



GAZETTE STAFF/SARAH CROSBY

Graduates Lori Rindels of Southwick, left, Angellina Nigro of Southwick and Tiara Kenney of Chicopee watch their peers process in at the start of Holyoke Community College's 71st commencement ceremony Saturday at the MassMutual Center in Springfield.

'Greatest feeling in the world'

HCC graduates 903

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SPRINGFIELD — On the morning of his graduation day, Alec Duarte couldn't stop smiling. He stood in line with his fellow Holyoke Community College graduates, clad

in a black cap and gown.

The time he spent earning his associate degree changed his life.

"It really transformed me as a person," Duarte said. "It was a big new school, a big new place. It pushed me over the edge."

The 21-year-old Granby resident studied liberal arts and sciences at Holyoke Community College. Next, he'll head to Westfield State Univer-

sity to double major in psychology and special education. After finishing school, he hopes to open his own practice to help youth.

Duarte is one of the 903 students who graduated from HCC on Saturday. The graduation began at 10 a.m. and was held in the MassMutual Center in Springfield.

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HCC holds 71st commencement

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The class of 2018 came to Holyoke Community College for a number of reasons — some were fresh out of high school, some were veterans, some were hoping to re-enter the workforce and others were looking for a new chance in life. What united them, speakers said, was their commitment to completing their education, even when life threw its inevitable challenges their way.

“The feeling of knowing that you have finished and earned your degree is the greatest feeling in the world, and this day will stay with you for the rest of your lives,” said criminal justice professor Alejandro “Alex” Sanchez.

Sanchez was the recipient of the Elaine Marieb Faculty Chair for Teaching Excellence Award. In his speech, he compared the college experience to a rollercoaster ride. Sanchez graduated from HCC in 1990.

“I can assure you that everything in life will have its ups and downs, fast speeds as well as slow ones, but you know that this is part of life, and things will get better,” Sanchez said. “Remember to challenge yourselves, and don’t be afraid to take another leap of faith as you have done for your education and careers.”

Holyoke Community College awarded 927 degrees and certificates to the 903 members of the graduating class of 2018. Of the graduates, 787 students received associate degrees and 140 students received certificates in nearly two dozen programs.

The graduating class hails from about 71 Massachusetts communities. Graduates are also from California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, New Hampshire, New Jersey,



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Graduate Jaritza Rosario celebrates her accomplishments as founder and CEO of her own company, Florr, which makes jewelry out of flowers and is showcased at Northampton Jewelers, Saturday during Holyoke Community College’s 71st commencement ceremony at the MassMutual Center in Springfield.

South Carolina and Tennessee. International graduates are from Brazil, China, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Ghana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Malaysia, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Philippines, Taiwan, Ukraine and Vietnam. Graduates ranged from ages 18 to 69, with an average age of 27.

Among them was student speaker Jaritza Rosario of Holyoke. She spoke about the road that brought her to HCC, and also acknowledged the people of Puerto Rico who have suffered as a result of last year’s Hurricane Maria. Rosario had started a business called Florr, which makes jewelry from flowers, when she decided to enroll in college. Her work is showcased at Northampton Jewelers.

“I had the passion to succeed but not the skills,” Rosario said. “I remember going home to look up words like net income, gross margin and I was still not getting it, but one thing I do remember while doing my research is reading

something I will never forget. It said that 80 percent of businesses fail within the first three years because of lack of knowledge.

“I said to myself, ‘Well, I’m going to college to get some knowledge because I’m not failing.’”

Rosario was determined to succeed. She stayed late to use the college’s computers, and took the shuttle when she had car troubles. She’d even go without food when money was tight.

“I remember my first semester at HCC. I wanted to give up. I didn’t know how college worked,” Rosario said. “You see, I was not a school kind of girl. I dropped out of middle school. I never went to high school ... During my teen years, I was going through a lot. I lost faith in myself, trust in people and hope in the world. I felt alone. To all the people who suffer from depression and physical or sexual abuse, you are not alone.”

Once at the college, she

learned about business and herself. She learned she actually enjoyed school and would rather read a book than watch television. She learned to take risks, too. She even has a second business in the works.

“I didn’t even know how to write an essay, and now here I am, reading one to you at graduation,” Rosario said. “I feel like HCC gave me another opportunity in life. One of my dreams was to be here today, at graduation, speaking to you and having my family and friends watch me graduate. And guess what? I am.”

Additional speakers at the ceremony included President Christina Royal, State Rep. Aaron Vega and Associate Commissioner of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Katy Abel. The college honored disability rights advocate Chris Palames of Florence with its Distinguished Service Award. Palames founded the Stavros Center for Independent living in the 1970s and has advocated for people with disabilities for more than four decades.

Student Senate President Lindsey Pare presented the class gift, and student singer Brittany Berta performed a rendition of Kelly Clarkson’s “A Moment Like This.” Student Nicholas Parenteau delivered a spoken word performance titled “153 Years of At-Risk Youth.”

The school recognized the class valedictorians, who earned a perfect 4.0 grade point average. The 2018 valedictorians are Chloe Crabb of Easthampton, Cynthia Desroches of South Hadley, Christine Langford of Greenfield, Jared McPherson of Holyoke, James McSheffrey of Florence, Rebecca Milak of Longmeadow, Andrew Poehlman of Westfield, Zachary Polwrek of Goshen, Marcela Rosenberg of Amherst, Oscar Rubio of Palmer, Jenna Russo of South Hadley, Eric Sawyer of Granby and Phoebe Scott-Lawson of Sandisfield.