

Chekeena Rivera, above, enrolled at STCC after receiving her high school equivalency credentials. At left, HiSET graduates listen to a speaker during the June 26 graduation ceremony. Below, STCC President John B. Cook speaks to the graduates.

SPRINGFIELD

# 'It feels so amazing'

## STCC ceremony celebrates adult learners

Wearing a black cap and gown, Chekeena Rivera smiled as she clutched the certificate signifying her accomplishment.

At 27, she had earned her high school equivalency credentials. Rivera, a Springfield resident, felt good about the future after passing her high school equivalency test, which is called the HiSET.

"It feels so amazing," Rivera said at the 2018 HiSET Celebration honoring nearly 40 graduates who took classes at the Springfield Adult Learning Center at Springfield Technical Community College.

Rivera is now seeking her associate degree from STCC and hopes to transfer to a four-year university or college and continue her education. She dreams of one day owning her own business.

"I wanted this for my son," Rivera said. "I want to eventually have that house with the picket fence, so I went back to school."

STCC President John B.

**"Success is nothing without failure. I like failure, because it opens up the opportunity for learning."**

José Lopez-Figueroa

Cook, faculty and staff offered encouragement and congratulations at the June 26 ceremony, which was packed with friends and family of the graduates. Cook urged them to consider the value of an education at STCC.

"As you move forward, think about what motivated you to be here tonight, and how you keep going with that in mind," Cook said. "As you look around, please know you are needed. There are employers with good jobs all around looking for your talents."

Noting that many employers are looking for candidates with college credits, Cook encouraged the HiSET

graduates to consider taking courses at STCC.

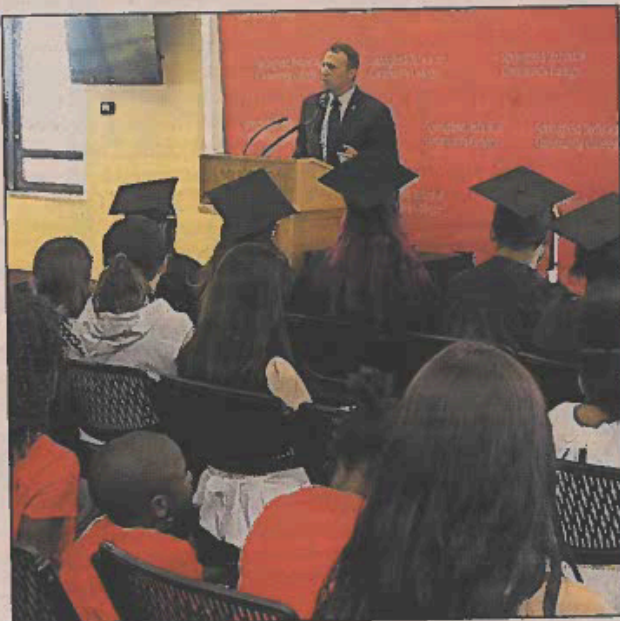
"Please note this wonderful institution will continue to be there for you," Cook said.

The college offers about 100 different programs, has childcare on campus and gives area residents an affordable opportunity to earn a degree or certificate, he said.

The graduates heard several success stories during the ceremony. Student speaker Elizabeth Rivera, of Springfield, graduated last year and then enrolled in the medical coding and billing program at STCC.

"This past spring, I made it to the dean's list and was invited to join the honors program," she told the graduates, referring to the list that recognizes excellence in academic performance.

Graduates also heard that failure can lead to success. José Lopez-Figueroa holds a master's degree and is now director of the Center for Access Services at STCC, but said he "barely graduated from high



school." "With my grades, I wasn't even thinking about college," Lopez-Figueroa said.

After going to a college fair, he decided to enroll at a four-year school. He struggled with his academics, even failing courses, but with help from TRIO student support services, he obtained his bachelor's and then his master's degree.

"Success is nothing without failure," he said. "I like failure, because it opens up the opportunity for learning."

Thomas Hegarty, an adult basic education instructor for the learning center, quit school at 16. "I believed I knew everything worth knowing," he told the graduates.

"Over 25 years, I've been through a whole lot of dirty jobs, dangerous jobs, low-paying jobs and I felt maybe I should do something about this," Hegarty said.

After receiving his high school equivalency credentials, he took courses at STCC. One day, he finished a math test and felt elated knowing he did well. Today, he teaches math and science at the adult learning center.

"I would encourage anyone who thinks there's any chance at all that they might get something out of even one course at college to give it a try," Hegarty said. "You're going to be amazed. It's such a wonderful, beautiful experience."