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Tacia Bryant of Willimantic struts onto the stage to receive her diploma. Below: Balloons fall from the ceiling at the commencement ceremony Tuesday at the XL Center in Hartford. About to congratulate him, on the right, is ECSU President Elsa Nuñez.

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An emotional day for Eastern’s graduates

By MICHELLE FIRESTONE
Chronicle Staff Writer

HARTFORD — The last 10 days have been emotionally draining for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. During the 125th Eastern Connecticut State University commencement ceremony at the XL Center Tuesday evening, she told the graduates her 83-year-old father was recently kidnapped in Nigeria.

“The past 10 days have been the most emotionally difficult of my life,” Adichie, an internationally renowned author and 2001 Eastern graduate, said.

The experience caused her to re-evaluate what matters in life, advice she gave the 1,200 students who graduated from Eastern that evening.

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One happy day

Pure, unbridled elation is one way to describe the emotions college graduates feel when they wear their caps and gowns. That was the case at the XL Center in Hartford Tuesday, where Eastern Connecticut State University conducted graduation exercises.

ABOVE: Newington resident Lisa Forcellina shows just how happy she is. LEFT: ECSU alum and noted author Chimamanda Adichie was the keynote speaker and received an honorary doctorate. BELOW: Showing it is never too late to learn, Willimantic resident Mary Dillon, 54, earned an accounting degree at ECSU.
An emotional day

Eastern graduates

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Luckily, Adichie’s father was released after the family paid a ransom and is doing well. “I am still not sleeping well,” she said. “I still cannot look at my father without fighting tears.”

According to Eastern officials, 1,200 people graduated from Eastern in the XL Center, 1,130 undergraduates and 70 graduate students.

“Graduates, help me thank the people who helped you get here,” said ECSU President Elsa Nuñez. Adichie graduated summa cum laude from Eastern in 2001 with a bachelor’s degree in communications and was awarded Eastern’s Distinguished Alumni Award in 2004.

“The entire experience has made me rethink many things — what really matters and what doesn’t,” she said. It was a message Eastern graduates will remember as they embark on different paths.

During her speech, Adichie compared life to writing a novel. Adichie has written three novels and a short-story collection, “The Thing Around Your Neck.”

When writing, she said, she starts stories by having a “leap of faith.” “It’s OK not to have all the answers,” Adichie told the graduates.

As is tradition at Eastern, the graduates threw pennies with the year 2015 on them into a wishing well as they entered the XL Center arena, signifying their future goals and dreams.

Whether they are headed to the military, graduate school or the work force, graduates reflected on their years at Eastern.

“It’s kind of unreal,” said Samantha Bonan of Vernon, who graduated with a bachelor’s degree in health and physical education. “I can’t believe it’s over. It’s been a long ride.”

She is seeking a job as a physical education teacher at schools in eastern Connecticut. As they embark on the next chapter of their lives, Nuñez implored graduates to make a difference in the world.

“The world needs each of you,” she said. “The world needs your talents. The world needs your contributions.”

Senior class speaker Matthew Hicks, a Wallingford resident, noted Eastern students are “warriors,” referring to the school’s mascot.

He noted his class moved in during a hurricane/tropical storm freshmen year, battled through wind tunnels on campus and overcame cold winters.

“Our time here has generally prepared us for anything life can give us,” Hicks said.

As Gregory Kane, president of the University Senate, indicated, college graduation is a milestone.

“While today is an ending, it is also a beginning,” he said.

For Bonan, it is just one of multiple life events she will experience this year.

In October, she’s getting married.

Bonan said it has been stressful to finish college while planning a wedding and bartending part-time at a restaurant.

Luckily, her employer has let her take time off when she needed it.

“They’ve been super supportive the entire time,” Bonan said.

Like many of her classmates, Bristol resident Nicole Martin, a business administration major, is both excited and nervous about graduating college.

“Eastern’s been my home for the last four years,” she said.

Martin plans to work at her parent’s store, Dunphy’s Ice Cream Parlor in Bristol, this summer as she applies for management positions.

“I’ve been applying the past few weeks,” she said.

Martin has fond memories of her time at Eastern and said she felt the four years went by quickly.

“I had the best four years at Eastern,” she said. “I couldn’t imagine going anywhere else.”