

## At MDC's graduation: 13,000 students received diplomas, one received a marriage proposal

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Gregory Castillo / Miami Herald Staff

Graduates celebrate after receiving their diplomas during the MDC North and West Campus graduation ceremony on Saturday, May 4, 2013 at the Bank United Center.

More than 13,000 students graduated Saturday from Miami-Dade College, including Andrea Nicole Castillo, who died in a Hialeah police-involved car crash last year.

Andrea Castillo, daughter of Miami-Dade School Board member Susie Castillo, finished her associate degree in Miami-Dade College before her death and was pursuing a career in education. With tears in their eyes, her mother, grandmother, brother and boyfriend went up on stage to

receive her diploma.

"It's breaking my heart. I'm very proud that my daughter graduated, but it's a lot harder than I thought," Susie Castillo, said. "I hope a lot of other students can follow Andrea's career path."

The college conducted five ceremonies to award its students with bachelor's degrees, associate degrees and vocational certificates.

And for the first time in the history of the college, a marriage proposal was an important part of the North and West Campus commencement ceremony.

Student Rafael Burdier, 21, was graduating with his girlfriend of more than two years and decided that the ceremony would be the perfect opportunity to pop the question.

"Thank God she said yes," said Burdier, who graduated with an associate degree. "This was a very special moment in our lives and the proposal made it more special."

Kayla Cortes, 22, his fiancée, also graduated with an associate degree. She covered her mouth with her hands in disbelief, said yes and hugged her future husband.

Students of all ages and ethnicities received their diplomas, with graduates representing 185 countries.

“People think that Miami-Dade College is no big deal but its tough — my professors challenged me and they required me to do a rigorous amount of work,” said Valentina Rivadeneira, who graduated with associate degree in science. “At the end of the day, I think it was one of my best experiences because this is a bridge that allowed me to have the opportunity to move to something better.”

Rivadeneira, 20, was recently accepted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to pursue a degree in biology. Her parents cheered and waited for her with gifts.

“Education is a legacy that will stay with her forever,” Eduardo Rivadeneira, her father, said. “We are very proud. As parents, we put in a lot of work and effort to have our kids go to school and accomplish their dreams.”

For first generation graduate, Linda Thelismord, 28, receiving her diploma is one of her biggest achievements.

“It’s unexplainable, I am the lead example for my daughter,” said Thelismord, who plans to continue her education at Miami-Dade College. “All it takes is effort and you can accomplish your goals. I told myself I was going to finish it and that’s exactly what I did.”

For student and father Walner Deshommes, 29, Miami-Dade College gave him the opportunity to take care of his family and afford his bachelor’s degree.

“This is a joyous occasion, but it’s not easy. I made a lot of sacrifices for school,” Deshommes said. “I praise MDC because it gives anybody an opportunity to go to school.”

This year’s graduation speakers included National Council of La Raza Board of Directors chairman, Jorge Plasencia; MDC alumnus and Jackson Health System president and CEO, Carlos Migoya; MDC alumnus and U.S. Congressman Joe Garcia; MDC alumnus and the president of the United Faculty of Miami Dade College, professor Mark Richard; and Miami-Dade Chamber of Commerce president and CEO, Bill Diggs.

“As you go on in life I want you to remember one thing,” said Diggs at the North and West Campus commencement. “All it takes is all you’ve got.”