

## **Dr. Chris Reber, HCCC President**

Congratulations, graduates!

Although we are unable to be together in person, we are so pleased to celebrate your success in this first-ever, virtual Commencement ceremony!

Today we honor and celebrate graduates who finished their studies last year and also those who are finishing this December.

Before we begin, I'd like to remember HCCC student Crystal Ojeda, who passed away recently. Crystal joined the HCCC family in fall 2019 and was enrolled in the Medical Assisting program. She was on track to graduate in May 2021. Crystal excelled academically and also in the area of leadership and service. Her faculty described her as "bright and eager." On this special day, we remember Crystal and send her family and all those close to her our love and condolences.

Students, families and colleagues, Graduation is an emotional time. Graduates, now HCCC alumni, you are happy to be finished and proud of your accomplishments, but sad to leave your friends and mentors, and maybe a bit anxious about what lies ahead. You are grateful for the love and support of your family members and all those who are close to you. While you are now moving on to new schools and new career opportunities, you will forever be members of the Hudson County Community College family.

As HCCC president, I hope the pride you feel today stays with you forever. Our faculty, staff and trustees are partners with our students on their educational journeys. Our mission of "meeting students where they are" and helping students explore, define and achieve their goals means that our students' success – graduates, your success – is our success, too.

Our society needs new professionals like you, who possess skills for leadership and accomplishment; a dedication to service; caring for others; a genuine concern for the environment and for sustainable living; and an understanding of the importance of embracing collaboration and diversity, across and within communities.

As HCCC alumni, all of you will now have the opportunity to lead, serve and inspire others.

You will no doubt face both thrilling opportunities and difficult challenges as you leave HCCC behind and take the next steps on your educational, professional, and life journeys.

I believe that who you are, and what you have learned at HCCC, will equip you to seize opportunities and overcome challenges.

Our faculty and staff have encouraged and inspired you to learn from one another and to persevere, and we are enormously proud of you!

Graduates, I have no doubt that all of you will continue to make Hudson County Community College proud.

Thank you for being a part of the Hudson County Community College story!

Remember the time you have spent here, and, as you continue to learn and change, remember that this College is a place you can always call home!

Yes, Hudson is Home!

Congratulations, and best wishes, graduates!

You did it!

## **Introduction of Commencement Speaker, Lisa Dougherty, Vice President, Student Affairs and Enrollment**

Greeting and welcome to Hudson County Community College's December 2020 Virtual Commencement Ceremony. On behalf of Diego Villatoro, December 2019 graduate, it is my pleasure to introduce today's keynote speaker, James Elliott.

James Elliott is a prolific member of Phi Theta Kappa International Honors Society. Truly an inspirational student, community leader, prison rights reforms advocate and Phi Theta Kappa Scholar. He is a strong and inspirational speaker featured in the Delaware News Journal, ABC's Action News, and PTK International.

Additionally, he is an advocate for redemption, success, and opportunity.

He represents all the attributes for which PHI THETA KAPPA stands

SCHOLARSHIP

LEADERSHIP

SERVICE &

FELLOWSHIP

Truly, a catalyst for change

As president Barack Obama once said: "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time, we are what we have been waiting for, we are the change that we seek"

So, without further delay, Let us welcome w/ a warm round of applause PHI THETA KAPPA INTERNATIONAL HONORS SOCIETY Former president James Elliott

## **James Elliott, HCCC President**

Good Afternoon,

I'd like to thank, President Reber, Hudson County Community College Board of Trustees, Administration, Faculty, Staff, and the student body for providing me this special opportunity to share in recognizing and congratulating the Class of 2020.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize all of you for your dedication and tireless commitment to your student's academic growth and success during this unprecedented year.

Confronted with numerous challenges presented by the COVID-19 Pandemic, all you have displayed the willingness, determination, and care to do whatever it takes to continue providing HCCC students the opportunity to pursue their dreams and transform their lives.

I would also like to acknowledge the HCCC's Phi Theta Kappa , Beta Alpha Phi and congratulate them on an amazing 2019-2020 year.

In March they were received numerous awards:

- Five Star Chapter
- Middle States Gold Chapter
- Reach Chapter

Also, their Advisor Ted Lai received the Continued Excellence Advisor award. Ted Lai is a true completion champion and a legend in the Middle States Region.

Lastly, a special shoutout to all the graduating members of Phi Theta Kappa.

And now, TO THE Graduates:

I know it seems like you have been waiting forever to hear this congratulation, CLASS OF 2020!

Being a graduate of the Class of 2020 as well, I have been eagerly waiting for you. It seems like a lifetime ago; I received the offer to address all of you. This opportunity is undoubtedly one of the greatest honors of my life. I am proud, excited, and, to be honest HORRIFIED.

As I think back, I can't recollect a time I was this nervous to speak.

Despite numerous speaking engagements ranging from: grand ballrooms filled with 4,000 of my fellow high energy community college students to addressing hundreds of Community College Trustee, whom I thought would have been a pretty tame group; turns out, a few hundred college trustees can get rowdier than a couple thousand students.

Some of my most meaningful speaking engagements came in prisons across California, Alabama, Maryland, and my home state Delaware. \*Even they weren't as rowdy as the College Trustees.

What makes me so nervous about addressing all of you is,

I sat where you are sitting, and I felt what you are feeling today.

I know firsthand how important this day is to you because of how important it was to me.

I also know how I felt about my commencement speaker and the expectations I had for them... (Looking back on that, I hope you all are kinder to me than I was to them).

I've concluded that being a commencement speaker is inherently accepting failure. Nothing I can say will adequately articulate or capture what you all have accomplished.

So today, I am standing on stage for all of you.

I challenge you to not view me as an individual but as a representation of you.

Each one of you deserves to be standing where I am.

My job today is to be a mirror of your success, as you listen to my message, envision yourself standing here as well.

So, for the next 10 or so mins, I am you, and you are me.

To prove that we are the same,

I'm going to read your minds right now and tell you precisely what you are thinking...

"I DON'T WANT A VIRTUAL GRADUATION; THIS IS NOT FAIR."

I'm sorry, the elephant in the room had become too large.

I thought about trying to avoid it, but...

It's too important, and if I am going to represent you, I have to talk about what I know weighs heavy on your hearts today.

I know that feeling you felt when you finally realized that after all of your hard work, you weren't going to be able to walk across that stage. I know the feeling when you finally realize you're not going to get a thousand likes on your Instagram for the perfect graduation picture; and Yes, I know you invested more time planning that post then spent studying on all of your classes combined during your last semester.

I know the feeling when no-one in your family believes you graduated, and your only proof was in-person graduation. Now your crazy uncle still doesn't believe you graduated.

I know the feeling when you realize that there will be no cap throw, no out-of-town relatives coming in to celebrate you, no pictures with your best friends, favorite administrator, faculty, or staff, and no looking out into the crowd to see the tears of joy run down the faces of your loved ones.

I know the sadness, and I'm not here to condemn you or even tell you not to be upset, angry, or just plain defeated because that would make me a hypocrite.

My only hope today is that I can slightly refocus our perspectives so that collectively we can capture this momentous day in your lives, even if only for a fleeting moment.

Because 8 months ago, I virtually "walk across the stage," and to be honest with you, I was still bitter about it until recently as I began to shift the focus from myself to all of you. As I dwelled on my own experience and pondered the message I wanted to bring, I became depressed.

Not because I was still upset about my moment being taken from me...

but because I realized while writing this address,

I ALLOWED my moment to be taken from me. I don't want this to happen to you.

Today we gather virtually to celebrate the beauty in the struggle of each of your journeys.

Famous Hip/Hop Artist J. Cole said, "There's beauty in the struggle and ugliness in the success. Hear my words of wisdom or listen to my signal of distress."

As I share the beauty in my struggle, reflect on the beauty in your struggle.

The journey to my virtual graduation began in 2011 when I made the worst mistake of my life. I was arrested as a gunman in a home invasion style robbery of a drug dealer and subsequently sentenced to 7 years in prison. I didn't know it then, but I had become a part of a prison system with no intention to rehabilitate me but with every intentions to break me.

I can still remember spending my 20th birthday in Solitary Confinement, locked in a cell for 23 hours out of the day. That year I was forced to read what my mother had written on the birthday card she had sent me through the small window on my cell door because I could not have mail in my possession.

A year or so later, I would find myself enrolling in distance learning courses through Ohio University. I can envision myself sitting at my small stainless-steel desk in my prison cell, working on my first assignments with only pencil and paper. For the next 4 years, as I struggled with the countless hardships of life in prison, I would slowly make progress completing 18 credits.

In 2016, after 5 ½ years, I would be released for good behavior to a work-release facility. Unfortunately, the joy of my new but limited freedom was met by the harsh reality of being a formerly incarcerated individual. It was a requirement to get a job, so one of the first jobs I applied for was a janitor position. It was a good-paying job and would have provided for me. They told me I didn't get this job because I was a felon. I remember thinking, "if I can't be a janitor, what am I supposed to be." Well, I ended up in the food industry, making minimum wage.

After completing my work release, my life as a full-time student and employee for the next year and a half was as followed: Wake up at 5 am go to work. Get off work at 3 pm, and rush to evening classes until 10 pm.

Day, after day, after day, after day.

At the beginning of 2018, something magical happened, my daughter, Vade Jade, was born, and she changed my life. Now, when I got home at 10 pm, homework wasn't the only thing waiting for me; there was a stinky diaper as well.

By 2019, and what felt like 1 million diapers later, my hard work started to pay off.

I had been promoted to Manager at my job, providing me with a livable wage and benefits to support my new family.

I would become the first previously incarcerated member of Phi Theta Kappa—the International Honor Society for 2-year colleges—to hold the top student leadership position of International President.

Along with other scholarships, I would be selected to the Phi Theta Kappa ALL-USA Academic team, which recognizes the top 20 community college students in the nation.

I also became the first-ever previously incarcerated individual to be named a Coca-Cola New Century Transfer-Pathways Scholar.

The start of 2020 brought me the best news of my life. I was accepted to Columbia University's School of General Studies and awarded two scholarships that would fully cover the \$85,000 a year cost of attendance to Columbia.

Needless to say, I was ready for my big day, but life had other plans...and the rest you already know. I would refuse to accept my virtual commencement...

By not even attempting to embrace my new reality, I let my selfishness block out my ability to appreciate the truth of what I had accomplished and the beauty in my struggle.

I had effectively canceled out my journey.

I lost sight of the beauty...

And as the beauty faded, I stopped dreaming. For a second, I thought the light went out, but as I pulled myself up, I realized, the light to never went out and the beauty never faded, I just turned away from my dreams.

I'm reminding you today about your dreams, turn back towards them, grab hold of them, and keep dreaming. Your dreams are what allowed you to see the beauty in your struggle. Today, a dream of yours is coming true regardless of where you are sitting, in a packed stadium, or in your living room. Nothing can stop you from dreaming. If you accomplished your dreams, develop more, and know that this day is a reminder that your future dreams are attainable. If you haven't yet, grab hold of your dream, know that today brings you one step closer to achieving that dream. This graduation is your reminder that your ability to dream has not stopped. It is a reminder that no matter what challenge is placed in front of you, you have what it takes to conquer it.

With COVID-19 still wreaking havoc today, you are confronted with yet another opportunity to see the beauty in the struggle.

Will you meet one more challenge, knowing that a virtual graduation does not define or diminish your success and your ability to dream.

Or, will you turn your back on your dreams and cry tears of sadness?

Today, I wholeheartedly believe that you will rise to the occasion, just like you have done throughout each chapter of your journey thus far, and today you will cry tears of joy...

- ...because of the countless days, you never gave up.
- ... because you live in a community where more people end up in prison than college, let alone graduate.
- ... because you are a single parent who is graduating and providing a better future for your child or children.

- ... because you are a first-generation graduate.
- ... because despite your mental health disorder or learning disability, you completed your degree.
- ... because you lost a loved one during this journey, and you thought you would never make it or even smile again.
- ... because you kept a full-time job and graduate.
- ... because you were the primary caregiver for a family member and graduated.
- ... because you are a cancer survivor or a student with a chronic disease who graduated.
- ... because you identify with a minority population that is frequently held back by society, and you still graduated.
- ...because you are you, and you are graduating?

Class of 2020, collectively, we cry tears of joy because despite everything 2020 has thrown at us, we kept dreaming, and WE GRADUATED.

Thank You and Congratulations

### **Introduction of May 2020 Valedictorian, Faisal Aljamal, Instructor, STEM**

Board of Trustees, President Dr. Reber, Provost Dr. Friedman, Vice President Dr. Jones, Dean of STEM, Dr. Yearwood, Vice Presidents, Dean's of all divisions, full faculty members and administrators, graduate class of 2020 and their families and Hudson County Community College students, I am honored to introduce this year's valedictorian Gabriella Melendez, Gabby, an outstanding, committed and humble student who always has a positive attitude.

I came to know Gabby, over the past 20 years, as she took eight computer science and cybersecurity classes with me. Gabby never missed a class. Gabby never came late to any of her classes. She did all homework assignments, and labs, either on time or before time.

One of Gabby's greatest characteristics is being selfless student. In my cybersecurity classes, I usually assign a group of projects. Gabby made sure that all members of her team contributed to the group project and that the projects were finished on time. Gabby was always willing to help her fellow classmates.

During Lab, Gabby would finish her lab assignment ahead of time. She never hesitated to help other students who needed help. Gabby was loved by her classmates as well as by her professors. While Gabby was focusing on maintaining a 4.0 GPA and keeping her eyes on advancing her career beyond Hudson County Community College, she was involved in extracurricular and community activities. She was a Peer Leader for Hudson County Community College and help the new students with their transition to college by giving them the tools they need to make their transition and first year a smooth ride.

Gabby volunteered at her church to help the needy and the homeless. And she helped in raising money for the youth of her community to go on pilgrimage trips to see the Pope by doing bake sales, as well as family game nights.

I am proud to say that Gabby already started pursuing a master's degree in cybersecurity at St. Peter's University. Gabby, cybersecurity students and all graduates, your professors want to prepare you will for the challenges ahead. As you continue your academic journey, keep up the hard work and never lose focus. A brighter future is ahead of you.

Your parents, family, friends, and Hudson County Community College professors will always be proud of you. Never forget your roots. Hudson County Community College is always here to support you. Good luck to you all. Professor Aljamal.

## **May 2020 Valedictory Address Gabriela Melendez, Class of 2020**

To the HCCC graduating class,

I want to thank all the faculty and staff that helped us get here because we couldn't have done it without them. I know that it has been difficult for many of us during this pandemic and without the support of the professors, employees, security guards, custodial staff, and everyone that has helped keep HCCC up and running, we wouldn't be here today.

I know many people have lost family members due to COVID-19. I want to take a moment to remember them and their place in our lives because I believe that they are present with us today in our hearts and minds.

I want to give a special thanks to my family, my friends, my professors, and each one of the graduates watching today.

I also want to thank those who supported you in your difficulties and in your successes because without them, maybe you would have given up and believed that you couldn't have done it. Look at us, look at where we are, we are here, we made it.

Maybe for some of us, graduating was a piece of cake, and wouldn't mind doing it all over again.... Maybe for others, it was a difficult experience that paid off.... Whatever the case may be, it is no small achievement that you've made it this far. Especially during this time of the pandemic where we've had to adapt to our current situation. The fact that we were able to push through this difficult time is an achievement within itself.

I want to make a special shout out to our all of health majors because they are the ones that have been and will continue to putting their life on the lines to help those that have been affected by this virus.

Overall, each of us holds a value in this world and has the opportunity to impact the lives of others. If there's one thing that I've learned being here is that in some weird way, we're all connected. Though I may not know all of you, we have all shared a life here at HCCC. The people we meet, the people we

walk by, the people that sit all the way at the back of the classroom or sit in the front, camera on or camera off, you have the ability to change and impact our lives by simply existing.

I'd have to say that this is exactly what happened to me. I was the girl that always sat in the front of the class, on time, and excited for math because I had a lot of problems and I wanted to solve them. Then one day my class got canceled and I was really bummed out because I genuinely enjoyed my quality time with math and its limitless curves. I don't know if you know the unfortunate story behind parallel lines... they all have so much in common, it's a shame that they'll never meet.

As I was contemplating this, I started to do math for fun like any normal person would and in this very critical moment a fellow student approached me, her name was Laura, and steered me into a completely different direction. Mind you, I had no idea that she was in my class, I never paid attention to who was behind me because I was always looking forward, goes to show that even when you're looking forward, something or someone behind you could still impact you. Cars know the feeling especially with street parking in the city. After an awkward conversation about how I didn't realize she sat right behind me and that I thought she was from a completely different math class, she asked me if I could help her understand what was going on in class and I did. That simple, awkward interaction affected my life in a way I never imagined it would.

I had this idea that I was going to go straight to school, do my work, go home, and mind my business. I never thought that these simple interactions with people would lead to anything. I never thought that the things I did to try and help people or to be nice to people would matter or change anything. And I can say for a fact that I was wrong. Laura invited me to apply as a peer leader because she thought that I would be a great fit for this position. Even though I was doubted I would be offered the role, I went for it, and I was accepted!

I was able to help many students both in the classroom and outside the classroom. I went from being a person who solely went to school just to go back home, to a person who became really involved in school activities and got to work with so many wonderful people. You are all wonderful people. This simple interaction with this person opened so many doors and led me to meet many people who walked alongside me on this journey. The baton has been passed down to us and now it's our turn to make our own paths.

Life isn't flat, it's not just going to school, it's not just going to work. We are all a part of something great and sometimes we just need simple interactions, events, or people to help us realize it.

Life is like a puzzle, there are a lot of pieces that may not seem to fit at first, but as you begin to work on the puzzle and put some of the pieces together, you'll start to see the beautiful image that is waiting for you at the end.

Let today be the start of this realization - Don't be afraid to help someone or ask for help. Don't be afraid to go for an opportunity just because you think you won't make it. Don't be afraid to make mistakes because you never know what wonderful door will open for you.

I wish for the best for all of you. Don't be afraid to be yourself, be weird, be different. And don't forget that HCCC will always be a home for us. I can already start to see the beautiful image of the puzzle that you are putting together for yourself.

Congratulations HCCC Graduates now qualified to make educated guesses!

### **Introduction of December 2020 Valedictorian Sean Egan, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, English & ESL**

Hello, I'm Professor Sean Egan and today I'm honored and thrilled to introduce the December 2020 valedictorian Vanisha Patel.

Vanisha made an impression on me right from when I first met her when I walked into my first class College Composition class in spring 2020 and she was sitting in the front row right in the center, the laptop open and clearly ready to go.

I often tell students that if you want to seem like you're the smartest person in the room, you should work to be the most prepared person in the room, even if there's other people who are smarter.

Now I can tell the difference, usually if you're more prepared, and Vanisha's case, she probably very often is the smartest person in the room, but she's also one of the most prepared, and that was true my class.

I also know that since I've learned that in her career, the same thing is true that she is very prepared for her professional goals. She doesn't just pick a major and take the classes, she also has credentials and work experience. And I'm sure that future professors and employers and colleagues will find Vanisha as someone who is prepared and ready to work and to succeed.

With that Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Vanisha Patel.

### **Vanisha Patel, December 2020 Valedictorian**

Thank you for that wonderful introduction, Prof. Egan. Good afternoon trustees, administration, honored guests, family members, and graduates of December 2020. Today, we proved that nothing could impede us. I, Vanisha Patel, am honored to stand before you today as Valedictorian of the class of December 2020. Writing this speech, I realized it was even harder than doing my psychology and sociology assignments. On behalf of the class of December 2020, I would like to thank every individual who made Hudson County Community College incredible and the place that felt like another home. I thank the President, Dr. Reber, for taking good care of us and showing great concerns about our safety, especially in these circumstances. Thanks to our excellent faculty for affording us tremendous education and knowledge, for always encouraging us to do our very best. Thank you for taking the extra time to build relationships with us that for some will last many years to come. I thank the staff for supporting us and the faculty. A very special thanks to our family members for their sacrifice and belief in us without whom this would not have been possible. WE LOVE YOU!!

Now to the graduates, everyone here today feels proud of us; don't know about tomorrow. Especially, of the grads who happened to be parents, grandparents, especially abled, full-time workers, or international students. My own journey began in the Fall 2019 semester, attending my first ESL level 4 reading class that feels like it was just yesterday. I had no idea about the workings of the American educational system as I landed in the USA four months ago. This is not a story of me, but also of various students who came from foreign countries and had to compulsory take ESL classes before taking their college-level credits.

We all have grown into potential intellectual individuals. As we know, different people have different definitions of success. I would advise – think like a proton, select an aim, follow your passion, do what makes you happy, and make you feel satisfied and success. Strive to be the best version of yourself and bring the outcome that will make others grateful to have known you. Learn today and share it tomorrow. Appreciate what is important and do not take anything for granted like the experience of the college, Starbucks, or perhaps toilet papers. Be strong as you battle your approach to success, the trouble you face today isn't anything compared to the delight of achievement. Remember, this is not an end but the beginning of us as the HCCC Alumnus.

### **Presentation of Graduates and Conferring of Degrees, Eric M. Friedman, Ph.D., Executive Vice President and Provost**

Greetings to the Class of 2020!

President Reber, I am pleased to present to you, upon the recommendation of the faculty, the students who have met or will have shortly met the requirements leading to the Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, Associate in Fine Arts, and Associate in Applied Science degrees, and Certificates.

Graduates, if you have your caps on, please make sure the tassels on the right, as it is now time for the symbolic turning of the tassel. You are now officially graduates of Hudson County Community College. On the count of 3, I want you to move your tassels from the right to the left – 1, 2, 3 – Congratulations graduates!!