

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sat, Apr. 28, 2012

13,000 MDC graduates savor their achievements

Christine Dolen

cdolen@MiamiHerald.com



Roberto Koltun / El Nuevo Herald

Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padron and North and West Campus President Dr. Jose A. Vicente celebrate Saturday's graduates.

It's Pomp and Circumstance season, with high schools, colleges and universities all over South Florida sending their newly minted graduates off to find their futures in a rapidly changing world.

But on Saturday, as Miami Dade College held five commencement ceremonies to accommodate more than 13,000 graduates, worries about tuition increases, student loan interest rate hikes and a daunting job market got put on hold. Those graduates, including the more than 2,500 from the North and West campuses who received associate degrees, bachelor's degrees or vocational certificates in a morning ceremony at the James L. Knight Center, found time to pause, take a breath and

savor all they have achieved.

At the North-West ceremony, students from 65 countries received their degrees or certificates, with each country's flag carried onstage and announced. The biggest cheers erupted when Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Trinidad-Tobago and Haiti appeared. But in a ceremony infused with God Bless America patriotism, the loudest roar was for the U.S. flag.

Among the grads were sisters Marie and Kareen Seignon. They came to the United States from Haiti in 2008 but had to wait for a year to be eligible for financial aid to start at MDC. The sisters, whose mother died when Marie was 4 and Kareen 3, didn't speak English well when they arrived, but both are now fluent.

The sisters live together and are almost twin-like in their achievements, though Marie jokes, "If we spend a day without fighting, one of us is sick."

The two Honors College biology majors graduated with identical 3.88 averages. Marie, now 26, and Kareen, 25, have both been accepted at Smith College, where they hope to pursue studies that will lead to careers in biomedical research.

Honors College accounting graduate Rummessa Abrar, 19, came to the United States from Pakistan with her mother and sister in 1999. Thanks to financial aid, Abrar didn't have to work while she was going to school, allowing her to get involved in student government and the organization Women Moving Forward, which helps women who have been through domestic abuse. But paying for her continuing studies remains an issue as the young woman with the perfect 4.0 GPA waits to hear from seven different universities.

"Definitely, my biggest challenge has been financial," she says, adding that her sister Anam also graduated Saturday, from Miami Dade's medical campus. "We're a low-income family, and my mom is a single parent, so it was hard to go to school."

Jessica Obregon, 20, came to Miami from Havana with her doctor-mother in 2009. Her father, a dentist, has been in Miami for 15 years, but it took far longer for Obregon's mother to get permission to emigrate with her daughter. Obregon spoke no English when she arrived. But on Saturday, she graduated from Miami Dade's Honors College with a 3.92 average and plans to continue her studies to pursue a career as an architect.

The list of stellar grads goes on and on. Emilio Kenny, a student with a 4.0 in mechanical engineering, received the two-year Trustees Scholarship totaling \$5,000. Four Miami Dade students won the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship, worth \$30,000 per year for two years. Two winners, Cassandra Bazile and Esteban Roncancio, are Honors College students from the Kendall campus. The other two are Honors College students with 3.9 GPAs who got the happy news at the North-West ceremony: psychology major Jessica Alvarez, who beamed, and mass communications major Monique Madan, who wept, prompting a woman somewhere in the audience to yell, "Don't cry, girl!" Just a day earlier, Madan, editor-in-chief of Miami Dade's student newspaper and an intern for The Miami Herald, helped report the story of a double murder in Coral Gables for the Herald.

One of the most poignant moments during the ceremony occurred when an associate in arts degree was awarded posthumously to Amanda Haworth. The Miami-Dade detective and her partner were slain when they tried to serve a fugitive warrant in 2011. Haworth's mother accepted the diploma on her daughter's behalf.

José A. Vicente, president of the North and West campuses, presided over the ceremony and noted that Miami Dade College, founded 52 years ago, will graduate its 2 millionth student this year. At the start of the ceremony, Vicente reminded the crowd — in English, Spanish and Creole — to turn off their cell phones. The graduation was live-streamed over the web, for relatives and friends who couldn't journey from all those far-flung countries.

Commencement speaker Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, noted how vastly the world has changed since the brand-new graduates were born and how much change will happen over their lifetimes, including growth of the U.S. population from 300 million to more than 500 million with minorities becoming the majority.

"You are living in the age of globalization, a world increasingly defined by large and swift flows across borders of tourists, businessmen, students, dollars, greenhouse gases, oil and gas, manufactured goods, services, emails, television and radio signals, technology, drugs, germs, weapons, terrorists, viruses and much more," Haass said. "What is more,

the world is not Las Vegas; what happens out there does not stay out there. For better or worse, much of it will come here.”

But rather than commencement, Haass suggested, the graduates should focus on continuing what they began at MDC, perpetually topping off their educational tank with intellectual fuel — learning more, being an informed voter, voraciously consuming information, or serving the country in some way.

Kionne L. McGhee, a lawyer who teaches at Miami Dade, was at the ceremony to cheer on some 20 grads who had been in his classes, students who kept texting him before the ceremony to find out where he was sitting. He didn't have to be there, but he was happy to share in such a memorable day in his students' lives.

“So many kids have an opportunity to do what others say they couldn't do,” McGhee said. “With the help of a college like Miami Dade, they can achieve their dreams.”

© 2012 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>