

MCC Awards Degrees To 615

By GREG BORDONARO
Courant Staff Writer

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MANCHESTER -- Margaret Girardi reflected Thursday on all the people who helped her through years of adversity and a life that was "turned upside down," and she urged fellow Manchester Community College graduates to help those in need.

"When your world's falling apart and you feel alone ... what you really want to do is fast-forward to find out why this is happening to you," she said. "What you really need to do is find inner strength, reach out for help and find a new direction."

For Girardi, the class valedictorian from Vernon, that new direction meant enrolling at MCC four years ago at age 48 because she wanted to make her life better.

"To be financially independent without a college diploma in today's world is nearly impossible, or at the very least, exhausting," she said.

Working four jobs throughout her time at MCC posed great challenges for Girardi. She was able to earn her associate of science degree in therapeutic recreation through hard work, determination and perseverance, something she said all her fellow graduates have had to exhibit.

Girardi was one of 615 MCC students to graduate Thursday at the 43rd annual commencement ceremony held at the Bicentennial Band Shell. On a warm spring night, graduates from 73 towns throughout Connecticut and seven states were awarded degrees and heard hopeful words about the future.

Among them was Shawn Lukaszewicz of Norwich, who earned a general studies degree and the President's Student Award for demonstrating perseverance in spite of major obstacles. Lukaszewicz, who spent part of his life homeless and sleeping in his car, has had to support himself throughout his life.

"Today is bittersweet," Lukaszewicz said. "I'm leaving a place called home, but I know I've been prepared for the future."

Lukaszewicz, 24, will attend Eastern Connecticut State University in the fall, majoring in communications and business. One day he hopes to go to law school.

Marc S. Herzog, chancellor of the Connecticut community college system, delivered the commencement address. He spoke about the lasting value of the education the graduates have received.

"This school has challenged you to succeed ... and today each of you has achieved success that defines you," he said. "The next challenge is to apply the knowledge you have gained here to achieve success in the future."

Among the other graduates was Mike Patrizz, 21, who received his degree in criminal justice. Commencement was a truly family event for Patrizz, as he graduated alongside his mother, Janice, and brother Tony. Janice received a nursing degree and Tony received a general studies degree.

"It's a big accomplishment for me and my family," Mike said. "It's a proud moment to finish school at the same time as them. We are headed for bigger and better things."

Contact Greg Bordonaro at gbordonaro@courant.com.

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