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HCC in the News: Honor student highlights HCC's annual fundraiser

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TAMPA — At 9-years old, Arletis Alfonso's life was uprooted.

She embraced her family and friends in tearful goodbyes and left Cuba for the United States with her mother, father and older sister.

"Back then, I was so young I didn't understand why I had to leave my family and friends behind," Alfonso said. "It was a new life, something different so I did cry, but I was also excited to confront everything with my family."

Though the move marked more opportunity, Alfonso was surrounded by the unfamiliar. Her biggest barrier: the language.

"I remember going to class and not understanding what the teacher was saying," Alfonso said. "I felt alone, until I was able to learn the language."

And learn the language, she did.

Today, she is a first-generation student and scholarship recipient in the Hillsborough Community College Honors Institute.

Last month, at the annual HCC Foundation Presidential Showcase, the largest fundraiser the foundation hosts for its First Generation Scholarship fund, Alfonso served as the closing speaker. The event has raised $2.5 million for scholarships, including the one helping cover Alfonso's costs.

With confidence and in perfect English, two words resonated throughout her speech: thank you.

"Tonight, for me thank you means an education, a future and a dream realized," Alfonso said.

Just four years earlier, as a freshman in high school, Alfonso balanced eight classes in school, one online course and a part-time job.

"I realized that I needed to help my family, and the best way I could do that was to help my mom," Alfonso said. "I started to accompany her to her part-time job as a housekeeper. I didn't get much sleep and it was hard trying to get involved in school, make friends and live a teenager life."

With the scholarships she receives each semester, she can now focus entirely on involvement and the social aspects of college.

"Certainly she is smart and does her work, those things are assumed, but she takes it up a notch," said Dustin Lemke, HCC honors leadership course professor said. "You just know she is a good person, she wants to do the right thing, help others and make the world a better place."

On top of volunteer work, she is the president of Phi Beta Lambda, the social chair of the National Society of College Scholars, serves on the Arete Board of Directors and is an Honors Institute Ambassador.

"One thing I've noticed the last couple of weeks, she is willing to take criticism and feedback and then get better," Lemke said. "I worked with her on the speech she gave at the showcase event and I gave some feedback that was tough to take. But she went back, worked harder and came back. Some people give up quickly, but she is persistent."

Her remarks followed the recognition of former Tampa Police Chief Eric Ward, who was honored with the 2017 Distinguished Alumnus of the Year.

He relayed his journey and how, after receiving a scholarship to another school, he came home to HCC and enrolled in the police academy, aiming to help the community where he was raised.

President Ken Atwater also presented Caspers Company CFO Chuck Peterson with the Champion of Education Award.

The event also showcased various programs at HCC.

Paddy, the Irish Terrier, fresh out of surgery completed by first-year veterinary students, greeted guests by the entrance, while Jane the robot waved hello from a few booths down.

At the auto collision booth, attendees got a taste of the technology used by the department for training in how to paint

vehicles.

And it was just like a video game.

Students strapped virtual headsets onto attendees and armed them with a spray tool, then watched as they attempted to cover every inch of the virtual car door. In order to pass the course, students must get an 85 or higher. High scores of the night barely exceeded 40.

Two ambulances parked in the main reception and dining area represented the EMT department and its achievements, while the culinary department filled the entire back of the room, offering samples.

While attendees dined on chicken and steak, accompanied by music from the HCC Jazz Sextet, Alfonso sat nervously awaiting her turn to the stage.

Taking the microphone, she expressed her gratitude and ended by saying, "I look forward to the moment I walk across the stage and receive my credential in Business Management and Administration."

Though there is no stopping her now, as she will graduate HCC in the spring and attend the University of Florida in the fall, she still remembers spending summers cooling off from the Cuban heat at the public pool, surrounded by tourists drinking Coke and eating ice cream.

"I would tell my mom 'I'm hungry', and she said no, we can't get ice cream, all we have is bread," Alfonso said. "It was all we had, but she was still able to take us out and spend time together."

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