

EDUCATION

From PJs to pomp and circumstance: MDC grads get an in-person ceremony with sound advice

BY JIMENA TAVEL

UPDATED APRIL 23, 2022 8:18 PM



Miami Dade College students comment on reaching a major milestone after they participated in their graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, April 23, 2021.

BY [MATIAS J. OCHNER](#) | [JIMENA TAVEL](#)



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During her high school graduation at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Angelica Tangcangco McCalla sat in her living room wearing pajamas.

“When they called my name we all said, ‘hooray!’ and then we just carried on,” said McCalla, 20, chuckling at the memory.

This weekend, about two years later, McCalla finally experienced a more traditional graduation without any coronavirus guidelines, as she walked across the loanDepot Park stage and received her associate’s degree in biology from Miami Dade College. This time around, McCalla exchanged the lounge clothes for a white dress, a cap and a gown.



Photo Gallery: Miami Dade College Graduation | Saturday, April 23, 2022

Miami Dade College students attend their graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, April 23, 2022. *MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com*

Like McCalla, many who missed out on the traditional pomp and circumstance in 2020 celebrated at one of the three graduation ceremonies MDC throughout Saturday.

A total of about 7,000 graduates attended the three in-person events Saturday, said Sue Arrowsmith, a college spokesperson. Last spring, [about 4,500 attended the in-person events in total](#), out of a similar number of graduates.

The college, one of the largest in the country with roughly 120,000 students and 6,500 faculty and staff, officially launched graduation season in higher education across South Florida by awarding about 8,600 associate's degrees and nearly a 1,000 bachelor's degrees, and about 2,000 certificates.

MDC chose NFL Pro Football Hall of Fame member and Miami Dolphins defensive end Jason Taylor, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy and Florida Lieutenant Governor Jeannette Nuñez as commencement speakers.

FAMILIES CHERISH COMMENCEMENT IN PERSON AND ONLINE

“This is what my family has always wanted — an in-person graduation,” said McCalla about the experience.

However, not everyone in her family made it. Her uncle and grandmother, who raised her until she moved to the U.S. from Ternate, Cavite, in the Philippines at 13, tuned in to the college's live stream. So did her father, who has diabetes and got surgery earlier this week.

“As soon as graduation ends I'm going to the hospital and showing him all of my awards. That's what's most exciting for me,” McCalla said referring to her dad and adding she's a member of the Honors College.

McCalla picked MDC because she wanted to take care of her Filipino mom and Jamaican dad during the public health crisis. She wants to be a doctor, but hasn't yet decided which university to attend next.

Families rallied to support their graduates.

Valeria Stewart, a retired Miami Dade County Public Schools teacher, wore a custom-made T-shirt with photos of her granddaughter in downtown Miami on Saturday.

Ten relatives of Tiara Stewart, who graduated with a bachelor's Saturday and will soon become a math teacher herself, wore the garments that read, “Congratulations Tiara!”

“She's my only granddaughter,” Stewart said. “I'm so excited. I can barely contain myself.”

ADVICE TO GRADUATES: MAYBE GO ON DANCING WITH THE STARS

In his commencement speech Saturday morning, Taylor challenged graduates to ask themselves what's next and to "get comfortable being uncomfortable."



Commencement speaker and former Miami Dolphins player Jason Taylor speaks during a Miami Dade College graduation ceremony inside loanDepot park in Miami, Florida on Saturday, April 23, 2022. MATIAS J. OCNER mocner@miamiherald.com

"I did Dancing with the Stars back in 2018 — I know, go ahead, you can laugh; I laugh about it still. My wife is ashamed of it but it is what it is," he said. "That was by far the most uncomfortable thing I've ever done in my life. But it's putting yourself in that arena where you can start to grow. Never, ever get comfortable."

He also confessed that after finishing his last NFL game he realized he had forgotten to enjoy the "small moments in life" like watching someone dance in their car to their favorite song while stuck in traffic during a morning commute.

"We got to enjoy the journey," said Taylor, who got an honorary degree from MDC after his speech.

Meanwhile Murthy, the country's surgeon general, urged graduates during the Saturday afternoon ceremony to stay in touch with friends and family.

“These three ingredients — time, attention and kindness — these will help you build a truly people-centered life,” the Miami-Dade local said.

“It’s the relationships that you build and sustain that will be your greatest source of strength in the years ahead,” he added. “They will soften the sting of disappointment, and they will give you strength during the hard times. They will ground you when you are feeling lost, and they will amplify your moments of joy.”

This story was originally published April 23, 2022 3:49 PM.



JIMENA TAVEL



786-442-8014

Original link: <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article260571717.html>