

HCC start paves way to Mt. Holyoke College for graduate

HOLYOKE – Tatiana McKnight’s grandparents had the expectation that she would go to college.

Her grandparents are Sonia Nieto, the noted Puerto Rican educator and author, and Angel her husband, the Spanish poet Angel Nieto.

“When I graduated high school, there were certain expectations,” says McKnight. “My grandmother was like, college is something you need to be doing, if you’re not doing anything else.”

As McKnight considered her options, her grandmother took her on a tour of Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley. She loved it.

Knowing that Mount Holyoke was a difficult school to get into Nieto had McKnight visit Holyoke Community College.

On that visit, McKnight recalls her grandmother saying, in so many words, “Start here.”

In June, after five years as a part-time student, McKnight, now 23, graduated from HCC with honors and her associate’s degree in psychology.

“I’m very happy,” she said. “This has been very validating for me. I’ve been doing this for a very long time, proving things to myself, because I doubt myself a lot.”

As a teenager, McKnight was prone to panic attacks and diagnosed with agoraphobia, a debilitating fear of crowds.



Tatiana McKnight with her grandmother Sonia Nieto after graduating HCC.

Submitted photo

For a while, she was homeschooled. Later she completed high school in Chicopee through an online program called Edgenuity.

After graduating, determined to better her circumstances, she found a therapist, who helped transform her life to the point where she felt comfortable again in the outside world.

Despite her progress, McKnight was unsurprisingly nervous about starting college, especially in person. On that first visit, Nieto brought her McKnight to see

a friend, Irma Medina, senior special programs coordinator for HCC’s Pathways program. Every year, Medina, herself a graduate of both HCC and Mount Holyoke, helps dozens of HCC students successfully transfer to competitive four-year schools.

Nieto also introduced her granddaughter to Maureen Conroy, then the director of OSDDS, the college’s Office for Students with Disabilities and Deaf Services. Conroy became McKnight’s learning specialist and helped her obtain

needed classroom accommodations. She also offered McKnight a campus job as an assistive technology trainer in the college’s Assistive Technology Center.”She said, I think you’d be good at it,” says McKnight. “I was kinda shocked. I don’t know why she thought I’d be good at it. That was my first job ever in my life. But she made me feel very comfortable. I trusted her.”

Through Pathways, Medina helped McKnight build an academic record that would give her the best chance of getting into a top transfer school.

Since 2022, in addition to her schooling, McKnight has been working with autistic children as a behavioral technician for a company called Butterfly Effects. She conducts home visits and implements behavior plans to help children improve their communication skills and give them a better chance for living successful, independent lives.

“At one point, I was the person who needed help, and what my therapist did for me, motivated me to want to do that for other people,” says McKnight.

In May, she got the good news. She’d been accepted as a Frances Perkins Scholar at Mount Holyoke College, where she plans to study psychology. Although she’ll miss HCC, she says she’s looking forward to a new start at Mount Holyoke.

“I’m excited to be part of campus life there,” she says. “I’m ready.”