



**News release**

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**Grads overcame pandemic, other obstacles to reach their goals in 2021, keynotes say**

***Commencement ceremony historically different this year***

Be flexible. Be nimble. Never forget the historic times you've gone through to earn your degree.

These were the words of advice **keynote speaker Jennifer Freiheit** gave to the Gateway Technical College School of Health's graduating class Saturday morning at their commencement, held outside on the college's Kenosha Campus. The May 22 commencement was the first of four ceremonies, each with its own keynote speaker, held by the college during the weekend to honor its graduating post-secondary students

"But this is not just any moment. It is a significant historic moment within the middle of a pandemic still affecting the world," Freiheit, the director of the Kenosha County Division of Public Health, said. "A year of wearing masks while learning. A moment where your hands are dry and cracked from all the hand washing and your 'maskne' doesn't seem to dissipate.

"But all of that for this moment is forgotten as you revel in all that you have accomplished to get you to this moment."

The School of Health commencement was the first of four, drive-in commencement ceremonies held by the college, recognizing 1,347 prospective graduates from its Summer 2020, Fall 2020, Spring 2021 and Summer 2021 semesters. About 360 graduates attended the ceremonies, in addition to 72 who attended the pre-college commencement ceremony – for GED, HSED and adult high school graduates – late Saturday afternoon.

The drive-in format held in the Madrigano Center's parking lot allowed students to experience walking across the stage to receive their diploma in a safe manner.

A total of 81 graduates signed up for the School of Health ceremony. Just as the commencement ceremony's format changed to meet the needs of students, Freiheit said, the flexibility students have had to engage in is something they will take with them into their career.

"If this pandemic has taught us nothing else, it has taught us to be extremely flexible and nimble," Freiheit told the assembled crowd, many in their cars listening to the speech and watching it on large screens flanking the stage. "These traits will serve you well in your future career ... Flexible and nimble. These are two words I implore you not to forget."

**Student responder and Nursing graduate Jesus Vega Jr.** encouraged graduates to remember the impact they have on others, and the world.

"Our student community binds us together and gives us strength to move forward when we cannot, and I urge you to continue being that person for someone," Vega said.

“I will let you in on a secret that someone told me a long time ago: We affect people’s lives every day. One interaction can make a difference.

“We have the unique opportunities to touch someone’s life and make it better every day. I would ask you, do not squander that chance.”

### **School of Manufacturing, Engineering, and Information Technology,**

**May 22**

A total of 63 graduates signed up for this ceremony, held Saturday afternoon. **Keynote speaker David Dobbs**, senior manager, SC Johnson, told graduates that he, too, graduated from Gateway. After an initial struggle, he worked hard, persevered and graduated.

“The most effective leaders avoid ‘group think,’ they consistently challenge traditional solutions and they are not afraid to make mistakes,” Dobbs told graduates. “It is nearly impossible to find a success story without a defined path of failures behind it. Overcoming obstacles and embracing the potential of failure will keep you humble and focused on learning.”

Dobbs told graduates that they embark on a society and career path where they will be expected to define “the new normal.”

“Not at any point in history has a graduating class been asked to face the future with more purpose,” he said.

**Emily Rindt, Information Technology-Software Developer graduate,** was the student responder for the ceremony. She told fellow graduates to think

back to before they began attending Gateway to realize just how far they've progressed since then.

"Whether you came here right out of high school, you came here because you were tired of just scraping by or you were seeking a career change like me, it took great self-confidence to begin this quest," Rindt said. "Each of you vanquished your fears and self-doubt and took the first step toward a brighter future. Gateway isn't just a college. Gateway represents your quest for confidence and an investment of your precious time to earn your degree."

### **School of Business & Transportation,**

**May 23**

A total of 114 graduates signed up for this ceremony, held Sunday morning. **Keynote speaker Sharbel Maalouf**, president of Medline Industries Personal Care Division, outlined his advice to graduates into three points: fail fast, connect the dots and give back.

"Fail fast – why? Because oftentimes, the first step you take is the hardest," Maalouf said. "Therefore, the only way to make progress is like jumping in a pool, you have to go for it – or, believe me, the fear will stop you.

"So, don't be afraid to fail, because when you fail fast, you also learn fast."

Maalouf told graduates to connect the dots by finding their career passion and following it. He also told students to give back. "Don't underestimate the positive impact you can have on others," he said.

Maalouf, a 2008 Gateway graduate, was honored as the college's Distinguished Alumni in 2018.

**Hunter Orlowski, Business Management graduate, was the student responder** for the ceremony. He told fellow graduates that despite the challenges of the last year, they persisted and have reached their goal of a degree or diploma.

Orlowski, who earned his Gateway degree a month before his high school diploma, told them to always remember the passion that first brought them to Gateway and fueled their educational work and achievements.

"Now it's time to start thinking about your future and all the places your life will take you after graduation," he said. "Maybe some of you already landed your dream job and others are just starting to look. My advice to you is to find your passion. Passion will help you to make a difference."

### **School of Protective & Human Services,**

**May 23**

A total of 101 graduates signed up for this ceremony, held Sunday afternoon. **Keynote speaker Tamarra Coleman**, executive director of the Shalom Center, lauded graduates for their perseverance to gain an education, many times facing struggles that were hard to overcome.

"Some would say, you all have faced challenges far greater than most college students could ever imagine," Coleman said. "And I'm not talking about COVID-19. Some of you have been on the brink of being homeless. Some of you

have risked the rejection of your families to pursue your education. Many of you have lain awake at night wondering how on earth you were going to support your parents and your kids and still pay your tuition.

“Many of you know what it’s like to live not just month to month, but meal to meal. I think that it’s what the young people say – the struggle was real.

“But, graduates, let me tell you this: You should never be embarrassed by your struggles. You should never view your challenges as a disadvantage. Instead, it’s important for you to understand that your experience in facing and overcoming adversity is one of your biggest advantages.”

**Juanita Perez, Early Childhood Education graduate, was the student responder** for the ceremony. She told fellow graduates that the college’s diversity is what makes it, and graduates, strong.

“Gateway is such a diversity of learners, which means that each of our backgrounds and paths are unique,” Perez told graduates. “Maybe you are a student whose parents were immigrants and your native language is not English. Maybe you are a parent or have a spouse at home. Maybe you worked while attending classes. Maybe you are the first person in your family to go to college.

“I can proudly say that all of these apply to me. Whatever your background and whatever path led you here, we are all here today because we have achieved success no matter what obstacles we faced.”

*Photos of all the commencements can be found at Gateway’s Flickr site:*

*<https://www.flickr.com/photos/gatewaytechnicalcollege/albums/>*

and affordable for our diverse community. The college collaborates with communities in Kenosha, Racine and Walworth counties to ensure economic growth and viability by providing education, training, leadership and technological resources to meet the changing needs of students, employers and communities.

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