



*Center for
Accessibility
& Neurodiversity*

IVCC Graduates of 2025

Graduates of 2025 Share Their Experiences



Joy Buikema

Joy Buikema graduated with an Associate of Arts and will transfer to Eastern Illinois University to further her education in public health.



Buikema shared, “My passion is why I approached college again. I have a deep and vibrant interest in sharing natural health principles with people.

“I worked while attending a boarding academy. Right after I graduated, I came home and started to work as a CNA to help my parents financially.

"I am 63 years old and I have a family of my two boys, five stepchildren, and husband.

"When I was 27, I started going to college but later dropped out. Coming back to college started out very challenging because I took summer classes in 2024 (which are shorter of course); however, I was inspired by the welcoming atmosphere of this college.

"The genuine care and assistance were amazing. During the fall semester, one of our instructors encouraged us to check out the Tutoring and Writing Center and if we felt we had any issues, the Center for Accessibility and Neurodiversity.

"If it wasn't for the support of those two resources, I probably would not have finished. Tina Hardy was very encouraging and supportive."

When asked what advice Buikema had for current and future students, she replied, "Number one, seek out all the resources available to you. Number two, utilize the Tutoring and Writing Center, even if it is to ask an occasional question.

"If you have difficulty with a certain subject, managing time or any other issue, there is always someone that is willing to assist you. This is my fifth college to attend and is hands-down my ultimate favorite."

Ariana Kuehlem-Santoy

Ariana Kuehlem-Santoy graduated with an associate degree in criminal justice and a certificate in criminology.



Kuehlem-Santoy shared, “I’m 25 years old, a mother of three, and I live in Ottawa with my husband. We recently bought our first house together, and it feels amazing to build a home for our family while chasing my own dreams.

“My husband has been one of my greatest supporters, always encouraging me to keep going, even when things got tough. For six years, I was a stay-at-home mom, focused completely on raising our children and keeping our world together.

“Going back to school felt terrifying, like stepping into the unknown. I didn’t know if I’d fit in or if I could keep up. But I wanted my kids to see their mom chase something for herself, to prove to them and to myself that it’s never too late to go after your dreams.

“Every late night, every moment of self-doubt, I just reminded myself that I was doing this for us. These aren’t just pieces of paper to me, they represent years of sacrifice, determination, and believing in something bigger than my fears. I am truly proud to have earned this degree, not just for myself, but for my family.

“My time at IVCC was anything but easy. There were days when I’d be up before sunrise getting myself ready, then the kids ready for school, squeezing in homework between nap times, or staying up past midnight to finish assignments. Some classes I loved; others nearly broke me.

“There were moments I wanted to give up when exhaustion hit, or I doubted if I belonged here. But I never felt alone; my instructors genuinely cared, encouraging me to keep going.

“IVCC’s childcare program was very helpful, letting me attend classes knowing my children were safe and cared for. IVCC also offered the flexibility of online and in-person options, and support was always there when I needed it.

“Then there was Tina Hardy, coordinator for the Center for Accessibility and Neurodiversity. Tina believed in me even on days when I couldn’t believe in myself. She guided me, motivated me, and made sure I had the accommodations I needed to succeed.

“Tina showed me that needing help isn’t weakness; it’s courage. Because of her and the center, I learned to advocate for myself and to never be ashamed of how I learn. Every challenge at IVCC taught me something: how to ask for help, how to push through, and how to hold on to hope even on the hardest days.

“Juggling motherhood and college is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, but it’s also the most important. I wanted my kids

to see that dreams don't have an expiration date, and that it's possible to build a better life, even when it seems out of reach.

"Every time I felt like quitting, I thought about the example I was setting. I wanted my children to believe in themselves because they saw me refuse to give up. Being a young mom in school isn't a weakness, it's a superpower.

"It forces you to dig deeper, to fight for your goals, and to show your kids what strength really looks like. If I can do it, you can too.

"If you're a mom or anyone who feels like the odds are stacked against you, know this: you are capable of more than you think. Don't let fear or exhaustion convince you to quit.

"There will be hard days; days when you feel like you're failing everyone, but don't let those moments define you. Find your support system, whether it's family, friends, instructors, or the resources IVCC offers.

"Don't be afraid to use things like the childcare program; it's there for you, and it made a real difference in my journey. Ask for help, lean on others, and remember why you started.

"Your kids are watching, and you're showing them what it means to work for your dreams. Keep going, even when it feels impossible. You'll be amazed at what you can accomplish.

"Now, as I continue my career as a 911 dispatcher, I'm excited to put my degree to use and see what comes next for my family. I'm proud of how far we've come, and I can't wait for the future."



November Rhodes

November Rhodes graduated with an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing.

Rhodes shared, "I'm a single mom to the most amazing 11-year-old young man, who is the light of my life, and the reason I strive for success in this life. One day when I was 30, turning 31, I woke up and I looked all around and saw everything I didn't want.

"I believed there was a better life to be made out there, and my boyfriend had encouraged me to begin taking courses at IVCC.

So, with no idea what I wanted to do as a career, I began taking general summer courses and looking at different programs.

“Even when things didn’t work out as I planned, I can remember him saying things like ‘Just don’t give up yet. All these courses will lead you somewhere, so you’re not wasting your time. Keep going it will all work out for you.’

“My journey at IVCC has not only been about academics—it’s been a path of growth, healing, and rediscovery. I’ve had to carry and confront pain that many never see.

“Pain that I still don’t speak about publicly today. I’ve lost a parent, and I watched my brother bravely fight stage 4 pancreatic cancer for 18 months, only to lose him in the end.

“Throughout my 34 years of life grief has walked beside me through many seasons as I’ve witnessed others I love suffer, with loss being the heartbreaking outcome. On top of that, I am a survivor of domestic violence from a previous relationship.

“Surviving that part of my life has given me a deeper understanding of my own strength, resilience, and has motivated me to keep pushing forward—for myself, my son, and my current healthy and supportive relationship.

“In my journey here at IVCC everything was all worthwhile in one way or another. I discovered new things about myself I didn’t realize before.

“I witnessed situations and outcomes that had never been a part of in my life. I met new people who have become my good friends in my everyday life.

"Yet, nursing school was the hardest task I faced here at IVCC. Honestly, nursing should be hard because when the courses are over and the program is done, YOU are the Registered Nurse and YOU are responsible for helping those patients.

"YOU are keeping them comfortable in a chronic/terminal condition or keeping them alive while they're in your care. YOU stand between that patient and that doctor and as a RN you are taught how to notice the smallest detail that could save someone's life.

"The program being anything less than being hard would be a disservice to students, patients, and those families of the patients. I couldn't think of a more rewarding and heart-warming passion to call my career.

"Now that I have graduated with my associate's degree in nursing and rebuilt my life, I will begin working at OSF as a New Grad RN. I plan to continue my education and eventually get my master's degree, with the goal of becoming a Nurse Practitioner.

"As someone who has seen or survived some of life's most beautiful and traumatic events life could give someone, I feel I have a lot to give back.

"My advice to anyone who sees this, whether you're a new student entering IVCC or someone having a hard time in life just reading this article, change is hard and uncomfortable, but growth in life and change is uncomfortable.

"Yet, nothing in life is impossible, in fact the word itself says "IM POSSIBLE." So regardless of if life has given you lemons or you have been dealt a terrible hand in life, only you can make that first step toward change.

“Don’t doubt yourself! Don’t ever let someone tell you that you can’t do something. You have no idea the strength you have if you haven’t unlocked it yet.

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help. There is a better life to be made in this world with a little hard work.

“IVCC offers a variety of programs that provide help, regardless of if you learn differently or are struggling to buy food for your house. The instructors and staff truly want to see you succeed and offer a helping hand to those in need with confidentiality you can trust.

“There is always someone to listen and a solution to a problem. It all begins with taking that first step.”

Alexia Gross

Alexia Gross graduated with an Associate of Arts and will transfer to Illinois State University to further her education in social work.



Gross, who usually goes by Lexi, is a 26-year-old first-generation college student. Gross shared, "I grew up in Mendota, Illinois, in a multi-generational household.

"I found high school to be challenging to my mental health, along with having a visual impairment, so I transitioned to a distance learning school. I found Hadley School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and I graduated with a 4.0!

"Hadley was the beginning of a new chapter of my life, where I started seeking more ways to become independent. Now, some years later, I put myself through college and got my Associate in Arts where I graduated with honors!

"It still feels very surreal because I felt like a late bloomer in life, and I had little self-advocacy skills. Growing up with a disability, people are there to help guide you, but as you get to college, you have to adapt to asking for help on your terms.

"I was very bad at that while growing up and I missed out on a lot because of it. But I got connected with CAN and Tina Hardy, which was a life-changer for me.

"I realized that I have a right to the same quality of education as everyone else, and I am not a burden for advocating for that right. I felt so passionate about this that I even co-founded our school's neurodiversity group 'Minds of All Kinds,' where I made amazing connections with people like me and learned from them too!

"I hope to keep connected with them, and I will continue to advocate the value of neurodiversity and disability in academia, the job space, and in everyday life. As I continue on my college

journey at ISU, as a social work undergraduate, I would like to keep focus on the voices of neurodiverse and disabled people.

“My best advice would be to never be afraid to ask questions, no matter how silly you may think they are. It is hard at first. I felt annoying with how many times I would ask for clarification on something said, but nobody ever made me feel less than for it.

“I found at IVCC I was encouraged to ask questions, and that there truly are no ‘silly’ questions when you are there to learn and you have endless resources to help find the solution. There are people of many ages who are all there for the common goal of getting an education, so step out of your comfort zone and ask for help.”

Erin Dunlap

Erin Dunlap graduated with a degree in automotive technology.



Dunlap shared, "I was diagnosed with high functioning autism as well as dyslexia and dysgraphia and sensory processing disorder at the age of 16.

"Throughout grade school, I was put in extra reading classes and received an IEP that allowed me to have extra time on tests as well as alternate test sites. I was on the high school swim team as well as in band all while maintaining a high GPA, despite all my learning disabilities.

"I left the high school after my sophomore year and completed my high school requirements through another program because I couldn't handle the crowds.

"I started by taking basic requirements and then art classes at IVCC. It was suggested to me to try the automotive program. I had similar accommodations (to high school) at IVCC through the CAN program.

"The people in the CAN office are amazing and here to help you reach your goals. I wouldn't have been successful without their help.

"I graduated with a degree in Automotive Technology and I didn't even have a driver's license.

"I appreciate all the support I received from my teachers and the staff in the CAN office. To anyone who is reading this, if you are on the fence about asking for help, do it."



Lynn Keyt

Lynn Keyt graduated with a certificate in business management and an Associate of Applied Science in Business Administration and Marketing.



Keyt shared that she is “a non-traditional student. I am a 50-year-old, single mother of 3 children who all suffer with some kind of neurodiversity.

“I live with my mom, brother and my youngest child. I am an animal lover and love helping others.

“If it were not for IVCC, I would never have attended college. I was so impressed with the Adult Education Department and all the support I received while completing my GED, I wanted to continue my education.

“I have loved every minute of my time here at IVCC. IVCC offers so much support for many different things.

“I received accommodations through Tina Hardy’s CAN office, I used the Tutoring and Writing Center, Transformative Growth,

and I am a proud member of Project Success. I took full advantage of the college experience and joined many clubs and organizations as well as studying abroad.

“Obviously, there were hard times; however, with all the resources and support IVCC has to offer, I overcame my obstacles.

“I had classes that were more difficult for me than others, but with the help of the wonderful teachers and other resources, I improved and accomplished what I had set out to do.

“My advice to future students is there will be days that you will want to give up and have no faith in yourself or your abilities. These days are hard to overcome, but with IVCC in your corner you can accomplish anything.

“There are so many resources and people to talk to here that it can be overwhelming. Don’t be afraid to ask for help, that is why all the resources are available.

“Everyone at IVCC wants to see you succeed. At 50 years old, I now have an Associate in General Studies, AAS in Business Administration and Marketing, along with a certificate in Business Management. I NEVER thought I would accomplish any of that.

“What I will tell you is that you deserve the best and you CAN accomplish and live your dreams. If you put in the work, the time, and use IVCC’s resources you will be successful.

“Use everything IVCC has to offer and no matter what, you will do amazing. You all are amazing, smart, and will change the world whether it be in a big way or small way.

“One last thing, live the college experience. Get involved, join clubs or organizations, study abroad, and just enjoy yourself as much as you can.”

Aaron Noble

Aaron Noble graduated with Associate of Science and Arts degrees.



Noble shared, "I'm 22 years old; I grew up in Ottawa, Illinois, with my parents and two brothers. I graduated from Ottawa Township High School in 2022.

"I had a hard time adjusting to college life early on. I didn't know what the people would be like, so I mostly kept to myself at first.

"Things got a lot easier when I got to know more people at IVCC, especially Tina Hardy, people in the Tutoring and Writing Center, and people in Project Success. I figured out I was good at teaching by working at the Tutoring and Writing Center.

"Tina helped me learn how to think more adaptively in my life in general. Many of my professors were also really good and they helped me scientifically understand the world in ways that I might never have had access to without them.

"My Project Success counselor, Diane Scoma, was really helpful in my transition to another college, and she was always willing to talk to me about basically anything.

"Find the people that care about you and will have your back. There are some really great people in the tutoring center, like Angie Dunlap, and the counselors in Project Success are also amazing.

Absolutely find time to talk to Tina Hardy if you get the chance, especially if you're neurodivergent or disabled.

My advice:

- Find out what each professor is like before you pick your classes, if you can. Ratemyprofessors.com is a decent resource. If you have access to accommodations through Tina Hardy, it's a really good idea to talk to her.

- Don't forget to talk to your professors! They are important! Even just asking questions about class stuff can occasionally lead to good conversations.
- If anyone is worried about how they'll be treated at IVCC, it's almost never a problem. You are not in high school anymore, and the people here are almost always very safe and affirming, no matter what your background, identity, or beliefs (or lack thereof).
- Be willing to ask for extensions on assignments from time to time, unless your professor specifically states in class or in the syllabus that they will not grant extensions. They will not think any less of you for making the request, and they will fully understand how hard it is to keep up on stuff.
- Find some clubs on campus to join if you have the time because it will help you get to know professors and other students better. In some ways, those connections can be more important than the classes you are taking because professors can provide letters of recommendation as well as help you find jobs.
- And did I mention how much easier it is to get through everything when you find the people that have your back? Seriously, it's important.
- Be as curious as you can, and never stop learning! It will open doors for you in many more ways than just getting you a job."