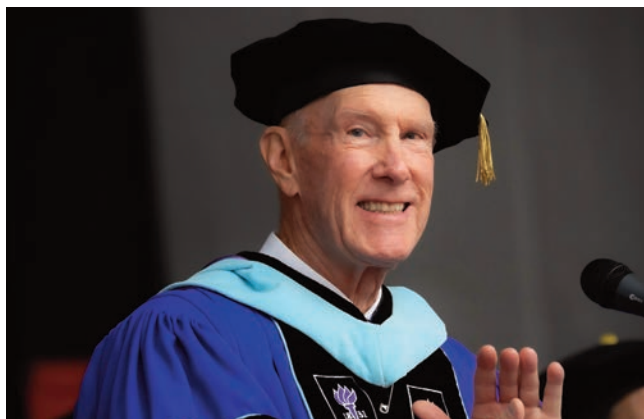


insideBergen

COMMUNITY
COLLEGE

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1. President Eric M. Friedman congratulated each of the graduates. 2. Grand marshal Professor Emeritus Charles McNerney. 3. Keynote speaker and Board of Trustees member Howard Haughton and Trustee Secretary Ritzy Moralez-Diaz. 4. Members of the class of 2025.

Celebrating the Class of 2025

A record number of Bergen Community College candidates for graduation participated in the institution's 56th annual commencement exercises during a morning ceremony at MetLife Stadium on May 13. Nearly 1,100 graduates in attendance celebrated alongside 7,000 family, friends, faculty, staff and guests. All told, the official number of the class of 2025 graduates will climb to more than 2,000 when including those students who graduated in December and prospective August graduates.

The class of 2025 featured Francesco Maneri as the class valedictorian. Also graduating were members of the College's Turning Point Program for adults with intellectual disabilities, local high school students who earned degrees through Bergen's dual enrollment program, and 71-year-old Nicholas Gatti, an end-stage kidney disease survivor, founding member of

the food rescue organization Table to Table and retired award-winning executive chef. Class of 2025 graduate Erica Faye Tubera performed the Star-Spangled Banner at the ceremony.

Among the special guests, Eva's Village CEO, Bergen Board of Trustees member and Bergen alumnus Howard Haughton provided the keynote address, where he encouraged graduates to find their "true north."

Joining Haughton as featured guests, Bergen County Executive James J. Tedesco III and Bergen County Board of Commissioner Chair Mary Amoroso also spoke at the ceremony. Professor Emeritus Charles McNerney opened the event as the grand marshal before yielding to Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost Andrew Tomko who served as master of ceremonies.

Continued on page 2

BY THE NUMBERS - The Class of 2025

567

Members of Phi Theta Kappa

71

4.0 GPAs

14

Turning Point Program Students

2,000+

Total Grads

220

Members of the Early College Cohort
(students earning associate degrees often before earning their high school diplomas)

Valedictorian Circles Back Home

Valedictorian Francesco Maneri's path to the top student in the class of 2025 took a circuitous route: he moved to California after graduating from Fair Lawn High School in 2015 to work in the music industry as an audio engineer before returning home to Bergen County to enroll at the College in 2023.

"In life, skill is second ... kindness is first," he said during his remarks at commencement. "Knowledge means little if it isn't shared generously. Learning is richest in collaboration. The best of us lift others up rather than leave them behind."

Maneri distinguished himself at Bergen by not only earning a 4.0 GPA, but serving as the co-president of the Dr. Judith K. Winn School of Honors and as an editor of the Labyrinth student literary journal.



Studying psychology, he will now pursue baccalaureate and graduate degrees in the discipline with aspirations of clinical practice and research. This fall he will begin his studies at Stanford University.

Outside of his academic pursuits, Maneri maintains a deep commitment to community outreach, including participating in peer-to-peer service by providing clothing and food to the homeless, mentoring fellow pickleball players and working as a peer tutor in Bergen's Cerullo Learning Assistance Center. ■



Grad Sings for the Moment

Class of 2025 graduate Erica Tubera had not seen her family in six years. When they reunited at Commencement 2025, her parents received a surprise of a lifetime: their daughter had a starring role in the ceremony as the National Anthem singer. Tubera left her family behind at age 18 to pursue a college education in the United States, relocating from Saipan, the largest island and capital of the Northern Mariana Islands. She drew inspiration from her parents, who moved from the Philippines to Saipan many years ago in the hopes of a better life.

"They never had the chance to go to college, so now it's my turn to fulfill their dreams," she said. "I'm proud to be the first in my family to earn a degree, and I'm doing this for them, especially my dad, who worked so hard to support my mom, my two brothers, and me."

To become Bergen's National Anthem singer, Tubera emerged from a strong field of entries to become a finalist. Ultimately, organizers selected Tubera due to her unmistakable energy in singing the notoriously difficult song and the story that brought her to Bergen.

"These past years have been the hardest physically, emotionally and mentally," she said. "I worked three-to-four jobs, went to school full-time, survived the pandemic, dealt with health issues, felt incredibly homesick and still chased my dreams as a performer. I did it all without my family by my side, only their love and prayers from afar. Singing the National Anthem meant everything to me."

She will soon play "Moana" in a Disney Cruise Broadway-style musical aboard the Disney Treasure. ■



Assistant Director of Information Technology Business Operations Kirsten Perino (third from left) and the Perino Family Foundation Graduation Scholarship awardees.

Celebrating, continued from page 1

Late in the ceremony, and immediately after Student Government Association President Hanieh Kachooee led the graduates in a ceremonial turning of tassels, the Bergen Community College Foundation awarded five \$1,000 "send-off scholarships" to randomly selected graduates in attendance. The scholarships, which have become an annual tradition to signify the end of the ceremony and the graduates' Bergen education, aim to provide the selected graduates with a special head-start on their post-Bergen journey. This year, Kristen Perino, Bergen Assistant Director of Information Technology Business Operations, and her family foundation personally sponsored the scholarships. Accordingly, Perino drew the randomly selected names of the scholarship awardees: Roy Hidalgo-Ruiz, Valerie Leanette Orozco, Isidro Pablo Alvelo, Luisa Jimenez and Miguel Borstel Silva. Perino said her family made the donation after seeing the graduates' response to receiving the

scholarships at previous commencements. The Perino Family Foundation Graduation Scholarship will continue next year; the family has already made a \$5,000 donation for the class of 2026.

"We were really inspired by the students in previous years," she said. "You could just tell how much it meant to them. Supporting education, and our students, is the best investment you can make."

Inspired by the Perino Family Foundation, four platform guests – President Eric M. Friedman, Vice President of Student Affairs AJ Trump, Trustee Haughton and Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost Tomko – spontaneously announced that they would each sponsor \$1,000 send-off scholarships as well. Graduates Morelia Julissa Rosales, Gabriella Carlucci, Daniel A. Gallegos and Austin Peluso had their names randomly pulled for the awards. ■

Snapshotted

Commencement Edition



Celebrating graduates is always a family affair!



A record number of candidates for graduation attended Commencement 2025.



Members of the College's Board of Trustees.



Faculty and staff volunteers helped make everything run smoothly during the biggest day of the academic year.



Bergen County elected officials and President Friedman.

College Degree Just Desserts for Career Chef



Demonstrating that education can be a lifelong pursuit, Nicholas Gatti, a former executive chef, end-stage kidney disease survivor and founding member of North Jersey food rescue organization Table to Table, graduated from Bergen this year at the age of 71 with his associate of science degree in general studies.

"To be honest, I had no intention of going for a degree, although I had always told my staff and coworkers that when I retired, I would go back to school," he said.

Early in his career in the hospitality industry, Gatti considered taking college courses – and even thought about switching careers to pursue a degree in computer science at Bergen. However, his culinary career "took off," dashing any thoughts of a career change. During his time as a chef, Gatti dazzled diners at industry heavyweights such as the Four Seasons Restaurant, the Loews Glenpointe Hotel and Alpine Country Club.

He also served as a founding member of Table to Table, a North Jersey food rescue organization that takes leftover food from clubs, restaurants and supermarkets and distributes it to charitable organizations to combat food insecurity. He served as the restaurant chair of Table to Table during its fundraising efforts.

But the college education "what if" remained.

So, when Gatti retired from the hospitality industry in 2019, he recalled how he had told his staff and coworkers that he would go back to school. He "grabbed an available class here

and there" under senior citizen tuition waivers at Bergen and also registered for continuing education courses.

"As an adult student, I found the continuing education learning experience to be a drug that I couldn't get enough of," he said.

Despite his eagerness, Gatti also had to endure a series of health issues that nearly derailed his lifelong pursuit of a college degree. Attending classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, he survived end-stage kidney disease, a mini-stroke and then a kidney transplant.

Nonetheless, he continued taking degree program classes and eventually earned the credits to graduate.

"It turned out that I could graduate with the A.S. degree by only taking two more classes, so I decided to do so," said Gatti. "I came out on the other side of it all with an A.S. from Bergen Community College. Let perseverance be your watchword."

When asked what made him successful at Bergen, Gatti credited his favorite professors: Kevin Olbrys for Introduction to Philosophy, Song Chung for Introduction to Physics and Christina Mouser for Linear Algebra. He also lauded the counseling staff and the Cerullo Learning Assistance Center tutors.

"I practically lived in the math center during the past year or so," he said.

Even in retirement, Gatti's interest in education endures: he recently accepted a position as a substitute teacher in the Dumont School District.

"At my age, I have no career aspirations," he said. "I have to admit that I missed my calling, as [teaching] is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done."

Gatti cannot dismiss the idea of attending a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree, either. He credits his time at Bergen for unlocking this passion.

"I am quite proud to have attended Bergen and loudly say so whenever I speak of it," he said. ■



Words of Wisdom from Keynote Speaker Howard Haughton

"Document life's moments. Be open to opportunity and change. Pay very close attention to your values and your passions."

"Capture life's precious moments so you can look back and reflect on who you met and what you learned along your journey. I wish I did that along the way!"

"Stay true to your values and your passion. Doing so will help you make career choices that are a labor of love — work done out of passion, dedication and deep personal commitment rather than financial gain or obligation."

Howard Haughton, who joined the College's Board of Trustees in 2023, serves as the CEO of Eva's Village, a behavioral health and social service organization located in Paterson. He is also a Bergen alumnus! ■



Members of the management team wore denim at their April meeting to stand in solidarity with survivors and victims of sexual assault.

Bergen Wears Denim in Solidarity

In recognition of Sexual Assault Awareness Month, Bergen joined millions of people worldwide on April 30 to observe Denim Day. Developed by Peace over Violence, Denim Day asks people to wear denim on the last Wednesday in April as a visible way to highlight misconceptions surrounding sexual violence.

Denim Day recalls the case of a rape conviction overturned by the Italian Supreme Court in 1999 on the grounds that since the victim wore tight jeans, she must have helped the perpetrator remove them, thus making the act consensual. Women in the Italian Parliament, enraged by the verdict, protested the next day by wearing jeans to work and a movement began. ■



A Caffeinated Capstone

As part of a capstone experience in the Barista Fundamentals (HRM-132) course – and as a way to close the semester on a high note – Professor Tomer Zilkha's students prepared complimentary coffee and tea on Mondays and Tuesdays last month for the College community. Guests included President Eric M. Friedman, who visited for an espresso! ■



Assistant Director of Public Relations Jessica Fagnoli accepted two Paragon awards on behalf of the College.

Marketing and Communication a Calling Card for Bergen

Bergen has captured two National Council in Marketing and Public Relations Paragon Awards – the highest honor for excellence in strategic communication at community colleges. NCMPR, an affiliate of the American Association of Community Colleges, garnered nearly 1,600 submissions from 205 community and technical colleges from across the country this year, with Bergen placing first in the recruitment/marketing program category and second in the postcard category. Bergen Assistant Director of Public Relations Jessica Fagnoli accepted the College's Paragons at NCMPR's 50th anniversary national conference in New Orleans, Louisiana in March.

Bergen secured the gold Paragon for a comprehensive campaign to increase awareness and applications for scholarship opportunities through the Bergen Community College Foundation and the silver for a postcard promoting 2024-25 Bergenstages theatre performances. Including Bergen, NCMPR only recognized two New Jersey community colleges with Paragons this year.

Bergen's Office of Marketing and Communications has secured 20 NCMPR Paragons and Medallions for excellence in categories such as newsletter, video programming, communication success story campaigns and advertising during the last decade. Last year, Bergen earned its first Paragon Award in the interior signage/display category and earned an institution-record four awards in the Medallion regional recognition program in each of the past two years. Effective marketing and communication represent priorities for the institution, which included them as focus areas in the 2024-2029 strategic plan. ■



Tiempo de Fiesta!

The College commemorated Mexico's historic "La Batalla de Puebla", also referred to as the Battle of May 5, which occurred on May 5, 1862, with Mariachi music, traditional Mexican dances, refreshments and prize giveaways in the main campus student center. ■



Never mind the noise and the chatter, find intelligent, fact-based conversation on Bergen Banter! Season one of the College's official podcast features analysis from faculty experts on topics such as the aviation industry, de-extinction and women as heads of state. Listen wherever you stream podcasts.

banter.bergen.edu

Five Faculty Earn Emeritus Rank



Lou Ethel Roliston, Philip Dolce and Carlo Annese.

Since establishing the professor emeritus rank in 1988, Bergen Community College has awarded the title to a select group of faculty members who made extraordinary contributions to the institution during their careers as educators. On May 2, the College inducted five longtime professors to the exclusive group: Carlo Annese; Philip Dolce; Weiping "Bill" Jiang (posthumous); Mauro Marzocco (posthumous); and Lou Ethel Roliston. The College celebrated the retirees at a luncheon in Hackensack sponsored by the College and the Bergen Community College Faculty Association. Professor Kate McGivern chairs the professor emeritus committee that manages the selection process.

"Bergen Community College has a storied history of excellence in its faculty ranks," she said. "The professor emeritus program recognizes those individuals who became the 'best of the best' by making an indelible impact on the College community and student learning."

The professor emeritus class of 2024-25 includes a founding faculty member, Marzocco, who began teaching at Bergen when the institution first began offering classes in 1968. Additionally, the inductees' disciplines span from English to history and the sciences, with Annese and Jiang making significant contributions to the College's developmental English and American Language Program courses of study. Others helped connect Bergen to the national consciousness, with Dolce distinguishing himself as one of the country's top experts on the topic of the suburban landscape and Roliston spearheading initiatives that brought speakers such as Maya Angelou, Jhumpa Lahiri and Ta-Nehisi Coates to campus.

With the latest inductees, only 74 faculty members have earned the rank of professor emeritus in the College's near-60-year history. As part of their membership in the elite group, inductees join the Professor Emeritus Association under the Bergen Community College Foundation and receive special access to College events, activities and resources. ■