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OPINION

CCRI changes lives, and it should have big dreams

Guest Column: Ray M. Di Pasquale

On March 23, Ray M. Di Pasquale was officially inaugurated as the fourth president of the Community College of Rhode Island, a position he has held since July – and, as interim president, starting in January 2006. This article is adapted from Di Pasquale's inauguration address.

It is truly an honor to stand before you today as the fourth president of the Community College of Rhode Island. The theme of the inaugural celebration is "Changing Lives, Achieving Dreams," and it truly reflects the good work that we do here.

In just a few weeks, we will graduate more than 1,000 students whose lives were changed here and who will embark on a journey in pursuit of their dreams.

Dreams do have a power that approaches magic in their ability to transform us and our surroundings. If you think I am exaggerating about the power of dreams, imagine a world where there are no "wish" moments, when no one asks children what they want to be when they grow up. Imagine that: a childhood without imagination. It's hard to do, isn't it?

Sometimes it's too easy, however, to imagine an adulthood without imagination. That is why I love working where I do here at a community college, because every person who walks through our doors has a dream he or she strives to achieve.

I am sure that many of you in the audience today have had the benefit of an educator or role model in your life – a person who has positively influenced you, advised you and advocated for you without asking for anything in return. In my own life's journey, I have been blessed with several of these mentors and helpers.

In the small town of Mount Morris, in upstate New York where I grew up, my parents didn't raise me with the expectation that I would or should go to college. ... I think I would have been perfectly willing to move right from high school to the work world ... if it weren't for my cousin Gus. Gus was 10 years older than me and infinitely wiser.

Gus taught me not only that college is critically important, but that there are many ways to get there. For Gus, athletics made college possible. He played football for Syracuse alongside Jimmy Brown, and his example did more than introduce me to my first college campus, where I would go with my dad and watch his games. It taught me that college could be a real possibility for me. And because of that, Gus changed the course of my life. I certainly would not be standing in front of you today if it weren't for him and other members of my family.

At age 15, I didn't decide to go to college so I could become a college president one day. I wanted to go to college so I could become a coach. I decided that sports were going to be my ticket in.

When my older brother, Chuck, a retired police chief of 30 years – another one of my life heroes, who's here with me today – played high school football, I wasn't about to just stay home, even though I was only 8. I became the team mascot and water boy, back in the days when the team's water really came in a bucket.

Chuck grew up and joined the military. I got good grades and played high school football, baseball and basketball, and was involved as student body president. My dream was really humming along there for a while – until my dad died when I was 15.

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Anyone who tells you that life is easy or that life is fair is either deluded or misrepresenting the truth, because life can be really hard. But there are always these blessings, these amazing people who do not and will not let you give up on your dream ... people like my high school football and basketball coach, who showed up at my door to drag me to practice when I was feeling low; people like my brother Chuck, who took an early release from the military to come home and take care of my mother and me. Chuck ... thank you.

And I did get to college, Arkansas Tech University, in part due to my cousin, who was teaching there at the time. My mentors perhaps saw something in me that maybe I didn't see. They saw more than a future coach; they saw a future leader. And it was my cousin who connected me to my true love, education. In fact, when he took a job at the University of New Hampshire, he was the one who offered me my first classroom teaching experience.

Thirty-three years in education later, you know what I think? I think that I did achieve that dream of becoming a coach after all. Today, I am the head coach of team CCRI.

Being your coach means that I am here to help you – student and faculty member, administrator and administrative assistant, community partner and business leader. I am here to help each of you achieve your educational dreams. Like my brother Chuck, I am here to take care of those details – big and small – so that you can focus on your goals. Like my cousin Gus, I am here to support you and empower you to stretch your goals and become the best that you can be. And, sometimes, I am like that high school coach who will give you a little push when you need to get moving again.

I'm thinking back – it must have been almost a year to the day that I stood before the college for the first time and talked to them as a group. You know, when I originally took on this position, it was as interim president, which meant two things: It meant that they could walk away from me if they felt I was not the right fit for CCRI, and it meant that I could walk away from them if I felt I was not the right fit for CCRI.

Now, if you remember last March, the college had a lot going on, and not all of it was positive. CCRI had budget problems. It had a significant enrollment drop-off. And its community was still recovering from some serious upheaval and low morale. And even though I could identify the problems, I would be lying to you today if I told you I was sure of all the solutions. So, I walked up to the microphone, and before I spoke a word to you, I had my own powerful and quiet moment, where I made a wish of sorts.

Do you know what I wished for? It was a pretty simple wish. I wished that this audience full of expectant faces staring down at me would connect and rebuild bridges that might have been broken in the previous year, that they would establish new ways to communicate and would reaffirm their commitment to this institution. I wanted you to view this college as "our college," to have a sense of place and camaraderie in which each and every one of you would feel ownership and pride. "Our CCRI." That was my wish.

So I stepped up to the podium and I spoke from the heart and when I was done, you all did an amazing thing. You gave me a standing ovation. Talk about achieving a dream. ... I still choke up when I think about it. I had this flash – "Maybe I really can make a difference here" – and I made a new wish, to become more to you than an interim president.

During this year, I have watched the team that is "our CCRI" begin to thrive. I've tried hard to empower you to make decisions and to stretch beyond old expectations. Sometimes, when enough people tell you that you're average, you begin to believe that you are just average. That is a dangerous mind-set, and I reject it. I do not want CCRI to be seen as average. It is my dream that CCRI will set the example for our state and for other community colleges throughout the region. We are going to be a player – and all of you will help get us there.

In closing, I want us to dream together as we move forward in changing lives.

Thank you for joining me on this exciting journey.

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