year at Holyoke Community College, Samary Ramos was invited to speak to the Holyoke Community College Board of Trustees about the journey that had led her there.

Two years before, Ramos had suffered acute lung failure. Put on life support, she fell into a coma and nearly died.

"I spent an entire month fighting for my life," she said. "Upon waking up, I realized that if I had passed away my two kids, who are special needs — they both have autism — would have been lost to the system, due to lack of care and support."

For Ramos, who had left school in eighth grade, the moment was more than a physical awakening.

"It was a horrific experience," she recalled more recently. "Death is something terrifying and somehow I survived it, so how terrifying could passing a test be? How terrifying would it be to live life? That's when I decided to pursue getting my education, and I've been nonstop ever since."

The 36-year-old Springfield resident completed her studies at HCC this spring, earning high honors and her associate degree in Visual Arts. Along the way, she



Samary Ramos, of Springfield, recently graduated from Holyoke Community College with an associate degree in visual arts after suffering a near-death experience.

collected a steady stream of academic honors, awards, and HCC Foundation scholarships, finishing with a GPA of 3.8.

She is the first person in her family to graduate from college.

"It feels good," she said. "I know it's just one step along a longer path, but I am extremely proud of it, and it feels good to hear how proud my family is as well. I'm in a better place to be able to provide for them and secure their future a bit more."

Ramos received a big push along that path from the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, which awarded her a \$20,000-a-year scholarship to continue her studies in pursuit of a bachelor's degree and a career in visual arts education.

"I'm moving forward," she said.

Ramos's reintroduction to

school came through HCC's HiSET program. Through that, she earned her high school equivalency degree, then joined Transition to College and Careers, HCC's free college preparatory program.

The TCC program, which met on the main HCC campus, was "life changing," she said.

"It was a wonderful transition into the college environment," she said. "They were so receptive and warm and welcoming, and they put all of my worries at ease. I needed it."

The confidence she gained left no doubt that she would continue on at HCC for her associate degree or that she would study visual arts. "According to legend — my mother — I began drawing when I was 18 months old," Ramos said. "Art is my passion. It's been my life. I'm an artist above all else. I owed

it to myself to enhance that talent, to train and develop it, and explore new ways to express it."

As a freelance artist, Ramos works in all mediums, painting murals, designing tattoos, and drawing pastel and charcoal portraits.

"I'm known for being extremely versatile," she said. "Portraits are my main commission. I do a lot of memorials of people who have passed away."

Without a home studio, she sets up wherever she can, often in her living room or bedroom.

"Art is not a hobby. It's not a job. It's what I do. It's what I enjoy," she said. "The only time I'm really, really truly happy is when I'm creating something artistic."

She posts photos of her art on her Facebook page and plans to launch a website by the end of the summer showcasing her work.

Her talent did not go unrecognized at HCC. Two years in a row, 2018 and 2019, she received the Visual Art Faculty Prize, and her scholarship to Hartford Art School was based largely on her portfolio.

Ramos credits the HCC Visual Arts faculty for inspiring her to become an art teacher.

"They are amazing artists themselves and humble enough to choose to educate other people on their process," she said. "That was something that I respected and admired and decided to pursue myself."