



## **Valencia College District Board of Trustees Foundation Report May 25, 2023**

### **Distinguished Graduate:**

Established in 1982, the Valencia College Distinguished Graduate is awarded to a student who embodies the College's spirit and demonstrates academic excellence. Initially, this award was presented as part of the Valencia College Alumni Association's annual Alumni Achievers Reception before commencement. In 1996, the award evolved into a financial and recognition award. In 2003, the selected student became the annual commencement speaker.

Much of the effort to formalize this award as the highest honor bestowed by the College on a graduating student was led by Mary S. Collier '82, the College's first Distinguished Graduate and generous supporter. Shortly after her passing in 2011, the award was named to honor her legacy.

This past Fall, the College added a second annual commencement ceremony, and Alumni Relations awarded its first-ever Fall Distinguished Graduate. True to its original intention, Alumni Relations recently selected the 42nd Mary S. Collier Distinguished Graduate, Elizabeth Quinones Diaz, to provide the keynote address at the Spring commencement on Sunday, May 7, 2023.

### **Spring 2023 Distinguished Graduate:**

**Obstacles. Success. Loss. Resilience. Elizabeth Quinones Diaz has experienced all of these in her lifetime.**

In her early teens, she endured several trials that helped her become the person she is today. Her grandfather, a veteran hero, passed away when Elizabeth was 12 years old. She loved her grandfather with all her heart, and his passing did not come easy for her. "For weeks on end, I would feel very sad and vulnerable because he was gone, and he was the person I felt the closest to at the time," says Elizabeth.

A few years later, Elizabeth was diagnosed with Bipolar 1 Disorder. "I felt the pressure of society to really fit in and it was not acceptable to talk about my condition for many years... I really felt stuck at the time." While coping with her own mental health issues, she was also dealing with her mother's chronic illness. "My mother was battling a liver disorder and I just remember sitting with her from hospital to hospital, waiting for a "Ever since I was little, I would make little buildings and cities out of orange boxes and little tomato cans. And that was what led me to want to do architecture at first," she says. After doing research, she discovered Valencia's 2+2 architecture partnership with UCF.

Unfortunately, she discovered architecture was not her passion after all – which led Elizabeth on a journey that will seem familiar to many college students. She began dabbling in all kinds of courses, trying to find her place. Hospitality, film, graphic design. She took personality tests, career placement tests – but still felt a little lost.

After trying a few different majors, COVID struck. Elizabeth realized that taking classes online would not work for her. “I simply could not live online.” For 18 months, Elizabeth avoided classes – until she was finally able to take a face-to-face class on East Campus. “I took a humanities class with five people,” she says, laughing. “But it was great. I felt like a piece of myself was finally there. I was there and everyone else was there and I could finally interact with other people.

After all her searching for majors and careers, she seems to have settled on one. She discovered it quite by accident — when her dad signed up for a continuing education course on cybersecurity, and Elizabeth tagged along to see what it was like.

“It was not that hard, mathematically, but it was interesting,” she recalls. “Every single class was interesting.” She attended seven or eight sessions – and was hooked.

“I loved it, and I thought, ‘This is what I want to do. This is interesting. I think I will have a fun time doing this.’” And she reasons, she’d be doing something to help society – because the nation really needs cybersecurity professionals.

Finally, she found something that checked all her boxes.

So, too, has Valencia College. Here, where she has held a work-study job and volunteered with the Student Government Association, Elizabeth has found friendships and the joy of serving others. Now she’s eager to see where the next part of the journey will take her.

“Valencia College allowed me to get out of my comfort zone, meet true friends that will stay in my life for a long time, and be a part of something great.”

transplant. That really took a toll on my health, seeing her ill and not being able to do anything for her,” she says.

During these times in her life, Elizabeth felt lost and as if she was falling into a deep hole. At one point in her journey, however, Elizabeth realized that the path toward a positive future meant that she needed to find a way out of that hole – and that was the only way she’d be able to succeed in life.

“Something just clicked. I was so depressed, and I was so focused on everything that I didn’t need to be focused on. I needed to focus on getting into a better environment and a better mindset.” Determined to find her path, determined to be a survivor, Elizabeth enrolled in Valencia College.

Throughout her college journey, Elizabeth wanted to do her best to make Valencia a more welcoming place for students like herself. “As a student, I know what it feels like to be lost and without direction or guidance at one point or another,” says Elizabeth, 23. “This is why I wanted to help others with anything they needed, whether it was a concern, feedback, or advice. I always tried to genuinely have a positive attitude and tried my best to help other students as much as I could, even if I had to research information and get back to them on it.”

Those are just some of the many reasons Elizabeth has been named the Mary S. Collier Distinguished Graduate for 2023.

Before she enrolled at Valencia College, Elizabeth earned her high school equivalency at Seminole State College and took stock of what she wanted to do – and where she wanted to go next.