

SIUE Fall Graduates Highlight Respect, Compassion and Perseverance As They Accept Degrees

by Nicole Franklin

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EDWARDSVILLE – [Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](https://www.southernillinois.edu/) Chancellor James T. Minor, PhD, conferred degrees upon 1593 eligible graduates during fall 2023 commencement exercises, held Friday and Saturday, Dec. 15-16 in the First Community Arena at the Vadalabene Center. Student speakers took the spotlight. Their reflections and the work of their standout classmates exemplified the readiness of this cohort to

follow Minor's instruction from the podium: "Go forward with confidence and purpose knowing that you have the power to own tomorrow."

Led by Denise Cobb, PhD, provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs and respective deans, SIUE's 132nd commencement celebration began at 2 p.m. Friday with the School of Nursing.

Student speaker Mitchel Zurliene completed the accelerated bachelor of science in nursing, after first receiving a bachelor of science in computer science from SIUE. Zurliene was born with Tetralogy of Fallot, a congenital heart defect. He spoke of the dedicated nurses who were there for him during multiple open heart surgeries, and the love of his grandmother as motivation to pursue a career that would have more of a personal impact.

"All of us were motivated to go into the medical field for different reasons," said Zurliene. "I mean, in my past career, I never had a 79-year-old computer thank me for all I did, call me a sweetie, and mention her single granddaughter. Or have a four-year-old computer brighten up the room with a smile because someone sat down to play with him. The impact you all can have is incredible."

Fellow graduates include School of Nursing's Jorge Esquivel and Chloe Kirksey who recently jumped into action assisting with a patient cardiac arrest at a nearby facility.

When Esquivel, bachelor of science in nursing, witnessed his patient experience a cardiac arrest, he immediately called for help and began cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Kirksey, bachelor of science in nursing, also responded and performed chest compressions.

"Their efforts lead to the return of spontaneous circulation giving the family the opportunity to make end of life decisions for the patient," said Ann M. Popkess, RN PhD, CNE, professor and assistant dean of Undergraduate Programs in Nursing.

Esquivel and Kirksey were recognized by staff and hospital management for their heroic and professional efforts.

Accelerated degree holders now include Jesus Carmona Baeza, bachelor of science in nursing, who immigrated from Guanajuato, Mexico with his family at 17, which is also the age when he first learned English. Carmona Baeza was inspired to go into the medical field as early as seven years old when he witnessed the death of his friend who died of cancer "because his family didn't have money for the treatment."

In 2022 newly married Carmona Baeza enrolled in the SIUE nursing program that would quickly prepare him for a medical career. The Illinois campus was miles away from his new wife who stayed behind in California with their three-year-old son and their second child on the way.

“I left my whole life in California. At SIUE, the beginning was tough. I did not know anybody, did not know anything around, and didn’t like the weather. It was really hard,” said Carmona Baeza. “I missed when my second son was born.”

A classmate of Carmona Baeza offered to study with him, which allowed for the self-proclaimed introvert to start meeting others and excel both in school and life in the United States.

“SIUE is a really good school. It shows how to respect other people. If you give me respect, I give you respect,” said Carmona Baeza. “I face a lot of disrespectful times outside of school with racism. How are you going to hate someone that you didn’t even know?”

The graduate ceremony for those receiving advanced degrees through the SIUE Graduate School followed at 5 p.m. on Friday. Student speaker Mukesh Das, who earned a master of science in industrial engineering, emotionally shared "a story of dreams, aspirations, and the journey of leaving home to find a new home far from home. It’s a story of being an international student.”

Das complimented the nurturing relationship he experienced with professors and staff, who always welcomed him with smiles.

“This place, thousands of miles away from home, feels like home. I found unique stories, traditions, and dreams in each individual I met.”

Ceremonies resumed at 10 a.m. Saturday with graduates from the School of Business and the School of Education, Health and Human Behavior (SEHKB).

Madyson Darr, a transfer student who received her bachelors of science in public health, took the podium and spoke of the challenges that come with earning a degree.

“We have had to overcome difficult classes where we were unsure if we were going to pass, and we have had to overcome the trials that life brings on and we cannot slow down time to deal with them. But, often times these challenges allowed us to grow and learn.”

“My Dad was sick when I first came to school—he had flatlined three times,” said Karrington Marie Winters, who also earned a bachelor of science in public health. Winters attended SIUE on the GI bill because of her father’s veteran status. “I came here on a MIA POW Post-9/11 GI Bill Military Scholarship. I got in through a dependency program. I’m my Dad’s dependent and his first-born daughter, and I ended up getting the scholarship.”

“He’s the reason she was able to afford an education. I’m his third child, and I’ll be the first person to graduate college. So this degree is for him.”

To conclude her speech, Darr quoted famed poet Maya Angelou, “Like Maya Angelou once said, ‘People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.’ We have the opportunity to make people feel cared for and valued when they are our student, patient, or client. We have so much potential to do great things, and we WILL do great things.”

Both Darr and Winters attended programs in the SHEEB. The combined number of students of both SHEEB and the School of Business ceremony totaled nearly 300.

Like a number of 2023 graduates, Olga Chavez Reyes, bachelor of science in accountancy, completed her program already hired for her next adventure. Chavez Reyes will begin a career as an audit associate at one of the top five accounting firms in the world.

During an interview she offered this advice: “Be comfortable with being uncomfortable—push yourself to do different things, for when you are pushed in the real world where it’s uncomfortable, you’re more comfortable there.”

Graduates of the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Engineering were honored during a 2 p.m. ceremony Saturday, the final of the four ceremonies.

Student speaker Trevor Rallo, bachelor of science in biological sciences, professed SIUE’s success in conveying responsibility, individuality and compassion to students. “With graduation, it is our time to apply Cougar Pride and the responsibility and empathy that goes along with it.”

Rallo acknowledged the parents, those who are living and those who have departed.

“The totality of your love may not be fully understood, nor may it be properly appreciated, but I encourage you to take this moment in. Breathe deeply knowing you have given the world a new hope in your college graduate,” said Rallo.

“To the graduates who have lost a parent along the way, I stand with you. I believe it is okay to grieve for our loved ones during this moment of accomplishment. As I reflect, I can imagine the love and pride that my father would have today – 11 years after our last goodbye. I hope in your reflection, you feel the same love and pride from your lost loved one.”

Both Gireesh Gupchup, PhD, FAPhA, vice president for Academic Innovation, Planning and Partnerships, Southern Illinois University System as well as professor of pharmaceutical sciences, and Sara Colvin, interim vice chancellor for University Advancement and CEO of the SIUE Foundation congratulated graduates for this high achievement and encouraged them to stay connected as new members of the SIUE alumni community totaling more than 120,000.

Hundreds more stories and memories helped close this chapter as graduates begin anew. Parting words from Das summed up the sentiments of the two-day celebration.

“Remember that we are here today because of our dedication, our hard work, and our unwavering commitment to our dreams. Our journey has been remarkable, and it's a testament to our resilience and courage. We are the living embodiment of the potential that SIUE graduate education holds. Congratulations, Class of 2023! I'm going to part now in old Vulcan style. Live long and prosper!”

A highlight reel of 2023 SIUE Fall Commencement is available at this link:

<https://youtu.be/y1-zDY9FTiU>

Watch replays of 2023 SIUE commencement exercises and subscribe to our YouTube channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/@siue>.