

Luis Pedraja: A graduation story begins again at Quinsigamond Community College

Luis G. Pedraja

Excitement is building at Quinsigamond Community College as we prepare to celebrate graduation. I hear it in the voices of students who tell me with pride that they are graduating in a few weeks. I see it in the flurry of preparations from our faculty and staff. Graduation is the culmination of the hopes and dreams of our students, who entrust us with their education and their future aspirations. It is why we do what we do.

As we get ready for graduation, I cannot help thinking back to almost 40 years ago when I was the first in my family to graduate from college. I remember the pride in my parents' eyes. Who would have thought that this immigrant kid who grew up poor in the barrio (neighborhood), who struggled to learn English, would one day be a college president? Education changed my life. And it continues to change the lives of our students.

I often talk about higher education and its transformative power in a person's life. While it may seem redundant, I cannot begin to stress enough that securing an education is one of the most important things a person can do to better their life.

The commonwealth recognized the importance of offering more inclusive higher education for its Central Massachusetts citizens and opened Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester 60 years ago in 1963. Since then, thousands of area students, many of whom were underrepresented and underserved, have been able to obtain a higher education.

This month, across the country and right here in Worcester, thousands of students will cross the stage to pick up their degrees or certificates to enter the

next phase of their lives. I remember my own graduation and crossing the stage to be handed my degree. The awe and pride I felt that day have still not diminished all these years later. At that time, I did not know what my future would hold, but I did know that I had more opportunities than ever before. One of those opportunities eventually was being president of QCC.

One of the highlights of my role at the college is graduation season. It is a particularly exciting time for our graduates and for all our faculty and staff ... me included. These students pushed through all the obstacles that stood in their way and are on the precipice of a new life, a future that is bright with promise and hope.

As a community college, QCC is unlike the traditional four-year colleges. QCC offers students of all ages, all ethnicities and all backgrounds the opportunity to earn a higher education with strong, unique support services (our new Parent Student Navigator comes to mind) that help them to succeed. In fact, approximately 35% of QCC students are over 25 and 20% identify as Latine. This melting pot of students is representative of the communities we serve. For the last 60 years QCC has offered this support-driven education that has enabled over 36,000 to call themselves QCC alumni.

This year there will be over 1,100 graduates who have earned their degree or certificate. On May 19, at the DCU Center, graduates along with their family and friends will wait with anticipation for the moment when they hear their name and go on stage to receive their associate degree or certificate. This emotionally charged ceremony is the culmination of hard work, of late nights studying, of happy tears and sometimes even tears of frustration. Yet, each student pushed through their personal challenges with grit and determination to make it to their end goal.

As is tradition, at every commencement ceremony a keynote speaker gives words of encouragement and inspiration to our graduates. This year QCC is honored to have the Honorable Margaret R. Guzman as our 2023

commencement speaker. A great friend and supporter of the college and its students, Judge Guzman is a native of Worcester who knows and understands the people who call Worcester and the surrounding cities and towns their home.

Guzman was appointed by President Biden and was confirmed by the U.S. Senate as a District Court judge for the District of Massachusetts, sitting in the Worcester Federal Court, in 2023. Previously, for close to 14 years, she served in the Massachusetts State District Court, including a term as First Justice of the Ayer District Court. She served on numerous trial court committees, including Judicial Education, Race and Ethnic Fairness, and Supreme Judicial Select Committee on Implicit Bias. Guzman has participated in numerous professional associations and is an active faculty member of the National Judicial College. As a resident of Worcester, she has a long history of service on numerous local boards, commissions and other nonprofits, including Dismas House, the Worcester Youth Center, the Worcester County Commission on the Status of Women, Creative Hub Worcester and Worcester Business Development Corp.

Guzman is an outstanding example of what can be achieved through higher education. Her motivation, resiliency, persistence, strong work ethic and most importantly her fairness and kindness are traits that I hope all our graduates will take away from their time at QCC.

As May 19 approaches, I will once again be taken back to that young boy with big dreams who is now conferring degrees. As each graduate walks across the stage and I shake their hand, I wonder what their future has in store for them. Whatever it is, I know it will be amazing.

Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester.