

THE CONNECTION

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President Christina Royal

Dear Friends,

I remember my interviews for president of Holyoke Community College seven years ago. There was so much hope in the voices of members of the search committee, the Board of Trustees, the HCC Foundation Board, and members of the community – each passionate about this institution and identifying its next leader.

Over the subsequent days and months, I met so many amazing people – students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, and board members – who shared with me their commitment to HCC. They helped me see the tremendous potential in this college and the opportunities to shine light on the extraordinary work done here.

From the beginning, I felt welcome. My fellow college and university presidents, business and nonprofit leaders, and our legislators all seemed eager to collaborate in ways that now, looking back, have enabled us to transform the lives of thousands of individuals across western Massachusetts and beyond.

One of the greatest joys has been talking to alumni. I have had the privilege to meet many of the 40,000 graduates of Holyoke Junior College and Holyoke Community College, whose memories never cease to amaze and inspire me. For many, HCC is a family affair, with siblings, parents, grandparents, and extended family all having some connection with the college. And while their stories are as unique and diverse as our community, there is one common thread: when you start here, you can go anywhere.

HCC has been a launchpad for every student who passes through its doors, and all along their educational journeys, students are greeted with support that enables them to remain on a path to success.

It is that relentless support that makes me most proud. Together, this community has imagined, developed, and championed programs and services that are truly changing lives, many of which you can read about on the following pages.

When I reflect on all that HCC has achieved in the last seven years, I am truly amazed. More than that, I am grateful. We did this work together.

As I leave, I take with me memories that will last a lifetime: Welcome Back BBQs with students excited to begin the semester; strategic plan sessions that helped us craft our new mission, vision, values, and student experience statements; ribbon-cutting ceremonies for the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute, Center for Life Sciences, and renovated Campus Center; and graduations that proved dreams really can come true.

Thank you. Serving Holyoke Community College as president has been the privilege of a lifetime.

On the cover: President Christina Royal and students gather on the Campus Center stairway during a retirement celebration in her honor.

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**HOLYOKE
COMMUNITY
COLLEGE**

THE CONNECTION

SPRING 2023



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FULL *(Pickle ball)* COURT PRESS

With pickleball a national sports craze, HCC's seven new indoor pickleball courts were sure to be popular. But no one anticipated how much attention they would generate from area players and local media. "The response from the community has been tremendous," President Royal told *Business West* magazine for a December feature story on the rapidly growing racquet sport. "People are calling and asking if we can expand the hours. I think we've really tapped into an outlet that people are looking for." The new courts, which opened in early fall, are available Monday through Friday, from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. for just a \$5 daily fee. During the colder months, HCC's indoor courts regularly saw action from 30-40 players a day. The idea for installing courts came from President Royal, herself an avid player. "I was looking for something to burn off stress, and as a former tennis player, I really enjoy racquet sports, and this is something that's a little easier on my knees," she said. Besides *Business West*,

HCC's pickleball courts have generated coverage from Western Mass News, Spectrum News 1, Reminder Publications, the *Springfield Republican*, and *Prime Magazine*, whose January issue featured a photo of President Royal and HCC Athletic Director Tom Stewart on the cover.



HOME-GROWN PRODUCTION

HCC English professors Lisa Mahon, left, and Alex Wagman stand next to a poster advertising the premiere of the new documentary, "Finding the Words: the story of Voices from Inside."

A documentary that had its origins in the classrooms of HCC premiered Jan. 28 at Northampton's historic Academy of Music. "Finding the Words: The Story of Voices from Inside" tells the stories of women who write to overcome their experiences with incarceration and addiction. HCC English professor and Service Learning Program documentarian Alex Wagman, one of the film's executive producers, began working on the project during a sabbatical semester in 2019 with the support of a \$15,000 grant from MassHumanities. The film features interviews with HCC English professor Lisa Mahon, HCC's Service Learning Program coordinator, whose classes

have long collaborated with Voices from Inside, as well as criminal justice professors Nicole Hendricks and Adina Giannelli, president of the Voices from Inside board of directors. Professors Mary Orisich (economics), Vanessa Martinez (anthropology), and Katharine Daube (sociology) served as research consultants. "It's a very HCC, home-grown production," Wagman said. In addition, one of the women featured in the documentary is HCC and Voices from Inside alum Sonia Mendez '20. Aundrea Marchoun '21, another HCC alum, worked as a videographer, and the music was composed by English instructor and singer-songwriter Kelly Vogel.

Finding the Words: The Story of Voices from Inside

Mystery Ink



Some teachers offer incentives such as gold stars, extra credit, or even candy for work well done. Early education professor Sheila Gould offers her right arm as a canvas for tattoos selected by her students. Her latest ink came in December. It's an image of the Very Hungry Caterpillar eating a pink cupcake. "They had an assignment to make Tik Tok videos about their course content to inform the public in a really fun way about how important the field of early childhood education is," said Gould. "I gave them a challenge: any group that gets over 1,000 likes on their video can ask me 10 personal questions and then design a mystery tattoo for me that I can't see until it's done." Gould ran the same Tik Tok challenge project in the fall of 2021, resulting in a tattoo of a green carnation with her maiden name, Murphy, on the stem, in memory of her father, who liked to hand them out to honor the family's Irish heritage. Of all the rewards she's offered to students over the years, the tattoo challenge seems to work best, so she's planning to do it again. "It would be kind of fun to have a sleeve by the time I retire," she said.

Early education professor Sheila Gould shows off her latest tat.

Homecoming Queen



The reception alone nearly brought Marcelle Dion LaBrecque to tears. "I was not expecting such a huge turnout," said LaBrecque '16, a New York City-based alum who performs a traveling drag show in the persona of "Marilyn Monhoe." In a much anticipated event last fall in the HCC Campus Center, LaBrecque literally filled the house, then brought it down. "I'm so used to doing college gigs where there's 10 to 15 students. Showing up here and seeing almost 50 was a little overwhelming. It felt really, really good to be home." As a first-year student at HCC, LaBrecque took Musical Theater Workshop with Professor Ellen Cogen, singing "Let Me Be Your Star" from the TV show "Smash," and "Who I'd Be" from "Shrek" in the semester-ending showcase. "She got my legs where I needed to get them and really helped drive me to continue pursuing musical theater professionally," said LaBrecque, who left HCC before earning a degree. "I'm not proud of this, but I used to cut class just to choreograph and run scenes," said LaBrecque. "My professors understood. They didn't agree with some of the decisions I made but they understood that HCC didn't have everything I needed to become a fully well-rounded performer, and they gave me the space and the opportunity to grow."

Marcelle Dion LaBrecque '16 performs at HCC last fall as Marilyn Monhoe.

DIÁ DE LOS MUERTOS



Despite its resemblance to one of America's favorite occasions, Diá de los Muertos (Mexico's Day of the Dead) has nothing to do with Halloween. "Halloween is tied to a pagan ritual," said HCC Spanish professor Raúl Gutiérrez. "Diá de los Muertos is typically a religious holiday that has to do with Catholicism and a mixture of indigenous practices." Part of the confusion may lie in their shared use of the color orange. "Orange marks the pathway to the afterlife. That's the way your loved ones are able to find you," he explained in November during HCC's first-ever Diá de los Muertos celebration, an event organized by El Centro and HCC's LEA Club (Latin Empowerment Association). Gutiérrez, a native of Mexico, explained the significance of the ofrenda, a kind of altar, that had been constructed outside the El Centro offices in the HCC Campus Center, on which members of the HCC community were invited to place photos of their loved ones who have passed on. HCC student Mishie Serrano of Holyoke brought in a photograph of her great-grandparents. "This is the only photo we have of them," said Serrano, co-president of the LEA Club. "I could not think of a better way to honor them than to do it like this."

Mishie Serrano, president of HCC's LEA Club, holds a photo of her great-grandparents at HCC's first Diá de los Muertos celebration.



Being Colleen

Growing up in Chicopee, Ashley Terron '23 dreamed of one day competing in the city's annual Colleen contest, but one factor gave her pause. "Colleen means Irish girl," she said. "I'm Puerto Rican. I always thought you had to be Irish, but that's not true at all." Early in 2022, during her last year of eligibility, the 20-year-old HCC biology major finally mustered the courage to enter. After several rounds of interviews, she won. "I couldn't believe it," she said. "It was such an experience. It makes me emotional just thinking about it." As her tenure drew to a close, Chicopee's 2022 Colleen visited campus one day with her tiara, green sash, and corsage. "I'm sad, but I'm really grateful," she said. "There are a lot of responsibilities. I've met so many people and learned so many valuable skills." Terron, who works as a personal care assistant, said she's now looking forward to Commencement in June before entering HCC's medical assistant program in September and then pursuing a bachelor's degree in biology on her way to a career as a physician's assistant. "I've worked hard over the last five semesters, so it's really rewarding to finally be able to graduate," she said. "I learned a lot from HCC, and I've learned a lot from being Colleen."

Biology major Ashley Terron '23, Chicopee's 2022 Colleen, graduates in June.

'THIS IS YOURS'

Julissa Colón '13, director of El Centro

EL CENTRO A WELCOME INVITATION TO HCC'S SPANISH-SPEAKING STUDENTS

BY DUSTY CHRISTENSEN

In September, on Greishenys Lopez's first day as a Holyoke Community College nursing student, she didn't know what to do. Concepts like "prerequisites" were new to her, and she felt surrounded by English — a change for Lopez, who grew up speaking Spanish and English in a bilingual home.

But then Lopez found El Centro, an academic-support space and community dedicated to the needs of Hispanic and Spanish-speaking students like her. Walking into El Centro's offices, where flags of Latin American countries hang on the windows and art from the Spanish-speaking world decorates the lobby, Lopez was able to connect with a bilingual advisor who made her feel a lot more comfortable with learning and the academic process.

"It almost feels like a family," Lopez said. "Here, we can talk our Spanish and we won't get made fun of for it. It's just the norm."

At El Centro, which opened its doors at HCC in the summer of 2022, students receive culturally responsive guidance toward graduation, transfer, or a career. In addition to academic advising and financial aid assistance, El Centro provides wraparound support services, helping students connect with HCC's tutoring center and child watch program, for example, or food pantry if they're experiencing hunger.

"El Centro was built from the ideas and beliefs of Latinx people on campus," said HCC alum Julissa Colón '13, the center's director. "We

wanted something by us, for us. It's very different to be helped by someone who has walked the same journey you are walking right now."

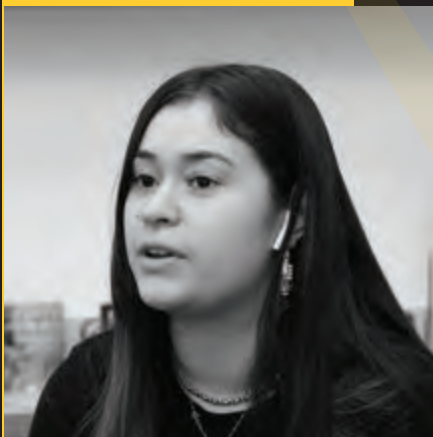
Colón would know.

At 19, she dropped out of college after giving birth to her first child and started working. When she was 28, she applied for a clerk job at Gateway to College — a dual-enrollment program at HCC that allows those who have dropped out of high school to take college classes for both high-school and college credit. By then, Colón believed her opportunity to attend college had passed her by. Her HCC supervisor challenged that assumption.

"She didn't say, 'Come in and answer phones,'" Colón recalled. "She said, 'Come and be part of building this culture — and then encouraged me to go back to school.'"

That's exactly what Colón did. She eventually received her associate's degree from HCC and a bachelor's degree from Smith College before heading to the University of Massachusetts Boston for her master's degree — all while working full time and parenting.

When Colón saw a posting for the director's position at El Centro, she felt all of her life experiences — including her childhood growing up as a Puerto Rican in Springfield's North End — leading her to apply.



“And I got it,” she said. “It just blew my mind ... Just this incredible sense of joy and nerves, and I felt, and still feel, a huge sense of responsibility. Not just to the students but also to everyone at the college and in the community who pushed for so many years for something like this to be created.”

Holyoke Community College is a federally designated “Hispanic-Serving Institution,” or HSI, meaning that at least a quarter of its students identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx. Many staff and faculty members are Latinx, too, and it was from those groups that the idea for El Centro emerged.

“This didn’t just come up out of nowhere,” Colón said. “It wasn’t one person’s idea.”

The college’s support for Latinx students has evolved over the years. The El Centro space, for example, was built into the renovation plans for the HCC Campus Center, which reopened in September 2019, after a three-year, \$43.5 million reconstruction. At first, El Centro was home to MAS, HCC’s Multicultural Academic Services program, which began in 2006 as a way for the college to offer academic and personal support to its diverse student body.

But Hispanic faculty, staff, and students continued to push for a fully staffed, bilingual space with culturally responsive support services. Advocates included the college’s Hispanic Leadership Committee, as well as HCC alum and longtime staff member Myriam Quiñones ’95, the founding director of MAS, who left HCC in 2022 to move back to Puerto Rico.

“For HCC to have El Centro is really important because we are a Hispanic Serving Institution,” said HCC Spanish professor Raúl Gutiérrez, a member of the Hispanic Leadership Committee and chair of the Latinx Studies program. “It creates this space where students who identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx can find help, not only bilingual help but cultural help. It creates this possibility of belonging and placemaking to happen. There’re always students there. It’s important to have a vibrant space where students feel welcome.”

When Sharale Mathis arrived in 2021 as HCC’s new vice president of academic and student affairs, the process of creating El Centro was already moving forward. Because HCC is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and because the college is located in a city where a majority of residents identify as Hispanic, Mathis said college leaders wanted to ensure HCC was doing all it could to meet the community’s needs.

“How do we do this?” she asked. “How do we provide the support services that they need to get them in the door, support them while they’re here, and then make sure they’re successful upon completion?”



At left, top to bottom, Dylan Guzman, Rosie Lopez, Greishenys Lopez, Diomary Guzman. Above, El Centro staffers Sintique Carrillo (community outreach counselor), left, and Shakara Acoff (clerk)

For starters, El Centro’s five-member staff is entirely bilingual – an important detail not just for students who feel more comfortable speaking Spanish, but also for their families as they navigate the often esoteric world of academic credits and financial aid. Like Colón, many of the staff are from western Massachusetts and have experienced some of the same difficulties their students are now encountering.

“I’ve been there before,” said Sintique Carrillo, El Centro’s senior community outreach counselor and a Springfield native. “I know what it’s like to be a first-generation college student, to have that barrier with the language and terminology.”

El Centro's staff includes a financial services clerk, academic counselor, senior community outreach counselor, and student success counselor. Together they work to actively recruit students to the college, help them with applications and financial aid, provide academic support, and connect them with partners out in the community.

But more than that, Colón said, the staff wants to make El Centro a place "where you feel comfortable bringing your culture, bringing your language, bringing yourself." Students can stop by for a biweekly café con leche gathering at El Centro, where, Carrillo said, staff "get some energy up" and check in with students.

El Centro has also co-organized and hosted events and activities to make students feel welcome on campus. Those include a Latinx Fiesta, and a "Bienvenidos" event — Spanish for "welcome" — for first-time students arriving on campus in the fall. Also last fall, El Centro was the location of HCC's first-ever celebration of Día de los Muertos, a holiday celebrated in Mexico and other parts of the Spanish-speaking world that pays respects to those who have died. That event was organized together with the student-run LEA Club, the college's Latinx Empowerment Association.

While events like these can be fun, Colón added they are also part of HCC's efforts to make the college feel like home for students, where they don't just get by but can thrive as their authentic selves.

That kind of support is critical in Holyoke, where around half of residents have less than a bachelor's degree, Mathis said. If HCC wants to have an impact in its home community the college has to be able to communicate to families the importance of education and to push back against the perception of HCC as the "college on the hill," isolated from the rest of the city.

"It is truly equity-focused and understanding of the community that we serve," Mathis said. "We want to be Holyoke's college — a place for career growth, lifelong learning, workforce advancement, and just a place where people feel they are at home, where they're welcome and they're appreciated."

That's how Dylan Guzman feels. A first-year art student, Guzman stumbled upon El Centro one day when he was looking for the Student Engagement office to get his photo taken for his student ID. He said an El Centro staffer joked with him and made him feel at ease. Since then, he has made friends with other students at El Centro and has returned there often for academic support.

"If you need to catch up on anything, you can come in here," he said.

Rosie Lopez, who came to HCC through the Gateway to College program, said El Centro's staffers are "very understanding and supportive, whether it's school related or home related."


"I had this fear of coming into the room and there being a whole bunch of advisors with a serious demeanor," Lopez said. But instead, "it's like a family member telling me, 'I want to be supportive but I also want you to be successful.'"

One of those academic counselors in El Centro is Sully Netti, who, on any given day, can be seen helping students with everything from scheduling to email etiquette and understanding their syllabi. Netti said that El Centro's being a bicultural environment "shifts the space, even if whoever walks in doesn't speak Spanish."

"They help you with everything," said psychology student Diomary Guzman, Dylan's sister.

For many years, Colón said, if you were Hispanic on HCC's campus you likely had a story about feeling out of place and even, at times, unwelcome. The mission of El Centro is to change that.

"This was a commitment from the institution and the people building it to say: 'No more,'" Colón said. "'Not only are you welcome, this is yours.' It has just been huge."

Dusty Christensen is a freelance writer living in Easthampton. 

Below, academic counselor Sullynette Ortiz works with student Diomary Guzman.





THE CHANGE AGENT

Saúl
Caban
brings new
energy to
'dream job'
at HCC.

By **CHRIS YURKO**

“I am the product of effective mentoring,” he says. “I know what it can do for an individual’s life, especially as a man of color, as a Puerto Rican, a Latino man.”

Saúl Caban, 30, sits behind an old desk in his new

office, still mostly unfurnished, a photo of his newborn son, Aidan, on the windowsill. Never at a loss for words, he talks with seemingly endless energy about his job as the first full-time director of ALANA Men in Motion, an HCC student-mentorship program for young men of color, ALANA being an acronym for “African-American, Latino, Asian, and Native American.”

“Mentoring can mean different things, right? It really just depends on the student, what their needs are, what their goals are,” he says. “At the core, ALANA is meant to establish a relationship, a go-to resource, to give men of color someone they can rely on and talk to who can help them make the necessary connections on their academic journey, so their goals and aspirations become a reality.”

ALANA has existed for about 15 years. Until recently, though, it had operated under the umbrella of the Center for Academic Program Support – the college’s tutoring centers – with part-time mentors and a part-time coordinator.

Driven by the college’s equity initiatives, a grant from the newly established Massachusetts SUCCESS Fund, and ALANA’s positive results, HCC administrators decided to expand the program. With Caban’s hiring in September 2022, ALANA became a stand-alone program with four dedicated, full-time staff members: Caban, an administrative assistant, and two professional mentors.

“Our target enrollment for the year is 200 students,” says Caban. That would represent a roughly six-fold increase over the three dozen or so students ALANA used to serve each year.

“It’s a big jump,” he says, “but I’m super excited about that. I feel like we’re in a great position now to really reimagine the way we support men of color.”

Caban came to HCC in 2019 as a learning specialist – essentially an academic and career counselor – for TRIO Student Support Services, a federally funded program that works with low-income and first-generation students, and those living with documented disabilities.

“It’s all tied to supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and marginalized communities,” says Caban. “The students who need us most.”

When he saw the posting for the ALANA position, he jumped at it. “It was like, oh my god, this is a dream job,” he says. “This is my dream job.”

Born in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, Caban migrated to Holyoke with his family as a child and grew up in the Flats, “the back streets,” he says, “in a very impoverished neighborhood.” Fourth of six children, he was first in his family to graduate from high school and first to go to college.

As a sophomore at Westfield State University, he discovered the TRIO program there, and it changed his life. “What it did for me,

working with my advisor in TRIO, I really felt like I belonged in college,” he says. “They made me feel like a superstar.”

During his junior and senior years, he worked for TRIO as a peer mentor: “I knew as I was nearing college graduation that I wanted to work in higher education and be a change agent, supporting students to help them move forward with their dreams.”

After earning his bachelor’s degree in social work, Caban was hired as youth career services coordinator for MassHire Holyoke and later returned to Westfield State as a career counselor and employer relations specialist. Last year, he completed his master’s degree in public administration at Westfield.

Despite his connections to WSU, Caban says he always believed he would work for HCC one day.

“I am a product of effective mentoring,” he says again, “but more importantly, I’m a product of the Holyoke community.”

And he continues to stay involved in it. Outside of work, Caban serves as a board member for the Latino Scholarship Fund of Western Massachusetts and volunteers as a basketball coach and community activist for the Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative.

Ultimately, he says, faith and family (wife Maritza, and son Aidan, now 3) are the forces that drive his commitment.

“As a man of color,” he says. “I want to be an example to my son, because I know what unique challenges we face, such as financial barriers, which I know will be very different for my son, because I worked so hard to put myself in a better position.”

“I don’t take that for granted, though,” he goes on. “I know that at the end of the day my son will be a Puerto Rican man growing up in our city, in our community, and that can come with its own challenges.”



The new faces of ALANA: (left to right) administrative assistant Tina Lengieza; mentor Freddie Hernandez, student Hilario Peralta Jr., director Saúl Caban, and mentor Miguel Velez.



“I’ve always wanted my story to impact other people, to help them succeed, because, you know, life is hard, and sometimes we don’t always have the resources we need to succeed. But hearing someone else’s story can motivate you, give you ideas of how to get

where

you

want to

be.”

With the right support, student Alondra Serrano takes a big leap

- Alondra Serrano, 20



By *CHRIS YURKO*

Her long black hair pulled back tight into a bun, the young student, scalpel in hand, stared down at the laboratory table as still as the expired creatures pinned to her team's dissection tray, a freshwater clam with its guts exposed and an earthworm about to suffer the same fate.

"I've never done any of this before," she said, explaining her hesitation. "I've never dissected anything. I'm learning something that I've never seen."

As a student last fall in General Zoology, Alondra Serrano saw a lot she'd never seen and learned even more, about herself as well as biology, her new major. A year ago, Serrano was three semesters deep into her HCC education and about halfway to an associate's degree in business administration, which she chose because it could be completed entirely online.

"I started during the pandemic," she said, "and I have a daughter, so coming to campus wasn't a choice for me. I didn't have anybody to take care of her, and daycare's pretty expensive. My husband works. One income is not a lot, but we didn't qualify for a voucher. At that point, all I

(Top) HCC STEM Scholar Alondra Serrano sits with her daughter, Anna, after collecting her from the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch. (Bottom) Serrano greets one of her HCC advisors, Irma Medina, coordinator of the Pathways Program.





(Above) Biology major Alondra Serrano waits for her zoology class to begin. (Below) Serrano and her daughter, Anna, wait for the elevator in the Campus Center before heading to child watch (for Anna) and class (for Alondra).

could do was take online classes, so business seemed like the perfect match for me.”

And then...

In the summer of 2022, HCC opened the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch, a free service for student-parents who need care for their children while they are on campus and in class. For many current and would-be HCC students, the earth shook with new possibilities.

Suddenly free from the bonds of stay-at-home motherhood, Serrano enrolled in an on-campus summer course to fulfill a lab science requirement. She chose STEM Explorations, a free program offered through the college’s STEM Starter Academy. The class provides an overview of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and, through hands-on classwork, lectures, and field trips, exposes students to specific STEM subjects, such as robotics, environmental science, geology, statistics, and marine biology.

“STEM Starter Academy reminded me of the passion that I had for science,”





“I feel like I’m breaking the poverty cycle in my life. Just being here in college is changing my life every day.”

Serrano was one of the first HCC students to sign up for the child watch program. Her daughter, Anna, turned 2 in December.

“They take great care of her,” Serrano said. “When she started, she barely talked. Now she talks a lot. She’s very social – not like me. She loves drawing. She likes to play and talk to everybody.”

STEM Starter Academy did more for Serrano than remind her of her love for biology. It showed her what an education and career in STEM could offer.

Two moments from that summer stand out. One was a field trip to Boston’s New England Aquarium, a place she’d never been. Her eyes light up with the memory. “I always wanted to go,” she said. “My daughter was with me. She just kept pointing at the fishes and the turtles.”

Left: Itsy Bitsy Child Watch director Emily Webber plays with Anna Serrano while her mother attends class.
Opposite: Serrano picks up her daughter after class.

The second, also a class trip, was an excursion to a biology lab at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where researchers were using zebrafish to study neural pathways in hopes of developing therapies for people prone to seizures.

“Oh, I loved that one,” Serrano said. “It was my favorite. That actually helped me decide that I wanted to be in the biology field. It was very – how you say it? – inspiring, because I got to see the equipment and all the technology that was used to support the research.”

Melissa Paciulli, a STEM advisor and one of the field trip organizers, could see the spark as the idea revealed itself.

“She left with a big smile on her face, like, oh, wow, this is awesome; this is what I want to do,” said Paciulli.

During the summer course, Serrano was also introduced to HCC’s STEM Scholars Program and learned that if she changed her major to biology, she would be eligible to apply a scholarship from the National Science Foundation, which is available to STEM students at HCC through a competitive application process. If awarded, she would have all her college expenses covered, including tuition and fees.

To do that, though, she would have to give up most of the credits she'd earned as a business major and essentially start over.

"I find her fearless in that sense, taking that leap of faith, being open to letting people guide her in that decision," said Irma Medina, coordinator of the Pathways transfer program and one of Serrano's many HCC advisors. "For a lot of students, that is scary, the unknown of it, especially science and where that might lead, and, more importantly, how it relates to financial aid, which is often limited."

By the time she returned for the fall 2022 semester, Serrano had made the leap and been rewarded. She started the new academic year as an HCC STEM scholar.

"When I found out, it was crazy, because I'm the first in my family to go to college," she said. "I'm the first to get a scholarship. I come from a low-income family. It was all very impacting on me because I didn't think I would ever be able to go to college. The scholarship gave me the courage to see something else in me."

Born in Puerto Rico, Serrano grew up living mostly with her mother, who, she said, struggled to maintain a stable home life for her and her sisters. Often homeless, they moved back and forth between Puerto Rico and western Massachusetts, often staying with relatives. "I was always like one year there, one year here," she said. "It was really hard because I couldn't catch both languages. My Spanish isn't that great. But neither is my English. I'm a little bit of both."

Nevertheless, she graduated high school with a GPA of 3.9, even though there were times she had thought of dropping out, times when members of her own family urged her to drop out. But for one teacher – always available for a hug – and her boyfriend, José, now her husband, she probably would have. "I've known him since I was 14," she said. "He has been my most support. He said, you're not dropping out. Those two kept me going."

When it came time for college, she and José struck a deal. She would go first. He would support her with his job as a machine operator. Then it would be his turn. Her unexpected pregnancy didn't foil their plans. But Serrano felt obligated to pursue a degree she knew would quickly produce income, and she was already making some money at home selling clothes online.

"Because we had a baby at an early age, we had to figure out how to get where we want to be," she said. "I went for business because I wanted to open my own business."

Last summer, she sat at the proverbial crossroads. "I was like, this is the time for me to decide," she said. "I could stay with the business degree, but I didn't feel happy where I was."

Business classes were easy for her, said Serrano, who had regularly made the Dean's List. As someone who struggles with math, though, science, she knew, would be more challenging.

"When I was first coming to college, people in my

family were like, 'you're not going to make it, you think it's easy?' she said. "Well, I'm the kind of person that thinks it's not about it being easy. It's about how far are you willing to go in life? I'm willing to go far and make my life be successful because I don't want the history that I had as a child to repeat in my adulthood. The only way I can do that is working hard. And it's not always about working hard, but also working smart. Smart decisions bring you to where you are in life on the good path."

HCC, she said, was a smart decision. Choosing STEM was another.

"I feel like I'm breaking the poverty cycle in my life," she said. "Just being here in college is changing my life every day."

For the fall 2022 semester, Serrano took four classes, two online and two in person. Each week, Monday through Thursday, while she attended her English and zoology classes on campus, Serrano dropped her daughter off at Itsy Bitsy Child Watch on the first floor of the Marieb Building. So far, HCC is one of only two community colleges in Massachusetts to offer a free child watch service for its students. She can't imagine life without it now.


"If there was no daycare," Serrano said, "I could not come to school."

Besides the financial benefits of being a STEM Scholar, Serrano also became part of a learning community that incorporates mentoring, undergraduate research opportunities, honors coursework, community service, and internships.

"That feeling of belonging is so important when you talk about STEM success," said HCC math professor Ileana Vasu, coordinator of the HCC STEM Scholars program. "We're a really close family and very proud of our STEM community mentors and students."

Serrano is happy to be part of it.

"I have so many people guiding me," she said. "It's awesome to have people that want to help you succeed and show you ways to succeed. I feel like I'm fulfilling my full potential in life, in my personal life, in my education life, and it's great. It's more than great."

So far so good. She passed all her fall semester classes – three A's and a B. 



Endings & EXITS

As retirement looms, President Christina Royal reflects on her time at HCC

By CHRIS YURKO

Endings and exits are just as important as beginnings, says President Christina Royal.

Fittingly, when she announced last year that she intended to retire from HCC, she gave nearly a year's notice, enough time to tie up loose ends and help smooth the college's transition to its next president. Her last day will be July 14.

"It has been one of the greatest honors and privileges of my life to serve as the fourth president of this great institution," she said August 23 in a message to the HCC community, "and now is the time to prepare for the next chapter of my life."

Royal, 50, made clear that she is not leaving HCC for another job and has no specific plans. Her choice of the word "retirement" to describe her actions, she said, was deliberate, marking a definitive break between her present job and whatever comes next.

"One of the greatest responsibilities of any leader is to

know when and why to lead an institution and also when and why it is time to leave it," she said. "I have spent a considerable amount of time reflecting about this life change, and my 'why' is simple and straightforward: I am seeking expansion and personal growth in the form of new learnings and experiences and an opportunity to pause and enjoy the present moments."

Royal started at HCC in January 2017 succeeding William Messner as HCC's fourth president, and making history as the first woman to hold the position.

In her announcement, Royal cited some of the milestones of her tenure: working collaboratively to develop HCC's first strategic plan, advancing equity across the institution; and investing in programs to support students' basic needs, such as creating the President's Student Emergency Fund (to provide grants to students facing immediate financial needs), opening Homestead Market (the first campus store in Massachusetts to accept SNAP benefits), partnering with Holyoke Housing Authority (to help students find affordable housing), and launching the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch

Opposite, October 2022: President Royal stands outside the Campus Center in support of students painting a rainbow crosswalk leading to the parking lot.

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Education Inspires. Connect.



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+ VALUED



(Top) November 2017: Former President David Bartley takes a moment with President Royal after her inauguration.
 (Bottom) May 2022: President Royal, an avid reader, holds one of her favorite books.

Have you ever had the feeling that you're on a kind of farewell tour?

Last year, when I first announced that I would be retiring from HCC, there was an immediate reaction from people saying very nice things and offering their goodbyes, and I said, "I've got a whole year ahead of me; I'm not going anywhere right away." When I'm speaking, I just try to remind people that it's not my final day yet. It's customary in the field of higher education for presidents to give a full year's notice. At HCC, though, that hasn't necessarily been the case. Because there have only been three presidents before me, I think maybe it seemed a bit unusual for folks, but I wanted to give the college the respect it deserved in having a peaceful transition of leadership to the fifth president.

Has your approach to the job changed since you made your announcement?

There is a shift that happens, but the shift is more about, how do I prepare the institution for a new president? How do I provide a good transition point for an incoming president to be able to pick up that baton and go in whatever direction she or he may choose to. On the macro level, I still have the same priorities that I had before in terms of aligning with our strategic plan, working on the core areas highlighted in our NECHE accreditation report, hiring a vice president of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, donor engagement, and fundraising for a capital campaign.

program (to provide HCC student-parents access to free, short-term care for their children.)

Other highlights include opening the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute on Race Street; reopening the HCC Campus Center after a two-year, \$43.5 million renovation; establishing El Centro, a bilingual center dedicated to the needs of Latinx students; weathering a global pandemic; and celebrating HCC's 75th anniversary as the oldest two-year college in Massachusetts.

"President Royal has always known what needed to be done to take HCC to the next level, and she involved everyone in the process of moving the college forward," said Robert Gilbert, chair of the HCC Board of Trustees. "The work to advance HCC's mission, vision, and strategic priorities will indeed continue. Without question, higher education as a sector is in for a lot of change as we look to the future, but Dr. Royal has prepared our institution well and set HCC up for success far beyond her tenure."

In January, as she prepared to begin her final semester at HCC, President Royal sat down with *Connection* editor Chris Yurko to talk about her decision to retire, her plans, and her legacy as HCC's fourth president.

A longer version of this interview appears on the HCC website. It has been edited for length and clarity.



Why did you choose this moment to move on?

It wasn't an instant decision. I put a lot of thought and reflection into everything I do. I have said multiple times that it's not so much about my leaving HCC as it is about starting my next chapter and being able to make space in my life for other things that I haven't had time to focus on. I wanted to make sure that the institution was in a stable place post-pandemic. That was very important to me, making sure that we would be okay and that we were far enough on the other side of it.

Do you believe HCC is in a stable place?

I do. There will always be challenges; it doesn't matter what period it is in the college's history. There's always going to be challenges that an institution's facing or higher education is facing. However, with that said, I do think that we're in a good place, and we have a lot of external recognitions to validate that. We have a lot of new folks we have welcomed to the college. In responding to the pandemic, faculty and staff have had to completely rethink the work they do and how they do it. I think that we're at a place where people understand this shift and have acclimated to the ways their job roles have had to change to accommodate this new post-pandemic world, although I don't really like the term "post-pandemic." We are in a different place than we were in 2020, clearly. Even 2021 and 2022 felt like the start of another layer of transition. I'm optimistic about 2023.

For most people, retirement means the end of their working life. You're only 50 years old.

Retirement to me signifies a completion and an ending of sorts, and that's what I wanted to communicate. Oftentimes, when people make an announcement at my age, the focus is so much on where they're going to. I wanted to be very intentional about disaggregating those things because I want to take a break before I transition to something else. I really did want to create some space and time for me to enjoy another chapter. I've got a lot of big things happening in my personal life. All very good things. It's also taken a lot to lead a college through a pandemic, and I thought this would be a perfect time to take a short break.

(Top) May 2019: President Royal and HCC criminal justice professor Alex Sanchez '90 welcome then-Attorney General Maura Healey, center, to campus for a tour and talk.

(Middle) January 2018: President Royal dons a white chef's coat during an open house at the new HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

(Bottom): May 2018: President Royal takes a selfie during a "Future Walk" unveiling of HCC's first Strategic Plan.





March 2017: President Royal greets student Kiana Estime in the HCC Courtyard after a celebration for International Women's Day.

You must be fielding inquiries about possible new jobs.

I've pretty much said no to everything that has come my way, because I did really mean it when I said I wanted to have some space in between this and whatever's next. I'm putting my focus on having a break for the rest of 2023 and then starting something sometime in 2024. I have some personal projects that I just haven't had a chance to put as much time into, even decluttering my household, spending more time with family and friends. I want to travel a little bit more and just make some space for things that can be challenging with a job as intense as a college presidency.

Do you have something specific in mind?

I might teach. I'm not necessarily thinking I would step into that full time, but teaching a class would be exciting when I think about that as a creative expression of my skill set and an opportunity to stay connected to students, which is what I really love.

You mentioned big things happening in your personal life. You recently got engaged.

Yeah, there's a lot of big, big news. My partner Karen and I purchased a house in South Hadley. She's a designer, so she is fixing that

up. I feel very grateful to be leaving HCC on a high when I feel like the college is doing good work. I feel I'm in a good space personally and professionally.

Did you set a date yet?

Not yet. I wanted to be able to fully focus on HCC this semester, this first half of the year, and so we are talking about a date in the fall, so sometime after I'm finished at HCC and I can give that the attention it deserves as well.

You broke a lot of barriers as president of HCC: first woman, first person of color, first openly gay. How did that feel?

I have spoken very openly and consistently about how important representation is. One of my very first HCC events was International Women's Day. I gave some remarks. People didn't really know me at that point. Afterward a lot of people came up to me and said how nice it was to have a woman as president, a queer person, a woman of color. All of these comments were about their being

MAJOR INITIATIVES

- November 2017:** President's Student Emergency Fund created
- January 2018:** HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute opened
- September 2018:** First Strategic Plan unveiled
- October 2018:** Center for Life Sciences opened
- October 2019:** Cannabis Education Center established
- February 2020:** Renovated Campus Center celebrated
- June 2021:** Pride Flag raised for first time
- November 2021:** Homestead Market opens
- March 2022:** Trans Flag raised for first time
- May 2022:** Itsy Bitsy Child Watch opens
- May 2022:** College celebrates 75th Anniversary

Honors, Awards, & Recognitions:

- February 2020:** Awarded New Presidents Fellowship from Aspen Institute
- November 2020:** Named "Woman of Impact" by Business West magazine
- January 2021:** Awarded AACU Inclusion Scholarship
- February 2021:** Featured in "HERstory" exhibit at Mass. State House
- November 2021:** HCC named one of Top 100 Women-Led Businesses in Mass.
- October 2022:** HCC named one of Top 100 Women-Led Businesses in Mass.
- March 2023:** Chosen "Woman of the Year" by Zonta Club of Quaboag Valley

able to see themselves in leadership. Now, what you do in the role is also important; you have to be able to make a tangible impact by bringing people along, engaging people in the endeavors that you wish to lead. Not being able to see yourself in key roles really does limit your thinking about what's possible for yourself. I hadn't even started thinking about a college presidency until I worked for a president who was a woman of color. She said, "You would be good at this someday."

What are you going to miss most about HCC?

Working with faculty, staff, and students. We are in the people business, and I've talked a lot about that and reminded people that while automation is important, and new forms of disrupting the way we do business is critical to our future, we are in the people business. I love interacting with people. I love that aspect of my job, being able to have a chance to see our faculty in the classroom, doing what they do best. That's been so powerful. It's part of my job as president to share those stories with the community at large so they can see the impact that HCC makes and why this is the place they should send their students.

You've been working with the HCC Foundation to endow the Christina Royal Equity Promise Scholarship. Why was that important for you to do?

If we're truly going to aspire to a promise of equity for all and to really help close achievement gaps then we need to prioritize equity at all levels. To do that, we have to think about how we close the gaps that students experience that do not allow them to stay continuously enrolled in college. I wanted to have a scholarship that allows us to help fill in those gaps as we continue to prioritize the equity agenda and focus on how we can ensure that every student who comes to HCC with an aspiration to get a degree or credential to change their lives through the power of education has the ability to do so. It's like trying to smooth over the potholes in the student experience so that it's a bit smoother and they don't get derailed.



June 2022: President Royal bumps fists before Commencement with alum Mychal Connolly '04, recipient of HCC's 2022 Distinguished Service Award.

You've presided over a lot of grand openings since you arrived in 2017. Is there any one that stands out?

I was really excited for all of them, but if I had to call one out it would be the Campus Center. I had toured the Campus Center when I was interviewing for this job and within weeks after starting we had to shut it down for reconstruction. It was such a difficult time because it was an area, even in its dilapidated condition, that was a focal point for students, and suddenly that didn't exist. And, so, we had to find other ways to create spaces for students to gather across the campus, and that was challenging. When we reopened the Campus Center, it was absolutely gorgeous. I knew it would be a space where students would congregate and it would do all the things we had wanted for a campus center. In February 2020, we invited Governor Baker and other key dignitaries to come for the grand opening. A month later we had to shut it down again along with the whole college. When the campus started to open up in the fall of 2021, I walked in there and it still had its new car smell, so to speak. I thought, OK, well here's our gift coming out of the pandemic. We have a brand new Campus Center. How are we going to make the most of this? It was a really great space to have to give students a sense of community again.

What's been your most memorable experience at HCC?

I've had a lot of memorable experiences. Most recently, painting the crosswalk outside the Campus Center with



strategic planning process. Mark your calendars for

rainbow paint was very exciting. I have really enjoyed my time attending plays and hanging out with the theater students, particularly when they invited me to participate in the 24-hour theater festival and I had a chance to run lines with them. I loved going to the Woo Sox game with students and alums of the college. One of the students said it was his very first time in a ballpark, and so it was fun talking to him about my experiences going to ball games, and especially since I had aspired to be the first female professional baseball player. Those types of experiences are just so joyous.

The opening of the Homestead Market was a memorable event for me because it was birthed out of students. They asked for a place where they could use their SNAP benefits on campus. Being able to directly respond to a student request and meet that call and challenge was exciting.

As someone who identifies as queer, raising the first Pride flag was a huge honor. To be able to represent our LGBTQ community and bring more visibility to LGBTQ issues felt very rewarding to me. Going into the radio station and talking with students as they practice their interviewing skills on me and hearing why radio lights them up. Those experiences bring a lot of texture and excitement to my job.

What's your favorite thing about HCC?


My favorite thing about the college is how well it responds to the community. All of the ways we work to support the community, even beyond direct education, such as events and activities, summer youth camps that bring students in early and help parents for the summer. Workforce programs that help adult learners make short-term career changes or leap into a new profession. Helping students transfer to four-year schools. These are all the ways that we make a huge impact in our community.

And then, most recently, pickleball, which I'm very excited about. The community response has been amazing. It just shows you that there's a need for us. This college really does serve a key role in this community. We truly represent who we are.

Surely, the pandemic was the biggest challenge you've faced as president.

There was a lot in my past that prepared me for the presidency. Nothing really prepared me or anyone to lead an institution through a pandemic. There was no playbook to follow. We were living through times nobody had experienced before. In that respect, it made it one of the most intense periods of my presidency, but I'm grateful for the decisions that we've made. I feel grateful that we were able to keep people safe. I was grateful we were able to keep students' educations going. There were a lot of people who needed stability and certainty and predictability during the pandemic, and faculty and staff, while they were experiencing being up-ended in the same way as everyone else, they provided that stability and comfort to students during a very difficult time.

U.S. presidents historically leave a letter for their successors with words of wisdom or advice. Do you have any words of wisdom or advice for the next president of HCC?

The advice I would share is that this is an institution headed in the right direction. With a leader who really embraces and supports and collaborates with faculty, staff, and students, the future is unlimited. 

September 2017: President Royal makes a new friend at the Welcome Back BBQ.

FORWARD
FURTHER



CONNECT- ING THE DOTS

Paul Hudgik '78
believes philanthropy
is a civic responsibility By DOUG SCANLON

1969

Paul Hudgik stands at the front of his seventh-grade classroom, petrified, sweat beading on his forehead, face flush, stomach twisting.

His assignment: Read aloud from *The Hobbit*, a book filled with unfamiliar words about fantastical creatures living in strange lands such as Eriador, Trollshaws, and Rhovanion, names difficult for the best readers to pronounce, let alone students like Hudgik, who at the time had an undiagnosed learning disability.

After stuttering and stumbling for several minutes, the teacher cuts him off and says, *You'll never amount to anything.*

Granby High

Because of poor grades, Hudgik is placed in a lower academic level he and his classmates nicknamed "The Zoo." It's a track for factory work. Even so, he scores in the top 1 percent on the abstract reasoning section of a high school aptitude test. His guidance counselor, buying into the perception of Hudgik as a dim, unmotivated student, accuses him of cheating.

Senior year

A different guidance counselor asks about his future plans. "I'm going to pump gas or work in the mills," Hudgik sarcastically tells her.

"No, you're not," she says. "You're going to college." She helps him submit an application to HCC, where he flounders for a year before dropping out. He finds a job in a computer cable factory, making decent money, but ultimately decides he's meant for something else and reenrolls.

A turning point

Hudgik meets with his advisor, Professor Richard Kumor, and explains his interest in business and investing.

After a short conversation, Kumor suggests Hudgik might have dyslexia, the first to do so. He helps Hudgik arrange his academic schedule, picking out courses and instructors best suited for his learning style.

"He told me, You're always going to have trouble spelling, reading, and so forth, but don't get discouraged," Hudgik remembers. "You can study something for three hours and get a B. Somebody else might do it for an hour and get an A. The difference between you and them is



Paul Hudgik '78, left, sits with his nephew Mark Hudgik '02, HCC director of Admissions and Onboarding, during a recent visit to HCC.

you will actually understand it, be able to use it, and make it work. You'll be able to connect the dots."

Connect the dots he did.

Finding his footing

Hudgik quickly noticed the difference between his experiences in high school and HCC. Rather than assign a chapter followed by a quiz, his HCC instructors asked for chapter outlines to ensure he understood the material he read. He was also allowed to take as much time as he needed on exams.

"I remember taking my first test in Mr. Kumor's class," Hudgik said. "I'm miserable and anxious. 'The kid next to me says, 'Hey, don't sweat it. It's just a test.' Then he starts quietly singing 'Here Comes the Sun,' and Mr. Kumor just lets him sing. That brought my anxiety down, and I ended up getting an A in the course."

He also made Dean's List that semester, an honor his mother saw published in the *Holyoke Transcript*.

"The past was forgotten," he said. "I was no longer the kid who graduated from Granby High School, 115 out of 115 students, the bottom of my class. I was excited, motivated, and respected."


With his associate's degree in hand, Hudgik transferred to the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he met his wife, Barbara, and discovered a knack for entrepreneurship. As dorm president, he booked the hall's communal space for events, managing thousands of dollars that they used to pay for semi-formals and ski trips to Killington.

UMass led to a long career in sales for several large companies, including Bic, Channing Bete, and Canon. While his success came as no surprise to those who knew him well, Hudgik, 67, now retired, is quick to credit those who helped him along the way.

"I would not be where I am and would not have gotten done what I have without Holyoke Community College," he said.

Philanthropic action

Hudgik believes philanthropy is a civic responsibility. Years ago, he decided to direct his monetary support to one of the organizations that matters most to him: HCC. For more than a decade, he has been a regular contributor to the HCC Foundation's unrestricted fund, which goes toward the college's greatest needs.

"Holyoke Community College was one of the most important things in my life," Hudgik said. "I would not have met my wife if I didn't go to Holyoke Community College. I would not have the kids I have, would probably not have had the career I had. That's why I donate to Holyoke Community College. It's a school that believed in me, treated me like an individual, and really helped me move forward with my life. I'm sure there's a lot of students out there like me." 



President Christina Royal bumps fists with student speaker Meagan Rodriguez at the HCC Foundation's Nov. 9 scholarship reception.

'So Incredibly Thankful'

Meagan Rodriguez (veterinary and animal science) received two scholarships from the HCC Foundation for the 2022-2023 academic, the Patrick J. and Margaret V. Sheehan Memorial Scholarship and the Teddy Bear Pools Scholarship. She gave the student address at the HCC Foundation's Nov. 9 scholarship reception.

"My time at HCC has been nothing short of transformative. I'm so grateful to have been able to competently navigate academia with the support of my fellow classmates, the phenomenal HCC staff, and the incredible support of the generous donors who see the value of investing in education for others.

I've dreamed of working in veterinary medicine for a decade, and being at HCC has allowed me to pursue my passion confidently and courageously. The individualized help I've received from my advisor and from the many resources that are available have helped me flourish and focus on my studies without having to worry about the cost of attending my courses or buying the materials needed for my classes and my labs.

Returning to school in the middle of a global pandemic was daunting, to say the least, as well as moving out on my own. There were a lot of challenges all at once. But HCC has a phenomenal network of support systems for students to help us navigate our courses and careers and pursue further education moving forward.

I have made amazing connections at HCC, and I know I will continue to meet more enthusiastic and inspiring people, day in and day out. Without HCC, I would not be as knowledgeable or as progressed in my field. And I am so incredibly thankful for all of the friends, coworkers, mentors, and teachers I've had the opportunity to learn with and from. I'm so proud to be a student at HCC."

GAP YEARS

JAMES BRADFORD GRADUATED
FROM HCC IN 1973.

FIFTY YEARS LATER, HE DID IT AGAIN.



U.S. Army veteran James Bradford '73, '23, gives a Veterans Day address at HCC.

In December, Bradford, 69, a U.S. Army veteran, retired police officer, lawyer, teacher, and Shriner's clown, completed his associate's degree in visual art. That means he is officially a member of the classes of 1973 and 2023. "My first major was law enforcement, which is now called criminal justice," he said. "I graduated from here with honors." From HCC, he went on to UMass for a bachelor's degree before enlisting and serving in Virginia as a military policeman. After the Army, he used his G.I. Bill money to go to law school and raised five children. He returned to HCC a few years ago as an aide to his autistic son, who was a student. He enrolled himself after learning that anyone 60 or older can take classes for \$50 a semester. "I got hooked on visual art, even though I had never drawn a straight line before," he said. In November, Bradford was asked to be the featured speaker at HCC's Veterans Day celebration. "Unfortunately, this is my last semester," he said. "Maybe I'll be done with HCC for good. I hope not. I'm hoping to find some way to stay involved." In any case, he donned his cap and gown again in June to walk across the stage at Commencement.

HONOR COURAGE COMMITMENT

TO THE RESCUE

After Ann Fisher '15, '22, graduated from Mount Holyoke College in 2008 with her bachelor's degree in environmental science, her curiosity took her all over the world, from conservation work on the Appalachian Trail in Vermont and survey work on the Irish coast, to wildlife rehabilitation in British Columbia and preservation work in Poland, where she helped protect the threatened aquatic warbler. Realizing her calling, she enrolled in HCC's veterinary technician program, graduated in 2015, and found a job at Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston. She loved her work, but knee and ankle issues led her to consider a new career that didn't require her to be on her feet all day. Inspired by the gift processing work she'd been doing as a volunteer for Urban Wildlife Rehabilitation, Fisher returned to HCC for the certificate in accounting program and found a job as a gift processor in HCC's division of Institutional



Advancement, while also working part-time at Angell and as a volunteer with Urban Wildlife Rehabilitation. "I like being able to help those who don't have a voice," says Fisher, above, with raccoon. "It's a great feeling to be able to help the animals and to make things a little bit better for them."

Remaking Mountain Park

Jay Ducharme '78 has never quite gotten over the loss of Mountain Park. The Easthampton native grew up visiting the beloved amusement park on the Holyoke side of Mount Tom and worked there for many years as a ride operator (before) and caretaker (after) it closed in 1987. He's spent the past 35 years collecting Mountain Park memorabilia and is no doubt the foremost authority on the subject, having written the definitive history of the place, *Images of America: Mountain Park*, in 2008, and its sequel, *The Happiness Machine*, about the preservation and relocation of the Mountain Park carousel to Holyoke's Heritage State Park. On Oct. 1, at the Heritage State Park Museum – next door to the carousel – Ducharme unveiled what is sure to evoke misty memories – a meticulously hand-crafted, miniature model of the long-lost park. Ducharme built the model in the basement of his Westfield home before relocating it to the museum lobby, where it will remain in perpetuity. "It took four years of my life," he said. "Hopefully it will outlast me." Ducharme, who retired from HCC in 2020 as a professor of electronic media and was the subject of a *Connection* cover story in 2019, chronicled the construction on his website, *Karenandjay.com*, under the header, "Remaking Mountain Park."



Above, Jay Ducharme '78 unveils his tribute to Mountain Park.

Media Acclaim

Editor & Publisher magazine, "the authoritative voice of the #News-Media since 1884," recently named Reminder Publications Executive Editor Payton North '15 to its list of "25 Under 35" for 2023. North, 27, a Monson native, was one of 25 young journalists nationwide featured in a Feb. 1 E&P story under the headline, "Meet the next generation of news media professionals."



"It feels both exciting and humbling," said North. "I'm certainly honored to be picked among such great talent." North assumed the top editor's spot at the weekly newspaper chain late last year. After earning her associate's degree in communications from HCC, North transferred to Western New England University for her bachelor's. She started writing for *The Reminder* newspapers as a freelancer during her senior year at WNEU and was later hired as assistant editor before steadily ascending the masthead. "When I was 5 years old, I knew I wanted to be a journalist," North wrote in an Oct. 4 column explaining the managerial shift. "I fell in love with the ability to tell someone's story – and to tell it well."

Above right, Payton North '15 reads *The Reminder* at her desk in East Longmeadow.

Dramatic Return



Pictured, from left to right: HCC theater professor Pat Sandoval '84, festival organizer Lisa Poehler '84, Donna DeFant '77, Paul Goddu '72, and Ben Phillips, son of Leslie Phillips, who played a part in one of the festival skits.

Nearly 100 HCC alumni, students, staff, and friends turned out on Oct. 8 for the college's fifth Leslie Phillips 24-hour theater festival – the first since 2019 – a night meant to honor the founder of the HCC theater program, raise funds for the department, reminisce, and have fun on stage. Participants wrote and rehearsed five, original one-act plays in one day before performing them the next night. After the show, everyone gathered on the stage to eat cake and celebrate the 50th anniversary of the theater program and the HCC Players, the unofficial name for all those students and alumni who have ever played a role in an HCC production, on stage or off. "We had about an equal number of alums and students who participated," said HCC alum and theater professor Pat Sandoval '84. "It was a wonderful event. They all said they had a really good time and want to come back and do it again next year." The festival was first organized in 2016 by HCC alumni as a tribute to Phillips, who died in 1988 after inspiring legions of HCC theater students.

STEM Action

HCC alum Aaron Portillo '22 kept the 3-D printers quietly humming during Massachusetts STEM Week, Oct. 17-21. During an open house showcasing the college's STEM Innovation Lab, Portillo was simultaneously building a puzzle in one corner of the room, a "STEM Starter Academy" keychain in another, and a hybrid jack-o-lantern/octopus in another. "I like making the pumpkins to hand out with candy to students," said Portillo, HCC's resident 3-D printing expert, who works part time for the college as a STEM peer mentor

and tech specialist. Portillo studied biotechnology at HCC and is now a full time biology student at UMass. "I wanted to incorporate more reptiles and insects into my studies, cause I love them," she said. During the pandemic, Portillo and other HCC STEM students 3-D printed bags of plastic bones for biology students to use at home for remote lab assignments. During a STEM Week tour, Portillo described the potential of 3-D printers to make prosthetics and even organs from real cells. "That's why I got interested in 3-D printing," said Portillo, pointing to a pair of robotic hands on a shelf. "That's the coolest kind of technology to me."

Aaron Portillo '22 tends to a 3-D printer in the HCC STEM Innovation Lab.





O'CONNELL



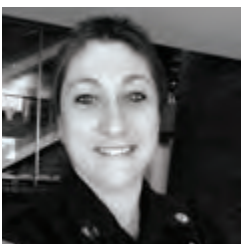
SANTOS



MCMAHON



FIGUEROA



DALPE

Send news of your wedding, retirement, promotion, travels, children/grandchildren, awards, academic achievements, military honors, whatever! Send news and photos to alumni@hcc.edu or to The Connection, c/o Alumni Relations, 303 Homestead Ave., Holyoke, MA 01040.

C/N

1963

John O'Connell earned a bachelor of arts from Boston University and a juris doctorate from Suffolk Law School. He is currently enjoying retirement.

1974

Since her retirement, **Louise Cavanaugh** (arts and science) has been working part time in the Holyoke Public Schools, two years as an instructional leadership specialist and three years as a reading tutor. She retired in 2014 after 38 years as an elementary school teacher, all but one year in Holyoke.

Janis Santos (liberal studies) retired in 2021 after working for over 48 years at Holyoke Chicopee Springfield Head Start, six years as a teacher and 42 years as executive director/CEO.

Gayle Smith (retail management) is semi-retired as president of Middlebridge Marketing in Lincoln, R.I. She will continue as a consultant to the firm as well as chief marketing officer. She resides in Cape Coral, Fla., with her husband.

1978

Jack Desroches (business administration) is the founder of Milestone Production in Springfield, a

full-service event production company, and My Father's House, a place of transformation for formerly homeless men.

1980

Stephen Donnelly (computer information systems) earned a bachelor of arts degree from Westfield State University and a master of business administration from Western New England University. He is now a consulting senior business analyst in the life insurance industry. He frequently contributes book reviews to the Historical Journal of Massachusetts. He has lived and worked in Germany and Japan.

1983

Sharon Miskiv (visual art) is semi-retired and volunteering at the Cape Cod and Islands chapter of the American Red Cross. She previously served as secretary for the Chicopee Democratic Committee in 2008 and attended the Democratic state convention as a delegate from Chicopee. She works as a special education monitor for Van Pool Transportation in Wilbraham.

1988

Cynthia Ravosa (arts and science) was named one of the Top Lawyers of 2021 by *Boston Magazine*.

Ravosa has extensive experience representing individuals and small businesses in bankruptcy cases throughout Massachusetts. In addition to earning her law degree from the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover in 2016, she earned her bachelor's degree from Western New England University, and also holds an MBA with a concentration in accounting from Suffolk University. She is a member of the Hampden, Boston, and Worcester Bar Associations, the National Consumer Bankruptcy Association, and the American Bankruptcy Institute.

1996

Melissa Labonte (hospitality management) is the human resources manager at Pioneer Valley Hotel Group in Springfield.

2005

Joseph Couture (arts and science) earned a master's degree from Boston University and now works as a regional information security officer at Orsted, an offshore wind farm developer in Denmark.

2006

Matt McMahon (psychology) completed a bachelor of arts degree in psychology at the University of

Massachusetts Amherst. He went on to Salve Regina University in Newport, R.I., where he completed a master's degree in international relations and post-graduate certificate in cybersecurity. He also has an executive education certificate in public policy from the Harvard University Kennedy School. He has a number of cyber certificates, including HCISPP, Sec +, AWS, and certified cloud practitioner, among others. He currently works as the research and development lead for cybersecurity and privacy at Philips, a graduate adjunct cyber professor at Salve Regina, and a cybersecurity subject matter expert at MIT.

2008

Jamal Coleman (arts and science) earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts from UMass Amherst and now works as the lead VFX artist at Lightforge Games based in Raleigh, N.C. He has previously worked for Blizzard Entertainment, WB Boston, and Hi-Rez studios.

2013

Leigh-Ellen Figueroa (arts and science) completed a bachelor's degree in sustainable food and farming from UMass Amherst in 2018, a master's degree in counseling psychology from American International College in 2021, and a graduate certificate in restorative practices from the International Institute of Restorative Practices in 2021. She currently works at the Communities That Care Coalition in Franklin County as the health and equity programs coordinator, where she manages and oversees state grants and projects that are connected to the coalition's mission of improving youth health, wellness, and health equity. She also works as a clinician in community mental health at the Center for Human Development and provides consultation, support, and coaching to schools on anti-oppression/equity work and restorative practices.

2015

Alison Dalpé (criminal justice) is finishing bachelor's degrees in criminal

justice and sociology at Westfield State University. She is a campus police officer at Greenfield Community College.

Shamia (Martinez) Anthony (elementary education) earned a bachelor's degree in education from Westfield State University and teaches fifth grade (English language arts) in Springfield Public Schools.

Melanie Wilk (nutrition and food science) is the food service director of Chicopee Public Schools and a registered dietitian.

Jeffery Anderson-Burgos (sociology) completed his bachelor's degree in political science from the Commonwealth Honors College at UMass Amherst in 2017. A resident of Holyoke, he now works as the administrative assistant to the Holyoke City Council and serves on the board of the Greater Holyoke Council for Human Understanding. He is also a member of the Holyoke Pride Committee, a member of the city's 150th anniversary committee, and a member of the Holyoke St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee. During the 2020 presidential campaign he served as a regional volunteer coordinator for Democratic candidate Pete Buttigieg and has raised funds for the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute as a member of several road race teams, including two years running the Boston Marathon.

2016

Savannah Paul (liberal studies) is in her final semester at Bay Path University, where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in education. She lives in Boston and works as an after-school teacher in the Somerville Public Schools.

2018

Cara Chenaille (veterinary and animal science) works at the Monson Animal Clinic as a certified veterinary technician.

Alyssa Lucchesi (Deaf studies) of South Hadley graduated from the Rochester Institute of Technology with a bachelor's degree in American Sign Language and English Interpretation

and now works as an independent contractor ASL interpreter.

Louis Burgos (criminal justice 2014; communications, media and theater arts 2018) is the digital and social media manager at Springfield Technical Community College.

Samantha Harris-Lariviere (visual arts) works in administrative services for the United States Postal Service and volunteers at Dakin Humane Society.

Marianna Chechile Puskas (liberal arts) works as an administrative assistant/digital coordinator for Ware Public Schools.

2019

Yaritza Barta (liberal arts) is a human resource staff assistant at HCC. She will graduate in 2023 from Bay Path University with a bachelor's degree in liberal arts.

Madison Trask (foundations of health) completed a bachelor's degree in health sciences from Westfield State University, as well as an EMT certification. She has been working as a medical assistant/EMT for Berkshire Allergy Care and as a registered pharmacy technician for CVS Health.

2020

Theresa Kincaid (business administration) is a manager at WIS International, a retail services solutions company.

2022

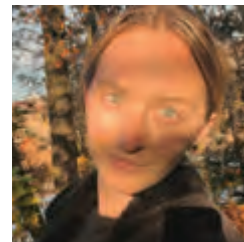
Sylvan Knight (biology) transferred to UMass Amherst, where he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in biology.

Arien Monti (business administration) will graduate this fall from Westfield State University with a bachelor's degree in marketing. She recently obtained her real estate license and also works for the fantasy sports betting company DraftKings.

Emma Pouliot (criminal justice) is studying criminal justice at Southern New Hampshire University and working full time.



WILK



LUCCHESI



BURGOS



BARTA



MONTI



POULIOT




Sue Ellen Panitch, 1935-2023

Sue Ellen Panitch (Holyoke, Mass., January 6, 2023), former chair of the Holyoke Community College Board of Trustees and long-time member of the HCC Foundation Board of Directors, passed away recently at home. Panitch was a champion for Holyoke Community College and the HCC Foundation. Her deep and abiding belief in the Holyoke Community College mission and in each one of our students led to the creation of the Panitch Family Scholarship and Panitch Family Transfer Scholarship, both which continue to be awarded annually. In honor of her dedication to HCC, her family endowed the Sue Ellen Panitch Scholarship.

Panitch was an ardent community activist whose advocacy efforts on behalf of children, the environment, and the City of Holyoke led to her contribution to the success of numerous organizations and causes in addition to Holyoke Community College. These include the Holyoke Conservation Commission, Therapeutic Equestrian Center, Council of Human Understanding, and more. In 1996, the Greater Holyoke Council for Human Understanding presented her with its Human Relations Award. In 2002, the Holyoke Rotary Club presented her with its William G. Dwight Award for her "tireless work and invaluable commitment to the City of Holyoke." In 2012, she was named one of the Unsung Heroines of Massachusetts by the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women. In 2015, she was awarded the Pynchon Medal for Distinguished Service to the Community. Holyoke Rows celebrated her with the naming of the City of Holyoke Sue Ellen Panitch River Access Center and Boathouse, in recognition of her long advocacy for the Connecticut River.

She was predeceased by husband, Dr. Victor Panitch, who was also a supporter of the college.

Memorial donations can be made securely at hcc.edu/donate or mailed to to The Sue Ellen Panitch Scholarship at Holyoke Community College, HCC Foundation, 303 Homestead Ave., Donohue 170, Holyoke, MA 01040. 

In Memoriam

We are saddened to learn of the passing of the following members of the HCC community:

Norene A. Roberts '66
Marion T. King '73
James P. Mikaelian '74
David A. Bernstein '75
Paul T. Lesieur '76
Fancis L. LaMagdelaine '77
Michael F. Slowey '81
David A. Arnold '82
Sharon L. Van Buren '85
Karey Joseph '87
Shirley A. Zimmerman Toner '91
Michael A. Guertin '92
Gerald J. Camerota '97
Sheila A. Townsend '98
Dennis R. Bachand
Joanne M. Wrobel '02
Sandra A. Hills '03
Zaneta I. Huertas '06
Pierce H. Jenkins '08
Mark J. Giannini '19
Kathryn H. Holmes, *retired staff*

And these longtime friends and supporters:

Robert A. Gelinias
Sue Ellen Panitch
Victor Panitch

To contribute in memory of a classmate, friend or relative, visit hcc.edu/donate or call John Sieracki at 413.552.2746.

Nonprofit Organization of the Year

Holyoke Community College
(2023 Shining Star Awards)
From: Greater Chicopee Chamber of Commerce

2023 Alumni of the Year

Meghan Maury '04
(Senior Advisor for Data Policy, U.S. Census Bureau)
From: American Association of Community Colleges

Best Student Support Services

Holyoke Community College
(2023 top community colleges in Massachusetts)
From: Intelligent.com

2023 John W. Nason Award

HCC Foundation Board of Directors (for exceptional leadership and initiative)
From: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges



Best Two-Year College
Holyoke Community College
(2023 Best of the Valley)
From: The Valley Advocate



Best Two-Year College
Holyoke Community College
(10th year in a row)
From: Daily Hampshire Gazette
2022 Readers Choice Awards



Best College or University
Holyoke Community College
(Reader Raves 2023)
From: MassLive / Springfield Republican



2023 Woman of the Year

President Christina Royal
(For improving the lives of women and girls)
From: Zonta Club of Quaboag Valley

Top 100 Women-Led Businesses in Massachusetts

Holyoke Community College
(2023 and 2022)
From: *The Boston Globe Magazine / The Women's Edge*

Paragon Silver Award

The Connection
2022 Best College Magazine
National Council of Marketing & Public Relations



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“I AM FUNDING MY OWN EDUCATION

so scholarship

support really makes it a lot easier on me, because, even though community college is a more affordable option, it isn't always cheap. HCC really goes out of its way to support students in every way possible. That's why I'm so glad I ended up here.”

— Eva Sweeney '23, chemistry major, STEM Scholar, NASA Aerospace Scholar, and recipient of three HCC Foundation scholarships



When you make a gift to HCC, you help enhance the student experience, build a more inclusive environment, train the next generation of leaders, and ensure that HCC is an institution of innovation and excellence.

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