

# Holyoke Community College celebrates fall 2023 graduates

HOLYOKE— The first time Alannah Brunt tried Holyoke Community College, she flunked out after one semester. The next semester, she only passed one class.

“I was working a ton of hours and had not yet invested in school,” she recently said. “I hadn’t found a way to get excited about being a student. It was COVID times, folks, and it was not fun.”

But Brunt eventually did find a way to get excited about college, and that led her to where she now stood - on the stage of HCC’s Leslie Phillips Theater as one of the student speakers for the college’s first-ever Fall Graduate Reception, held on Nov. 29.

“Fear not,” said Brunt, who will complete her associate’s degree in Latinx Studies this month before heading to the University of Massachusetts in the spring. “In my journey at HCC, I found a community of people who became my village.”

According to the HCC Registrar’s Office, 172 HCC students will be fall 2023 graduates at the end of the current semester. Like Brunt, many of them will transfer to four-year schools in the spring. Although fall graduates are always invited to attend HCC’s formal commencement ceremony in the spring, historically, many do not attend.

“This is really just the beginning of your celebrations as a college graduate,” said President George Timmons. “Today, we honor your achievements with this reception because what you just achieved deserves immediate recognition. In June, we will come together again and formally welcome you as HCC alumni.”

The family-friendly event began in the HCC theater, followed by food and photo opportunities in the PeoplesBank Room of HCC’s Kittredge Center for



Left to right are student speakers Marcos Figueroa, of Holyoke, Angela Tindell-Gula, of Three Rivers, and Alannah Milgros Brunt, of Springfield, with President George Timmons at HCC’s first Fall Graduate Reception on Wed., Nov. 29.

*Submitted photo*

Business and Workforce Development.

“Our goal with this ceremony is to celebrate our fall graduates, strengthen their connection to HCC in the hopes that they will remain engaged with the college and attend our 76th Commencement ceremony on Saturday, June 1, 2024,” said Sharale Mathis, HCC vice president of Academic and Student Affairs.

The fall 2023 graduates and their families also heard from student Marcos Figueroa, who had nearly completed his degree in criminal justice from the Universidad Interamericana in Puerto Rico before Hurricane Maria disrupted his life and education.

“Fate led me here to Holyoke, Mass., and the doors of Holyoke Community College,” said Figueroa, now a communications, media and theater

arts major. “I must say, I am extremely grateful. Here, I didn’t just find refuge, I found my passion. Photography and cinematography became my new path - a discovery that reshaped my life.”

Figueroa is on his way to Emerson College to study filmmaking in the spring while working as a video journalist for WGBZ CBS-Boston.

“Adapting to a new culture wasn’t easy,” he said, “but it was through this journey that I met incredible individuals who became my guiding lights.”

Student Angela Tindell-Gula, a creative writing major from Three Rivers, talked about “surviving” adolescence and deferring her college dreams for two decades as she became a wife, mother, and small business owner.

“No one could have prepared me

for how hard going back to school as an adult would be,” said Tindell-Gula, who will attend Westfield State University in the spring. “Every day I fold my life lessons from the past and tuck them safely in my backpack, and that gives me the drive to put one foot in front of the other.”

For Brunt, the recipe for college success was getting involved in campus life. She joined the college radio station, WCCH, and became a DJ. Through Student Engagement, she joined clubs: -”Lots and lots of clubs,” she said, including the Radio Club, the Psychology Club, and the Latinx Empowerment Association. She found an internship in the Financial Aid office through SAMP - HCC’s Student Ambassador Mentorship Program, and discovered El Centro, a bilingual support program for HCC’s Latinx students.

At El Centro, Brunt said, “I found people who look like me, who understand me, and who helped me navigate higher education in a way that I had never seen before. I love the community that El Centro provides and the people who are here who help me find joy.”

## Holyoke graduates

The following students from Holyoke graduated this fall: Emily Bayliss, Jazlynn Yvonne Brown-Pena, Imanol Cruz, Hayley Marie Cunningham, Shalimar De Jesus, Ashley Nicole Desrochers, Marcos Denzel Figueroa, Isabella Garbiel-Achorn, Kiara Sofia Lopez, Rudelki Lopez-Ozuna, Charmain F. Maximo, Jamie M. Michalski, Yara C. Nevarez-Martinez, Cameron Christian Proulx, Moira Catherine Reardon, Gisselle Elba Sanchez, Sheyla Taina Vargas, Rosemary Vazquez and Emily Anne Whitelock.