847 graduate at MCC’s 50th commencement

Let the celebration begin

Richmond Opokuware, of East Hartford, gives the thumbs up as he waits to enter the commencement seating, about to receive his degree in respiratory care, the fifteenth Manchester Community College Commencement Exercise, Thursday, May 28, 2014, at the band shell at MCC.

"You’ve got to find what you love," she told the crowd of nearly 2,000 assembled at 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 sunny sky that brightened an already joyous mood.

Yvette 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."

UCconn English professor and noted humorist and author Gina Barreca delivered the commencement address,
weaving wit in with sage advice.

“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 alumnae 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 great 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.