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847 graduate at MCC's 50th commencement

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Jim Michaud / Journal Inquirer

Posted: Friday, May 30, 2014 11:58 am

By Kym Soper Journal Inquirer |  0 comments

MANCHESTER — Four years ago East Hartford resident Baotram Ngoc Tran arrived in this country from Vietnam.

On Thursday she gave the valedictory address at Manchester Community College's 50th commencement, urging her fellow graduates to thank their families for their support, for without it, there is no success.

List of graduates,

more photos, Pages 11, 12

While her parents didn't go to college, Tran said, they taught her to value education and encouraged her to follow her dreams. She finished her associate's degree in December and has already started work on her bachelor's in accounting and business administration at the University of Connecticut.

"You've got to find what you love," she told the crowd of nearly 2,000 assembled on the lawn at the Bicentennial Bandshell, noting that for some graduation means a path to higher education while others begin new careers. "I hope that you will all find what you love to do, and do it with all your love."

MCC President Gena Glickman acknowledged the 847 graduates, singling out honor students and those who served in the military for special recognition. Graduates came from 79 towns across Connecticut and six other states; the youngest graduate was 18 and the oldest 68. Of those earning degrees or certificates, 254 received academic honors.

On Thursday, their families and friends spread out on the rolling lawn picnic-style, on blankets and folding camp chairs, pushing strollers and chasing toddlers, playing Frisbee and watching balloons set free by mistake under a sunnyspring sky that brightened an already joyous mood.

Yette Melendez of the Board of Regents for Higher Education welcomed the crowd by wishing the college happy birthday and told the graduates they arrived here through sacrifice, determination, hard work, risk-taking, and extreme balancing acts.

"You all should be very, very proud," she said. "We wish you a future poor in misfortune and rich in personal and professional fulfillment."

UConn English professor and noted humorist and author Gina Barreca delivered the commencement address,

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weaving wit in with sage advice.

"Listen most carefully to those ideas with which you're sure you'll disagree," Barreca told the graduates. "It's the mark of an educated person to be able to listen and understand a position without needing to accept it or share it."

It's a philosophy that works well in both personal relationships or professional work and politics, she said.

Nancy J. Kelley, MCC's valedictorian in 1982 and founding executive director of the New York Genome Center, gave the distinguished alumnus address, challenging the students to re-imagine their future now that they've earned their degrees.

Kelley said she was broke and a young mother with few prospects when, 34 years ago, she took her first classes at MCC, which ignited a thirst to learn more.

Her simple dream of earning an accounting degree quickly expanded, and the path she chose took her to degrees from Yale and Harvard, world travel, and positions in the White House.

"I am now also a mother of three grown daughters — a cinematographer, a surgeon, and an executive in international technology development — whose lives would have been very different without the possibilities provided to me by this college," she said.

Dreaming is the first, and easiest, step, she told the graduates, but they too now have the tools necessary and "the opportunity to dwell in new possibilities that may not have been open to you when you began your journey" here.

Among the many awards presented at commencement was the Regional Advisory Council's Community Service Award to Enfield resident Michele St. Pierre, who as president of Phi Theta Kappa helped implement a number of programs including a peer-mentoring and wellness program and all of the chapter's service and outreach activities. St. Pierre was awarded an associate's degree in liberal arts and science.

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