

More than 250 grads recognized at 2016 Fall Commencement

BAYTOWN, TX — With their family and friends filling every seat of the Sports Arena, more than 250 graduates crossed the stage at the Lee College Fall 2016 Commencement ceremony to receive their associate degrees and certificates of completion.

“You did it. You made it happen,” said Pres. Dr. Dennis Brown, extending congratulations to both the graduates and the loved ones who supported them throughout their academic journeys. “There were a lot of challenges and obstacles, but you are here this evening and there is so much more to come. Education doesn’t stop tonight; our education lasts a lifetime. You have set a course, your path is before you and now it’s up to you to follow.”

As she praised the graduates’ hard work to achieve their dreams, keynote speaker and Texas State Sen. Sylvia Garcia shared two of her earliest aspirations. The eighth of 10 children born and raised in the small South Texas farming community of Palito Blanco, Garcia first wanted to someday work inside an air-conditioned building rather than outside in sun-scorched fields. Second, she wanted to make sure children in need of medical care would not have to stand in line to receive shots, as she and other poor youth from Palito Blanco did.

Garcia’s parents assured her that if she worked hard, got an education and kept her belief in God, she could reach any goal she set for her future. After earning a bachelor’s degree in social work from Texas Woman’s University and receiving a Juris Doctor degree from the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University, the former social worker and longtime public servant realized they were right. A degree is the one thing in life that no one can give you or take away, she said, and the key to opening many doors and possibilities.

“No matter who you are or where you come from, tonight you’re all very equal because that’s the beauty of education: it’s the great equalizer for all Americans,” Garcia said, acknowledging that many Lee College students likely had to juggle their studies with a job, family and other responsibilities.

“You have an education and you have a shot at the American Dream,” she said.

“Whether your father is a plant manager or a welder or you were raised by a single mom, inside of the classroom you can achieve anything you set your mind to. It truly is a place where the sky is the limit.”

Though she was elected controller for the city of Houston, became the first Hispanic and first woman to be elected in her own right to the Harris County Commissioners Court and has represented District 6 in the Texas State Senate since 2013, Garcia told graduates that her first two election campaigns were failures. Success and failure are temporary and neither is a reason to grow complacent or discouraged, she said.

“There should never be a time in your life where you’re not challenged, because it is the challenge that stretches you and shows you what you can become,” Garcia said. “Use your will. Successful people aren’t stronger than others or necessarily smarter than others, but they have to have more desire than others. To succeed, you must desire to succeed more than anything else. Find something you can be passionate about. Find

something where you can make your mark on this world. Keep dreaming. Reach for more. Do and dare.”

The message resonated with graduate Stephen Shea, a U.S. Navy veteran who moved to Baytown from Gardiner, Maine, to attend Lee College and pursue a new career in the petrochemical field. A former butcher who was looking for an affordable education that would fully prepare him for work in the industry, he earned an Associate of Applied Science degree in process technology and feels confident about his ability to find a job and hit the ground running.

“I was never a great student and I was nervous about keeping up with my classes, but my experience at Lee College has been overwhelmingly positive,” said Shea, who thanked his wife and family for their continuous support from his arrival in Texas through completion of his degree. “The instructors really encouraged me. They didn’t make it easy, but they were always willing to help. I can’t believe the connections I’ve made.”