

HCC celebrates graduates of alternative high school program

HOLYOKE – Marjorie Pagan Robles describes her experience in public high school as “complicated.” She liked learning, she says, but not how or what she was being taught.

“Schools often have curriculums that don’t reflect or engage the students they serve yet expect a positive response,” she said. “They fail to promote critical thinking and individuality and fall short in their support of students’ social and emotional well-being. Instead, they lean on punitive action rather than addressing their own faults or shortcomings.”

She was labeled “bad” or “good,” she says, depending on the context – “good” for her grades, but “bad” for talking back, questioning adults’ actions, and standing up for herself.

“They’d probably tell you I had behavior issues,”

she said.

Like many students who struggle in traditional high school settings, Pagan Robles experienced “push-out,” and left after her junior year. Instead, she enrolled in Gateway to College, an alternative high school program at Holyoke Community College.

Through Gateway, she earned her high school diploma – by taking college classes. She graduated June 6 with a final college GPA of 4.0.

“I truly mean when I say being part of this program has healed the way I look at school,” she said from the stage of the Leslie Phillips Theater as one of the keynote speakers during the Gateway graduation ceremony. “Now, rather than just surviving I aim to thrive, because I was put in an environment where I could do just that. I always knew where I was going. Now I have the tools to get there.”

Pagan Robles was one of 47 students from nine area school districts who graduated from Gateway this spring. Collectively, they arrived at HCC with an average high school GPA of 1.57. They finished Gateway with an average GPA of 3.1 and collected 398 college credits. Thirty-five of them will continue on in college, most of them at HCC.

“With this class, Gateway to College now has 660 high school graduates,” said HCC Gateway to College Director Vivian Ostrowski. “Those graduates have earned over 100 college degrees, with many more in progress. One Springfield grad just finished at Mount Holyoke College, and another earned a master’s degree from UMass. We have three RNs. Gateway grads are indeed impressive.”

HCC’s Gateway program started in 2008 and belongs to the national Gateway

to College network. The Gateway modus operandi is to take students who have dropped out of high school or are at risk for dropping out and put them into college classes, where they can secure their high school diplomas while also earning transferable college credits.

“Gateway has always served students for whom traditional high school is not a good fit,” Ostrowski said. “With Covid, traditional high school was not a good fit for anyone. These students experienced profound anxiety and depression, lost family and friends, dealt with addiction and eating disorders and court involvement, were alienated from family, worked crazy hours, had car accidents. It’s been a rough go.”

Still, she added, “these same students kept showing up. These are some exceptional human beings – strong and

resilient, kind and decent.”

Pagan Robles, a criminal justice major from Holyoke, earned 15 college credits through Gateway and made Dean’s List during her last semester. She will transfer into Western New England University’s 3 + 3 law degree program in September. Her career goal is to be an immigration lawyer.

“I wholeheartedly believe there are no ‘bad’ kids,” said Pagan Robles, the first person in her family to go to college. “I do believe that young people have inherent power and that this generation will be the one to push our world forward. The kid that was told they talk too much will be defending you in court one day; the one doodling in class will design the clothes you wear; the one who talked back will be debating your politicians, and so on. These are the kids that will make the most difference not

only because they know what it’s like to struggle but because they are unafraid to challenge authority, and that alone is a powerful thing.”

Each year, Gateway National recognizes individual students for their academic performance. Fifteen HCC Gateway students received the Linda Huddle Award, which honors graduating students who earned a minimum GPA of 3.0. Seven received the President’s Award, presented to students with a minimum GPA of 3.7.

“Graduates,” Ostrowski said during her closing remarks, “you are Gateway for Life. That means we will help you with financial aid, scholarships, job references – forever. We will connect you with all the right people at HCC – forever. We will brainstorm with you about your future – forever. Relentless kindness – forever. We love you.”