

What a great few weeks I have had! For years I have written the May column on the subject of graduation, of how proud I am of all of our students as they finish their degrees and certificates, cross the stage, and move on to the next chapter of their lives. It's just such a great occasion watching them at commencement. It's wonderful seeing students wearing the robe and that weird square hat with the tassel that annoys you in your peripheral vision.

Last Saturday my oldest daughter Abrielle graduated from Friends University with her bachelors degree. Then on the following Friday my youngest daughter Alayna earned two associate degrees from NCCC. I was able to give her a celebratory hug on stage as she crossed, much like I was able to with her sister two years earlier as she finished her two-year degrees.

I was beaming with pride as you can imagine. It is often seen as the ultimate accomplishment of a parent to see their children complete their education. Abrielle is finished, at least for now, with her education. And while Alayna still has some years to go (she is transferring to Kansas State University in the fall), I know she is on the path to success thanks to the foundation she received as a student at USD-413 and as a graduate of NCCC.

These feelings are echoed by all of the family members of our graduates, all over the area. We conferred 828 degrees and certificates this year for so many students across our service area in many different technical education majors who are entering the workforce, and the graduates who, like Alayna, are transferring on to four-year institutions all over the country.

But beyond our graduates there are an unsung group of successful students, who may not have completed the full associate degrees, but nonetheless I am very proud of. I'm talking about students who set a goal to take classes from NCCC for a year or so then transfer on to university. They worked just as hard, learned a lot, saved some money by coming here first, and now they too have a strong foundation to be successful at their chosen university. While they may not have crossed the stage at commencement, they did what they set out to do in an impressive fashion.

Every year I say how proud I am of all of these students and their accomplishments. But this year, I am doubly impressed. There is a Chinese proverb that applies here. You may have heard it, made famous by Disney's Mulan, "The flower that blooms in adversity is the most rare and beautiful of all."

The 2020-2021 was the academic year of the pandemic. NCCC took all of the safety measures we deemed necessary in order to do what we could to slow the spread of COVID-19. Students often learned in new ways through teleconference technology, had to listen to instructors through masks, were self-isolated from time to time, and washed their hands obsessively. Residence hall students often had to eat alone or in small groups, were moved often to accommodate self-isolation, and many other inconveniences. And a few got COVID-19 anyway, despite our best efforts, but were still successful.

I often hear how terrible this generation is compared to some past generations. I even wrote a column disagreeing with that some years ago. This time, though, you have to hand it to this generation. They succeeded in some of the most trying times in our collective history. As a father of two of the members of this generation I know firsthand how hard they worked, the patience they had, the adaptability they displayed, and the success they earned. Both my girls were self-isolated during the pandemic, so they were touched by it directly. Both missed seeing family and friends. Both kept persevering, right up to

the end. There were tears, sure, but there was pride also. This generation and its graduates showed true strength. Our future is in good hands.

To the class of 2021, I say congratulations. Thank you for choosing NCCC. Thank you for succeeding despite the pandemic. Thank you for your grace under pressure and your commitment to your educational goals.

To my girls, Abrielle and Alayna, your success through this crisis has proved what I have known all along, you are the most rare and beautiful of all.