

Perez to grads: ‘You can do and become anything’

Texas State Rep. Mary Ann Perez had three key pieces of advice for the more than 300 students who received associate degrees and certificates Saturday at Lee College commencement: Believe in yourself, don't be afraid to fail, and never forget to give back to the community that gave so much to you.

Delivering the keynote address at the 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. commencement exercises in the packed-to-capacity college Sports Arena, Perez — who recently completed her first term representing House District 144 in the state Legislature — shared with graduates memories from her own winding journey to success.

Raised by her grandparents in a traditional Hispanic household where she was expected to aspire to life as a housewife and mother, Perez said she married and started a family right after graduating from Milby High School. It wasn't until she was 28 years old that she decided to enroll at Houston Community College, earning an associate degree eight years later. A bachelor's degree in business from the University of Houston-Downtown followed, when she was 41.

It doesn't matter what kind of economic or family background you come from, Perez told the graduates; what matters most is what you decide to make out of yourself.

“You can do and become anything you want,” she said. “You are not defined by what other people think of you. The opportunities are there, but no one is going to bring them to you. If you want it, go get it. It's your life, and you have to take ownership and responsibility for your own destiny.”

Seated among the proud and joyful Lee College graduates were dozens of seniors from the first graduating class of IMPACT Early College High School, who earned associate degrees while also completing requirements for their high-school diplomas. Operated by the Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District, IMPACT is currently located in the college's Advanced Technology Center.

“Our students are graduating from college and realizing their dreams. It's a historic day, and we are very proud of them,” said Dr. Salvador Cavazos, superintendent of the Goose Creek school district. “There's a time to celebrate in life, and this is that day for these students.”

Lee College Pres. Dr. Dennis Brown echoed that sentiment, telling graduates to take time amidst their revelry to thank the instructors, family and friends whose guidance and support helped ensure they would complete their academic programs and accomplish their goals.

At the end of the ceremony, Brown joined faculty, members of the Board of Regents and others to form a human tunnel of congratulations and applause through which the graduates recessed to exit the arena. The “Walk of Honor” is a beloved Lee College commencement tradition.

“Some of you are moving on to a university for a baccalaureate degree, and others are preparing to enter the workforce,” he said. “Keep this in mind: Today is the beginning of a journey that will lead you down a pathway to many, many more successes in your lives. We know you're going to make us proud.”