

BC3's 2017 degrees heard 'round the world

Natives of Brazil, India, Middle East laud school for honing their skills

June 1, 2017

(Butler, PA) Veronica Goncalo Vaz, a Brazilian who plans to become a novelist, was so convinced she had improved her English-speaking skills by attending Butler County Community College that she proclaimed it in a message worn atop her mortarboard.

"She believed she could so she did," read her statement at BC3's 49th commencement exercises, where nearly 1,500 people gathered May 17 to celebrate the school's largest graduating class this century.

When the 30-year-old Cranberry Township resident, who moved to North America alone in 2012, travels 4,920 miles back to Santo Andre in April 2018 to witness her brother Caio's wedding, "I am going to take my cap that I decorated."

Nearly 7,500 miles from BC3 is Jaipur, northern India, birthplace of Kavita Prajapat.

When the Butler resident visits relatives in 2018, Prajapat will take with her the associate of applied science degree in office administration-medical that she attained at BC3, where she was among the 596 students in the Class of 2017.

"I really wanted to learn English," Portuguese speaker says

Prajapat, who previously earned a master's degree in public administration in arts in India, graduated from BC3 summa cum laude, a designation for those whose final grade-point average was between 3.75 and 4.0.

"I wanted to do something here in the U.S.," Prajapat said. "That is why I came to BC3. The first thing I wanted was to improve my English, and I wanted to earn a degree in the medical field."

Goncalo Vaz earned an associate of arts degree in English and graduated magna cum laude, for those with grade-point averages between 3.5 and 3.74. She had previously earned a bachelor's degree in history in 2010 from Fundacao Santo Andre in Brazil.



Brazilian Veronica Goncalo Vaz, 30, of Cranberry Township, holds a mortarboard she decorated prior to BC3's 49th commencement exercises May 17. Goncalo Vaz earned an associate of arts degree in English from BC3 and graduated magna cum laude.

“I really wanted to learn English, to be able to write in English and to write books,” she said. “That is what I want to do. I want to write books.”

Goncalo Vaz, whose native language is Portuguese, improved her English-speaking skills dramatically through BC3, said Morgan Rizzardi, BC3’s associate director of admissions. As did Prajapat, whose native tongue is Hindi.

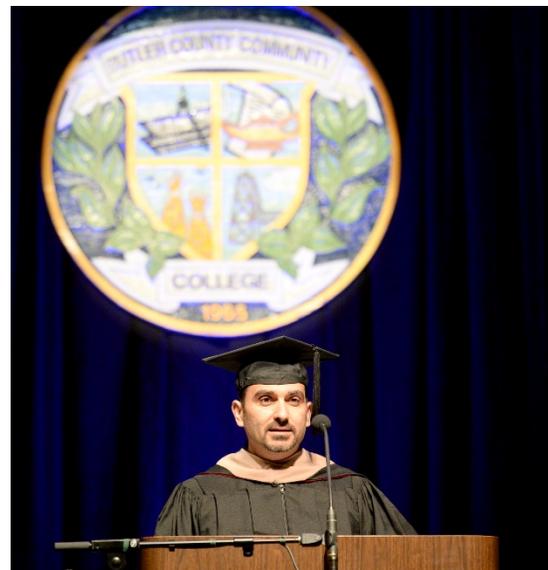
BC3 “not only helped (Goncalo Vaz) to gain a skill set in speaking English more fluently, but helped her with her grammar and syntax,” Rizzardi said. And Prajapat improved by being “immersed in English-speaking classrooms. I saw a confidence in her Wednesday night.”

Middle East native earns GED, 2 BC3 degrees

Their appreciation for BC3 echoed those of commencement speaker Jay M. Kifo, a native of the Middle East. Kifo, who first attended BC3 to earn his high school equivalency diploma, went on to earn two associate degrees from BC3 in 2010, in computer information systems and in business administration.

“When I passed my GED test, I was given a lot of encouragement and support to continue on with my education,” Kifo said, crediting Alex Gladis, who served as director of BC3 @ Cranberry in Cranberry Township from 2005 to March 2017.

Kifo later attained a bachelor’s degree in computer information technology from Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania and a master’s degree in business intelligence systems from Robert Morris University. He plans to pursue a doctorate degree.



Jay M. Kifo, a native of the Middle East who earned two associate degrees from BC3 in 2010, in computer information systems and in business administration, addresses the Class of 2017 as BC3’s commencement speaker May 17.

“Join me in a round of applause for Mr. Gladis and all other hard-working faculty who took the time to care about you and your dream,” he said, “whatever that may be.”

Among the most popular degrees conferred May 17 were associate of arts in general studies (54); business administration (52); criminology (28); psychology (23); social work (21) and early childhood education (20). Top associate of applied science degrees conferred were in registered nursing (47); business management (43); and child development education (16). Massage therapy (10); medical coding and billing specialist (9) and medical assistant (9) were among the most popular certificate programs.

BC3's Class of 2017 ranged in age from 18 to 63, and included 27 students with two degrees, 26 student-veterans, 11 students who received reverse-transfer degrees and one student with four degrees.

Mom from India: "My daughter is so proud"

Prajapat hugged her 9-year-old daughter, Samata, outside of Founders Hall, where Goncalo Vaz was attending a post-commencement reception.

"My daughter is so proud," Prajapat said. "She wanted to come today to my graduation party – and so she is here."

BC3's student body this spring also included a citizen of Vietnam, said Rizzardi, adding that residents of the Czech Republic and of Brazil plan to enroll for the fall semester.

"A lot of our students come from the local area," Rizzardi said. "They may not have had as much exposure to those who are different than they are. To have those connections adds value to their BC3 experience. That is what excites me about international education and growing that here. It presents an opportunity for everyone to learn from each other. Those who are not from the U.S. can provide a different perspective. It enhances the classroom environment tenfold."

Goncalo Vaz agrees.

"I had a lot of fun during my speech course, because a lot of my classmates started asking me about Brazil," Goncalo Vaz said.

"And they always supported me, telling me how to pronounce things or how to Americanize them. They were also very curious about food in Brazil. Every time someone asks me I say, pancakes. American pancakes are sweet and a breakfast type of food. Brazil, pancakes are salty, you can eat it with chicken or meat, and it is normally served during lunch or dinner. It's not the same at all."



Butler resident Kavita Prajapat, left, a native of Jaipur, northern India, celebrates her graduation from BC3 on May 17 with daughter, Samata, 9, and husband, Dr. Laxman Prajapat. Kavita Prajapat attained an associate of applied science degree in office administration-medical from BC3 and graduated summa cum laude.

“BC3 is amazing”

The former au pair who pursued her dream of becoming a novelist and wrote “She believed she could so she did,” will now pursue a master’s degree from Chatham University.

She misses her family in Santo Andre. And she will miss those at BC3 who became her second family, her American family.

“BC3 is amazing,” Goncalo Vaz said. “Students should absolutely start here. The teachers are great. The staff is great. They really help you to start your new life. After you graduate from high school, everything is so confusing. You may not even know what you want to do. But BC3 will help you with anything you need. They are always helping you to find yourself.”