A more than 400-degree day for MCLA’s Class of 2013

By Jennifer Huberdeau, North Adams Transcript
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Cheyenne Ritcher, 7, gets a hug and a kiss from her mother, Samantha Ritcher Porio, of Adams,...

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NORTH ADAMS -- Elizabeth Mullen choked back tears as she said her final goodbyes to her classmates -- many of whom she said had become her extended family -- as she delivered her last address as class president during the 114th commencement exercises at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts on Saturday.

"As we, the class of 2013, begin moving in the various directions we hope our lives will take us, we need to remind ourselves there will be fog," Mullen, of Abington, said. "Some days the roads will seem to disappear beneath us. Some days it will look as if there is not a horizon. Do not despair. Do not be afraid. Yes, some days there will be fog. However it is important that we remind ourselves that fog is not permanent. You are never alone on the journey. Take a look around this gymnasium, there are plenty of people here willing to help you along the way. Never forget you are the sunshine that melts away the fog."

More than 400 degrees were awarded during the ceremony, including 389 bachelor’s degrees, 35 master’s of education degrees, 22 professional master’s of business administration degrees and four certificates of advanced graduate studies in educational leadership.

In addition, honorary degrees were awarded to Diane Patrick, first lady of Massachusetts; Elizabeth Coleman, president of Bennington College; Mardi Ann Crane-Godreau, class of 1998 and faculty member of the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth,
and John "Jack" Downing, president and CEO of Soldier On.

Patrick, who served as the keynote speaker, told the graduates that "to grow and succeed, one has to be open to new ventures, new ideas, new people, new sights and sounds, and new ways of looking at things."

"Otherwise, you’re going to find yourself stuck in a rut and going nowhere," she said. "One has to be open to risks, and disappointments, too, and to learn from mistakes and failures."

She spoke of her admiration of MCLA President Mary K. Grant, who she noted has worked diligently to ensure her students possess the curiosity and the confidence to open "new doors of opportunity."

"For me, that’s what education is all about -- opening doors," Patrick said. "Doors that you might not have even known existed until someone helped you see your world in a new and different way. I think [MCLA] encourages the opening of eyes and ears and minds of so many who otherwise might not be inclined to look beyond what is right in front of them. Unlike other graduation ceremonies, this one recognizes that a degree in higher education, a degree that opens doors, is not just ‘a given’ for many of us.

"This commencement recognizes that many of us did not grow up with the assumption that we would go from high school right into college or graduate school. For many of you, I imagine, it appeared that doors to new horizons were limited. This recognizes the struggles large and small that each of you has had to deal with, as well as the strength and determination of each of you."

During the address, Patrick spoke passionately about the risks she and her husband, Gov. Deval Patrick, have taken throughout their lives -- risks that led to a young boy from the south side of Chicago to becoming governor and to a young girl from Brooklyn to working for an international law firm. She also spoke about her struggle with depression during her husband’s first term in office.

"Today I stand here stronger than I ever imagined I could be," she said. "You just have to power through those rough moments. You have to take risks, you have to walk through those new doors to discover who you are and what’s possible."