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Transforming Lives award ceremony Tuesday, Jan. 29

OLYMPIA, Wash. – Five community and technical college graduates will each receive a \$500 “Transforming Lives” award from the Trustees Association of Community and Technical Colleges at a special ceremony on Tuesday, Jan. 29, in Olympia. The awards portion of the event will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Red Lion Inn, 2300 Evergreen Park Drive SW.

This year, the Transforming Lives award honors students and graduates who overcame barriers to pursue degrees and certificates in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) or other high-demand occupations. The five recipients were chosen from a pool of 35 nominations from the state’s two-year colleges.

“These students are truly inspiring,” said Tim Douglas, association president and Whatcom Community College trustee. “They’ve overcome the odds to succeed in academically tough, high-demand fields. Their achievements are humbling, and a good reminder that community and technical colleges transform lives.”

The following graduates will receive awards and share their stories at the ceremony:

- **Chris Zacharias, civil engineering** – When an auto accident left Chris Zacharias a quadriplegic, he realized he needed a college degree to re-enter the workforce and decided to pursue civil engineering at **Bellingham Technical College**. The college provided accommodations and support to help Zacharias thrive academically and personally. Zacharias worked tirelessly to master adaptive equipment, including a voice-activated computer program and a mouth-activated “mouse.” Today, Zacharias is a member of the Disability Support Services Leadership Team and is well on his way to completing his civil engineering degree. “There was a period in my life when I could not imagine this was possible. Now nothing seems out of my reach,” said Zacharias.
- **Inva Begolli, pharmacy/biology** – The 1997 civil war in Albania created emotional wounds and big dreams for 7-year-old Inva Begolli. Her 8-year-old brother was shot multiple times in the leg and, amid the violence, Begolli dreamed of becoming a pharmacist and helping others heal. At age 17, she decided to leave everything behind and move to the United States to pursue a pharmacy career. Thanks to the financial and academic support at **Clark College**, Begolli earned an associate degree and transferred to Washington State University Vancouver where she now studies biology. “The support and encouragement ... at Clark College gave me the financial means to continue my education and the inspiration and added commitment to achieve my long-term goal,” she said.

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- **Donald Fleming, industrial engineering** – Donald Fleming works for The Boeing Company as an industrial engineer, but his path there was a challenge. Fleming enrolled at **Green River Community College** three times: initially out of high school, but he had to drop out due to lack of funds; a second time, supported by his employer until he was laid off; and the third time, after he was medically discharged from the Navy for a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. The Navy provided him with \$1,500 which he immediately put toward his first quarter tuition at Green River. With services and scholarships, Fleming graduated with an Associate in Science in Pre-Engineering, graduated from the University of Washington, and landed a job at Boeing. “Green River Community College....taught me that community is more important than self-reliance,” he said.
- **Chris Cayton, welding** – Born deaf, Chris Cayton’s hearing impairment was first discovered at his elementary school in Guam, where sign language was forbidden. He ultimately moved back to the mainland United States and graduated from high school, but he lacked goals and a sense of self-worth. Becoming a father and enrolling at **Lower Columbia College** changed his life. Cayton had been out of high school seven years and knew his hearing impairment would add to the challenge, but he wanted to provide his son a better life and a good example. With high-caliber training and support at Lower Columbia, Cayton earned an Associate Degree in Welding Technology and is working as an apprentice with the Plumbers and Steamfitters Union Local 290. “(My teachers) embraced me, accepted me, believed in me, and gave me the tools I needed to succeed,” he said.
- **Michelle Rogers, engineering** – Michelle Rogers attended 17 schools before dropping out of high school. Her father was often jailed, her mother was addicted to drugs, and her family moved between campgrounds, relatives’ homes, and drug houses. Rogers was in her mid-teens when her mother left. She supported and raised her two siblings by working in a restaurant. Upon learning she could get financial aid and grants, Rogers rushed to **Olympic College**. “(The counselor) gave me a frame for the high school diploma I would earn and told me that one day I would be so proud of myself,” she said. “I am no longer ashamed... in fact, I’ve learned I truly am courageous.” Rogers earned an associate degree and is studying aeronautics and astronautics at the University of Washington. She has been offered a full-time engineering job with a major company after graduation.

Washington’s 34 community and technical colleges serve about 470,000 students each year. Students train for the workforce, prepare to transfer to a baccalaureate institution, gain basic math and English skills, or pursue continuing education.

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Note to editor: Stories of all 35 nominees are available in the companion publication, “Transforming Lives,” dated January 2013.

About the Trustees Association of Community and Technical Colleges:

The Washington Trustees Association of Community and Technical Colleges (TACTC) is comprised of all 151 trustees of the 30 two-year college districts in Washington and is the "trade association" for trustees. The vision of TACTC is to ensure quality, affordable and lifelong educational opportunities for all the people of Washington State. The mission of TACTC is to support, educate and unite Washington State community and technical college trustees in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities.