

EDUCATION

# Miami Dade College graduates 14,000 students during historic commencement ceremonies

BY JIMENA TAVEL

MAY 01, 2021 07:24 PM, UPDATED MAY 02, 2021 03:20 PM



Miami Dade College students take a selfie during their graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, May 1, 2021. [MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MATIAS.J.OCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)



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Little Havana's loanDepot Park, which usually hosts Miami Marlins home baseball games, and more recently COVID-19 testing and vaccine shots, dressed up its red clay infield Saturday with a red carpet for Miami Dade College's commencement ceremonies.

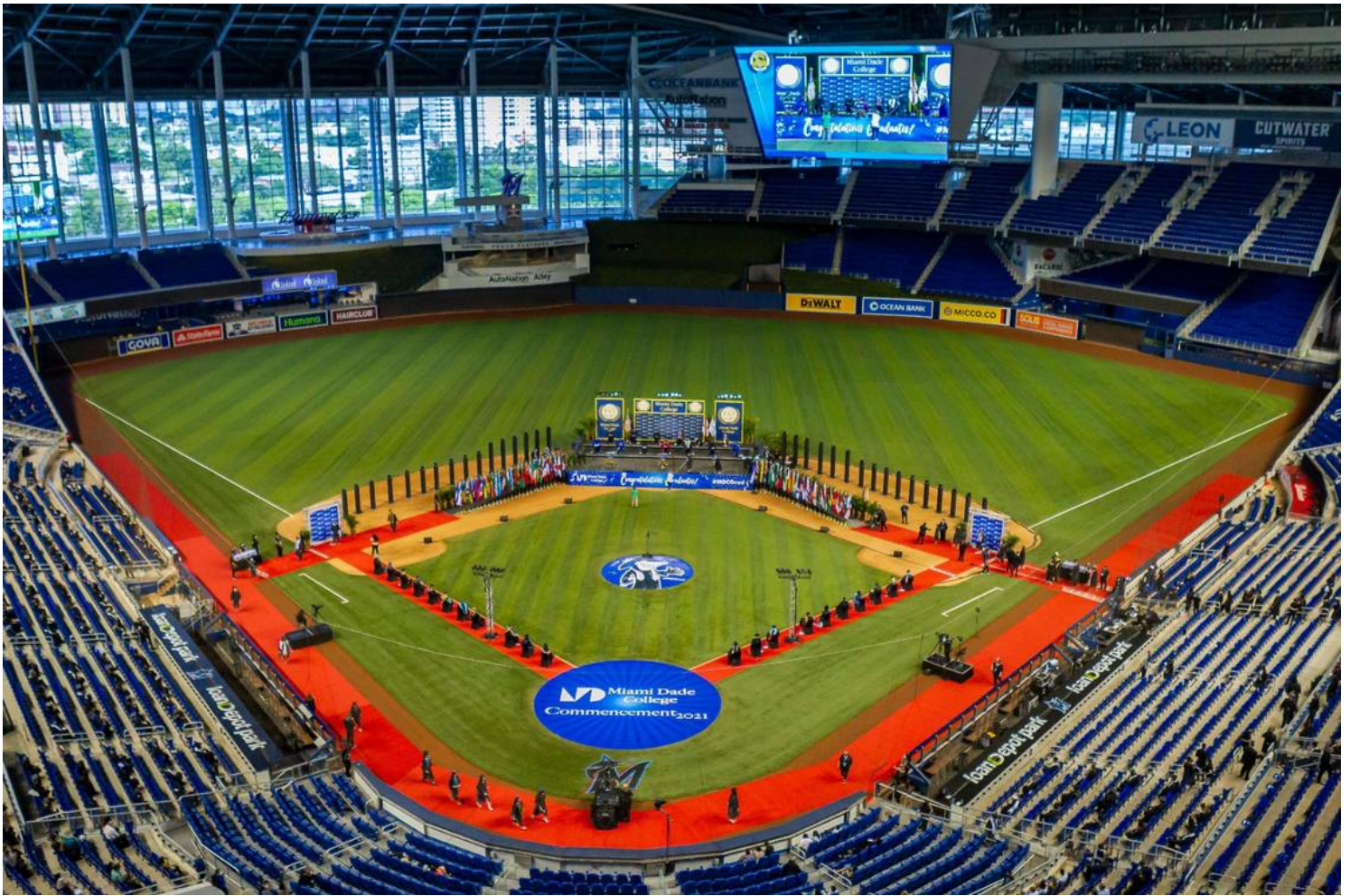
MDC, whose 120,000 students enrolled make it one of the nation's largest public colleges, graduated 14,000 this weekend, awarding them a combination of certificates and associate's and bachelor's degrees.

About 1,500 graduates attended each of the three loanDepot Park ceremonies spread out throughout the day — a morning one for the North, Medical and West campuses; an afternoon one for the Kendall, Homestead and Padrón campuses; and an evening one for the Wolfson and Hialeah campuses.

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Miami Dade College students attend their graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, May 1, 2021. [MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)

The graduates, donning their black gowns and decorated caps — and mandatory facial coverings — sat on the blue stadium seats, leaving about two or three spaces empty between them to allow for social distancing. They took turns to walk across the stage but saved the customary hand shakes and hugs, replacing them with occasional fist and elbow bumps.

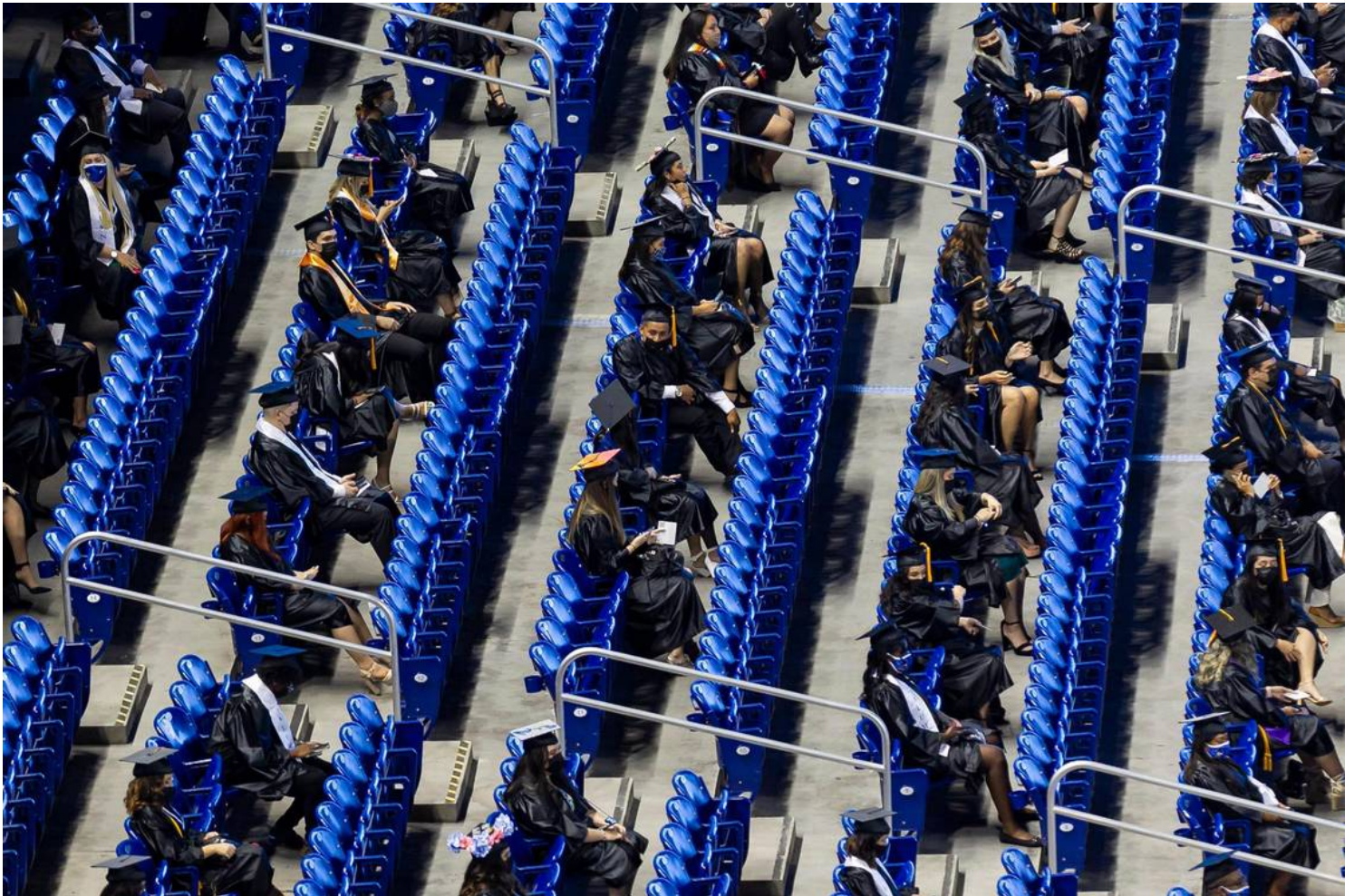
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Each honoree got two guests tickets to invite their loved ones, who witnessed the jubilant milestone from farther up the bleachers. They also got a link to a live stream that allowed many more to view it from a much larger distance. At least 20,700 watched the morning ceremony.

Other safety protocols put in place to prevent the spread of the deadly coronavirus included hand sanitizing stations, temperature checks and symptom questionnaires at the entrance.



Miami Dade College students attend their graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, May 1, 2021. [MATIAS J. OCNER](mailto:MATIAS.J.OCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)  
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The commencement ceremonies proved to be atypical, not only because of the moment of silence to recognize the COVID-19 victims and the vast health regulations, but also because they were the first, in the college's 62-year history, to be presided over by a woman. President Madeline Pumariaga, a Hialeah native and an MDC alumna herself, recently [became the college's fifth and first female president](#).

## **A HISTORIC DAY FOR MIAMI DADE COLLEGE COMMENCEMENTS**

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“It’s exciting,” Pumariega said about her glass-shattering role, but she emphasized in an interview that the graduates’ accomplishments were paramount.

“So many of our students have amazing stories,” she told the Herald. “So many of them are the first in their families to ever graduate. They’re not traditional college students; they’re moms and dads. They’re balancing life, going through the pandemic and working to support their families.”



Miami Dade College president Madeline Pumariega attends a graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, May 1, 2021. MATIAS J. OCNER [MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)

One of those stories is Heily Rivas’. The 17-year-old, who completed her associate’s degree through dual enrollment while home schooled, graduated Saturday alongside her dad, who finished a certificate in digital marketing at MDC at the same time.

It was a familiar sight for the family: In 2014, Heily’s mom and her sister graduated together. Her brother graduated last year from MDC.

The five-member family, originally from Colombia, manages a music school in Hialeah called Rivas Music & Video and launched the Rivas Perdomo Family Foundation, a nonprofit that delivers toys, scholarships, musical instruments, clothing and shoes to underserved children in Latin America. They also have a band called Grupo H.




Miami Dade College students attend their graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, May 1, 2021. *MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM*

Heily wants to go into fashion next and someday build her own clothing brand.

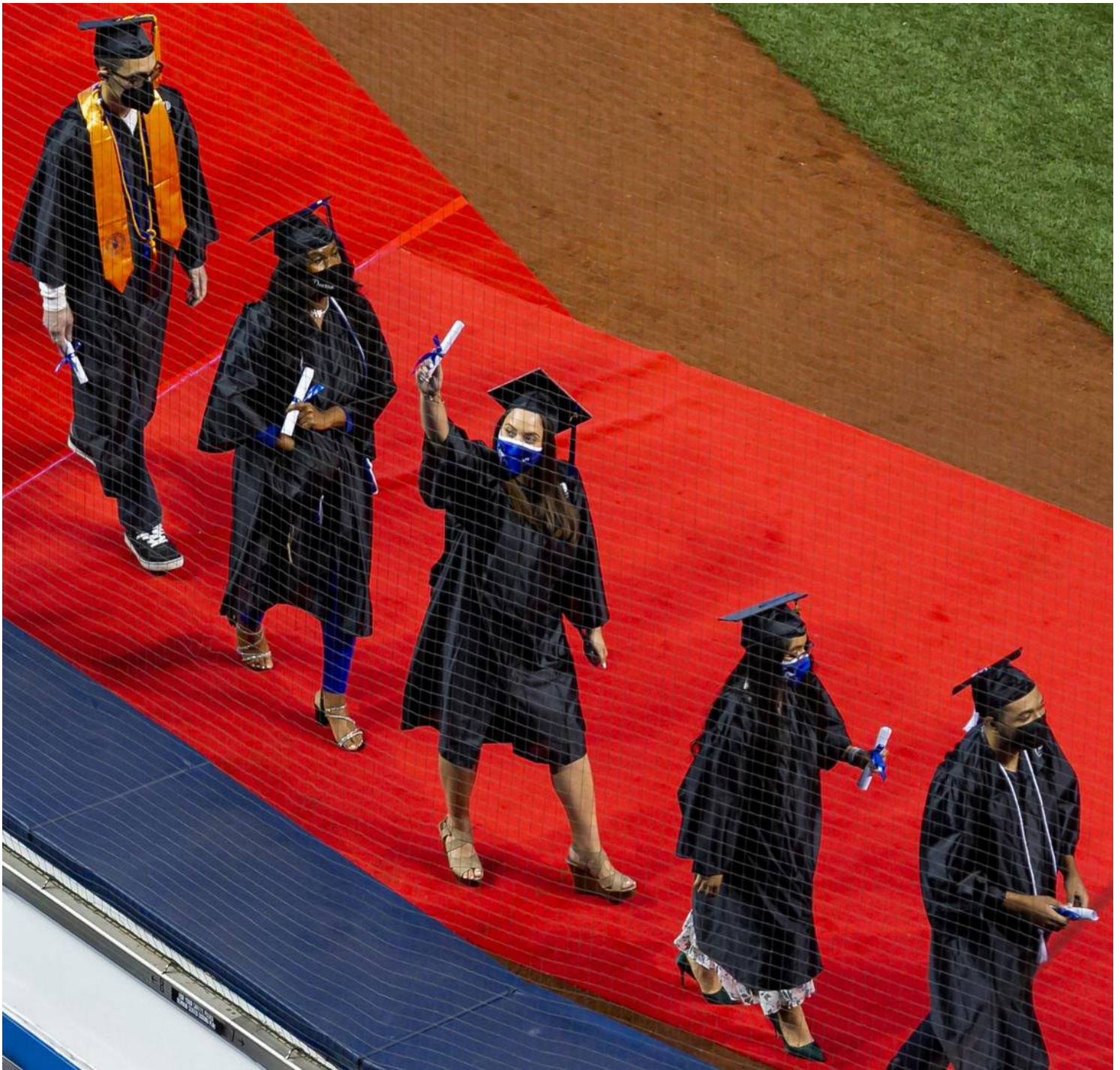
“It has been a beautiful experience,” she told the Herald. “We’re all going to be proud MDC alumni. The Hialeah Campus will always be home.”

Another graduate who will happily look back at her days at MDC's Homestead Campus is Jada Watkins, of Haitian descent.



Watkins, who dreams of becoming an anesthesiologist, said her mom struggled a lot with her own college education, ultimately dropping out to raise her three children as a single parent. Completing her AA will turn Watkins into the first person in her family to graduate from college — a success she said belongs to her and her mother.

“She’s my No. 1 supporter. My mom has always been there for me,” said Watkins, 20. “She made it happen.”



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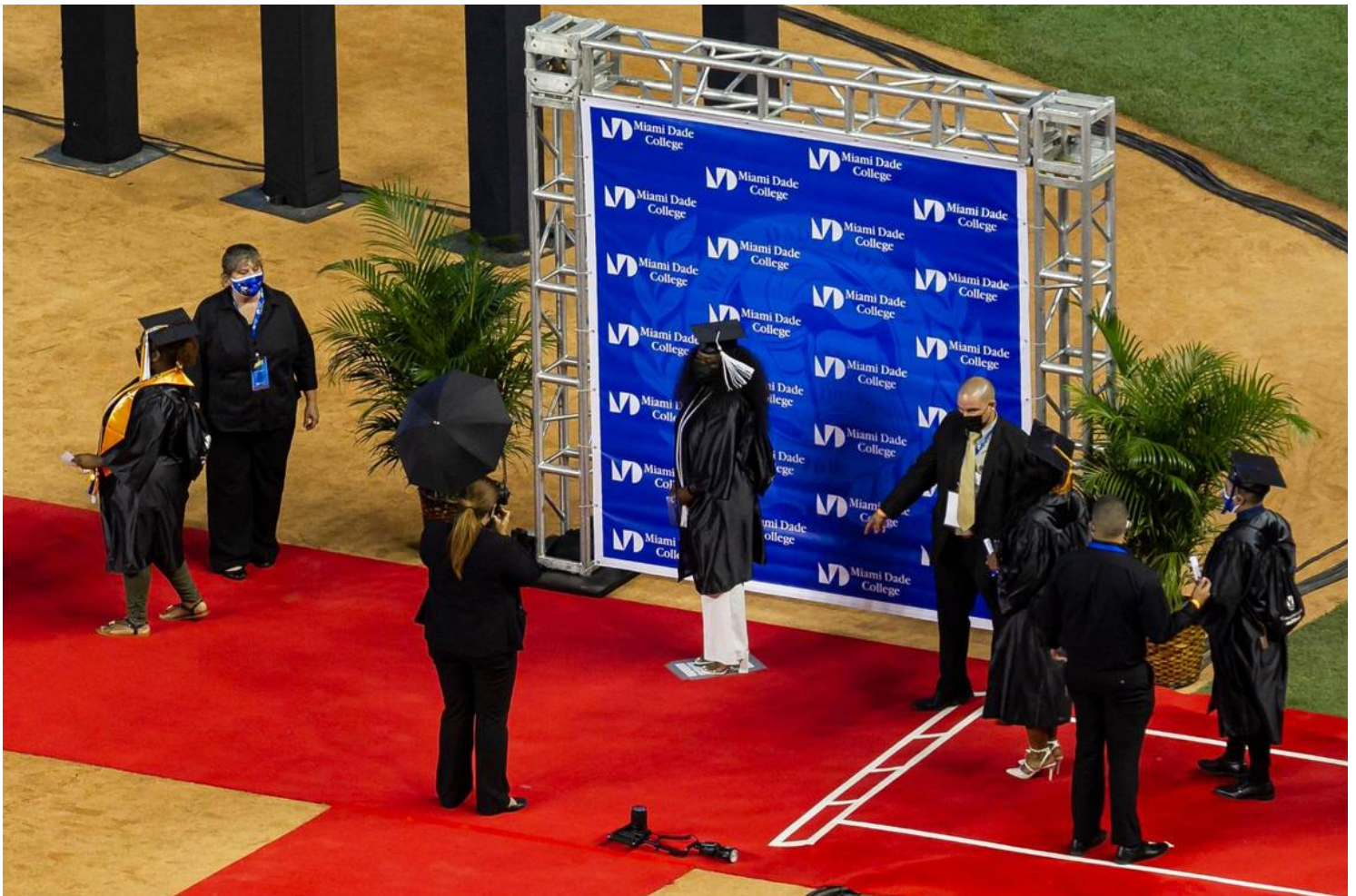
### **THREE WELL-KNOWN GUEST SPEAKERS**

Last year, at the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic, colleges across the world shuttered their campuses and pivoted to online courses. Canceled, postponed and virtual graduations followed.



In South Florida, MDC became the first higher education institution to bring back in-person commencement ceremonies last fall. It organized five different ceremonies outdoors at the North and Kendall Campuses, and allowed only graduates to go. But after rain showered down on some of the attendees, MDC decided to relocate the events for the spring.

That's how hundreds of people ended up at the formerly-known-as Marlins Park. Among them, the three guest speakers: Co-Founder and Chairman of Moderna Dr. Noubar Afeyan, City of Miami Mayor Francis Suarez and the Miami Herald's Executive Editor and McClatchy Florida Regional Editor Monica R. Richardson.



Miami Dade College students are photographed during their graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, May 1, 2021. *MATIAS J. OCNER [MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)*

During his address, Afeyan noted how the company he co-founded, Moderna, created and received emergency authorization from the FDA for the COVID-19 vaccine, faster than any other vaccine in history. But it wasn't easy.

"We were told messenger-RNA could not be turned into medicine, but we imagined a future in which it was possible, and we persevered," he said. "My message to you, graduates, is much the same: You, too, can imagine the future you want and pioneer your way to new possibilities."

### **SOME HOMEWORK AND EXTRA CREDIT FOR THE GRADUATES**

A few hours later, Suarez assigned graduates some homework: Go home and listen to the best commencement speech he has ever heard, he told them, [referring to U.S. Navy Adm. William McRaven's famous appearance at the University of Texas-Austin in 2014](#). McRaven recounted 10 life lessons he learned in his training.

The mayor also centered some of his remarks around his [now-trending push for Miami to become a tech hub](#).

"Over the past few months, Miami has entered a new and transformative moment," he said. "Miami is now the place to be for capital, tech, ideas and innovation. Seizing this opportunity will require creativity, courage, experimentation, innovation, ambition and persistence. And all of you have it in abundance."



City of Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, one of the keynote speakers at the Miami Dade College graduation ceremony, told graduates: "Miami is now the place to be for capital, tech, ideas and innovation." The college hosted three graduation ceremonies for its different campuses Saturday, May 1, 2021, at loanDepot park in Miami, Florida. *MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM*

Richardson, [the first Black executive editor in the Herald's 117-year history](#), spoke last. She gave the students extra credit for graduating during a health crisis and a racial reckoning: "Not only did you make it ... you made it through a pandemic."

“And it was set against the backdrop that America witnessed the killing of George Floyd sparking off active protests and demonstrations globally,” she added.



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Monica Richardson, the executive editor of the Miami Herald and McClatchy Florida Regional Editor, told graduates of Miami Dade College, “Not only did you make it ... you made it through a pandemic,” during MDC commencement ceremonies at loanDepot park in Miami, Florida, on Saturday, May 1, 2021. MATIASJ. OCNER [MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)

She then warned them against letting the “joy stealers” take a hold of them. She listed hate crimes against Asian Americans, exhaustion and “the driver who lays on his horn because I failed to move the second the traffic light changed” as some of them. She jokingly described the last as “a Miami thing” she discovered after moving to the area this year.

“All these things, some major, some minor. All these things can be ‘joy stealers.’ Life is full of them,” she said.



“Never let anyone or anything steal your joy. Joy allows you to keep dreaming.”



Miami Dade College students react during their graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, May 1, 2021. MATIAS J. OCNER [MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM](mailto:MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM)

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JIMENA TAVEL

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Jimena Tavel es una reportera bilingüe de triple nacionalidad: hondureña, cubana y costarricense. Nació y creció en Tegucigalpa, Honduras, y se mudó a la Florida a los 17 años. Obtuvo su título en periodismo de la Universidad de Florida en 2018, y se unió al Herald poco después. Jimena Tavel is a Honduran, Cuban and Costa Rican journalist who writes in both English and Spanish. She was born and raised in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, but moved to Florida at age 17. She earned her journalism degree from the University of Florida in 2018, and joined the Herald soon after.

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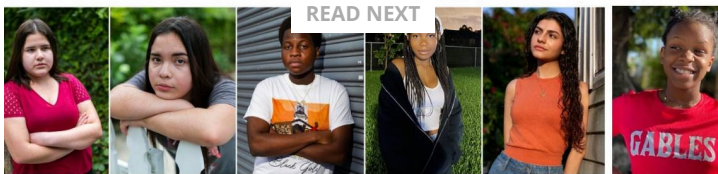
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BY LINDA ROBERTSON

MAY 01, 2021 07:00 AM, UPDATED MAY 02, 2021 11:53 AM



Since the coronavirus pandemic swept across the globe, Alma Martinez has been tossed between the extremes of tempest and doldrums. Her mother lost her job, so Martinez found work as a Starbucks barista to help pay the grocery

bills for a household of six. She babysat and home-schooled her two younger siblings while struggling with her own remote Coral Gables High classes, her last year of high school.

Her mood sank during long stretches of mind-numbing monotony while cooped up at home and cut off from her friends.

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