

AACC grads urged to 'be prepared'

College's 48th graduation is the largest to date

[By SHANTEE WOODARDS, Staff Writer](#)

Carolyn Jonasson planned to go back to school when her youngest child started high school, but she couldn't wait.

So she enrolled at Anne Arundel Community College in 2008 and studied computer programming, taking online classes at times and studying whenever she could.

When an epic snowstorm hit the region in February and she was stranded at the hotel where she worked, her professors were lenient when she had to e-mail assignments or turn them in late.

There were times when she had to tell her husband and four children that she needed an hour of silence to study, and that she shouldn't be bothered unless someone was bleeding.

Jonasson realized the fruits of her labor Thursday night, serving as one of the student marshals in AACC's graduation ceremony. Her next step is to go to Strayer University for a bachelor's degree, which could mean she'll finish up just as her youngest children graduate from high school.

"It was very, very difficult, but I had the support of my family, my husband and children," said the 40-year-old Glen Burnie woman said. "I'm a role model for my children. If I can graduate summa cum laude at AACC then they can do the same at Old Mill."

This year was the college's 48th graduation ceremony and with 580 students participating, it was the college's largest ceremony to date. Typically, about 420 students don caps and gowns at Siegert Field on the Arnold campus.

The Class of 2010 was made up of 1,672 students, with 1,309 getting degrees and 464 earning certificates. That is a boost from last year, when the college had 1,506 graduates, which included 1,218 degrees and 372 certificates.

Keynote speaker Frank Chong said he was pleased to see so many students getting their degrees. As deputy assistant secretary for community colleges at the U.S. Department of Education, his goal is to help increase the number of community college graduates to 6 million by 2020.

Chong told the students not to be overly concerned with the recession, pursuing academic degrees would put them further ahead. He also encouraged them to follow their passions, define themselves and above all, be prepared.

"Be prepared to lead America in environment so we can reduce climate change," Chong told the crowd. "Be prepared to lead yourself to financial independence so your parents can get a break and enjoy life again."

Many graduating students said they appreciated the opportunities that they were able to get at AACC, which might not have been available at bigger college or university.

Lindon Rice came to the campus in 2008 with a goal of starting a new career in interior design. She was so intimidated by her first computer class that she left in tears.

Eventually, she got the hang of it. Last year, she won a student project where she used a computer program to design her own faux restaurant. Her establishment - "The Joker" - offered tapas and karaoke in downtown Annapolis.

It also got the attention of a business executive, who has solicited her help in renovating a 6,000-square-foot restaurant.

"Being older is a distinct advantage," said the Annapolis woman, who declined to give her age. "I'm very goal oriented. I knew what I wanted, and I was not intimidated. When difficulties would arise, I would reach out, and I always found a helping hand."

Valedictorian Alexandra Houston-Ludlam - who came to the college at 16 - is planning to become a clinical psychologist. She always has been the person her friends turn to for advice and she'd like to continue that in a career with adolescents.

The 19-year-old Lothian resident will go to the University of Maryland, College Park in the fall. After that, she wants to pursue a doctorate at either the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill or Yale.

Houston-Ludlam was part of AACC's Honors program, which allows students to work independently with a faculty member. She did research projects on various therapy methods with children and adolescents.

She encouraged her classmates to develop empathy, something that she will need in her future career.

"Empathy is vital to have as human beings, no matter what your field of interest," Houston-Ludlam said in her speech, noting the college's diverse student and faculty population.

"My challenge to you is to see (differences) as an opportunity to build empathy within your self. You never know what will inspire you."