Transforming Lives
The TACTC Transforming Lives Awards recognize current and former students whose lives were transformed by attending a Washington state community or technical college. Each college nominated a student and the five nominees listed below were selected by the TACTC Awards Committee to receive an award.

Awards criteria
Washington’s community and technical college boards of trustees nominated current or former students who have completed or made significant progress toward completing a degree or certificate which has helped them prepare for, or be successful in, a competitive workforce. The nominees have also overcome significant barriers to achieve their higher education goals and their experiences demonstrate how Washington community and technical colleges help transform lives through education and support.

The 2014 Transforming Lives awardees are:

- Alain Patience Mizero
  Bellevue College

- Miraclejoy Curtis
  Big Bend Community College

- Timm Lovitt
  Edmonds Community College

- Alan Lovaasen
  Olympic College

- Jeffery Ray
  Tacoma Community College

While just five students were selected to receive awards, committee members found compelling stories of determination and success throughout Washington’s community and technical college system. All of the nominees’ stories are shared in their own words on the following pages.

In these times of economic turmoil, much attention is focused on the struggles and difficulties being endured. For now, we wish to offer our thanks and gratitude to the many community and technical college stakeholders whose vision and dedication have helped make these stories possible.
I am a graduate of the Electrical Engineering Technician program. I came to Bates to look for a new career—and I found much more than that! I had overcome a 20-year meth addiction, which took me to prison in 2007, where I birthed a set of twins who were put into foster care at birth.

All of my life, I had worked as a receptionist, secretary or legal secretary, all of which were dead-end jobs. The firms I worked for offered no medical, dental or retirement benefits. I found myself on welfare; dependent on the state for child care, food, medical and cash assistance. I wanted to provide a good life for my twins, whom I fought very hard to win custody of in 2008.

I entered the program at Bates in March 2009. My children went to the Bates Early Learning Center while I attended classes. I absolutely loved the staff and environment. It was so nice to be able to see my babies during breaks and lunch! They learned so much and were taken such good care of. I have yet to find a child care facility that we like as much as we liked the Early Learning Center.

My program instructor, Mr. Reed, was absolutely amazing. Many times, when the program was challenging for me, I would listen to the old tapes in my head saying I couldn't do it, I wasn't smart enough, etc., but Mr. Reed wouldn't let me give up. He encouraged me and patiently helped me understand the concepts and push through to finish my work.

Mr. Reed was instrumental in my success, and I am forever grateful to him. Another instructor that was a huge help was my math teacher, Ms. Ward. I came in with less than desirable math assessment scores, and her teaching style helped me overcome my math struggles! I ended up with As in all my math courses.

I graduated in February 2011 and, through the help of Mr. Reed, secured a position with an engineering firm exactly two months following graduation. Even with my criminal record, thanks to Mr. Reed’s high recommendation, I was hired at $8/hour more than I’ve ever made in my life—with excellent benefits and a promising future.

I’ve been with the company now 2 1/2 years and I love my job. I sometimes find myself in awe that I’m actually getting paid so well to do something I love so much. I am now fully self-sufficient, have almost eight years clean, I just bought a 2011 vehicle in which to haul my little family around and am more than capable of supporting my family.

I cannot thank the employees of Bates Technical College enough, especially Mr. Reed, for what they’ve given me. My life is what it is today because of the support, encouragement and the knowledge I received there.
Alain Patience Mizero  
*Bellevue College*

I entered this world via cesarean section in Rwanda, in a hospital ill-equipped to address such a delivery. A resulting complication destroyed the nerves in my right arm and my life as a disabled person began.

Upon entering school in Rwanda, students were categorized based on disabilities as well as the shape of their noses, which authorities use to identify children as either Hutu or Tutsi. I was teased mercilessly for my disability, but I held onto my dream to study software engineering.

As a high-achieving high school student, I was selected to study in France. It was an honor, but because of my disabilities, I was not allowed to major in the sciences. The stigma of being rejected for my disability compelled me to work diligently toward an early graduation: to finish in one year instead of three. I studied hard, resting only two to three hours per day. Six months into my studies, however, I was hospitalized with a brain aneurysm. To make matters worse, after the surgery to address the aneurysm, I forgot my mother languages – French and Kinyarwanda. It took a year of rehabilitation to regain and master my language skills. The brain surgery also left me with limited peripheral vision in my left eye. Although I did not finish school as I had hoped, I used these experiences to focus my dreams on a higher achievement: I learned about a place where educational opportunities are afforded to those who work hard – regardless of disability – the United States of America.

I was able to come to the U.S. through the green card lottery. Coming here, I only knew a friend of a friend. I came with a confidence in knowing that no matter the barriers, I can achieve my dreams; I will study what I want – software engineering.

Upon moving here in 2010, I rented an apartment with a friend of a friend, but a month later, I ran out of money and became homeless for a year. I went from shelter to shelter every night. One night I told my story to a volunteer and she was astonished! She told me that she would ask her friend if she had a room where I could stay. After a year of living in shelters, I was no longer homeless! The house I live in is not far from Bellevue College. So, with a roof over my head, I started thinking about school and realizing my goals of becoming a software engineer.

My dreams came true at Bellevue College. In fall 2011, I passed my placement test and was placed in pre-calculus II. I then met with an advisor who helped me to make a plan for my studies, which I stuck to, and now I will be graduating from Bellevue College with an AA degree in Computer Science. I have been accepted to UW Tacoma for winter quarter and I couldn’t be more excited for my future!
Fidelis Eze  
*Bellingham Technical College*

Before I came to BTC, I was a plumber and I got laid off. I was in-between jobs and didn’t know what to do. It was the most difficult time of my life as a husband and a father of two kids. I had a little side job that I was doing for (BTC Director and Counselor) Malcolm Oliver and I told him that I was thinking of going to school.

I always hear the commercial on the radio about I-BEST, so I told him that I was thinking of I-BEST or Heating Ventilation Air Conditioning (HVAC). He scheduled me for an appointment with him the next day. I didn’t think it was really going to happen, because my focus at the time was to find a job.

I don’t even know where to start, from a casual visit to being an HVAC student. It never came to mind that I could be where I am today. My first visit with Malcolm was a turning point. He was very encouraging. He knew where I was and what I needed. He encouraged me to get into HVAC and provided the information for every resource to help me. I have a better picture of my future today. It has been a great experience. My instructors, Dave Maricle and Marty Vande Kamp, are the best instructors in the world. So my experience here has been phenomenal.

First, the program is hands-on and I love hands-on. Since plumbing and HVAC are related and many employers want workers who can do both, my nine years of experience as a plumber will help me to have a steady job so that I will be better able to provide for my family.

The biggest challenge was finding a job to provide for my family while going to school at the same time. The first two or three months I was still questioning myself: Do I really want to go to school? Then, my financial aid came through. The first time I got the check, I didn’t know what it was for. They said it’s for me to use for school; I was blown away. It takes much of the burden off my shoulders.

What I’ve learned is to know what you want and go for it. There will always be challenges in life, but knowing what you want and opening yourself up for advice will help. Be committed to your schooling. If you don’t know where to start, there are people who are available to guide you. Be open to share. Speak out about your needs and people will help you. Have a goal and understand where you are going. Stay positive and study hard. Sacrifice things that are not contributing to your education. Keep focused and think of a better tomorrow.
I was a clueless young girl growing up on the streets of Seattle, surrounded by bad influences and poor choices. Growing up, the ghetto was all I knew. Survival was all I was taught. Each day, I struggled to find my identity in the world.

My father died of cancer when I was 12. My mother drifted into drug and alcohol abuse and quit taking care of us. I was living house-to-house and couch-to-couch, skipping school and hanging out with the wrong crowd. Most of my nine siblings were incarcerated due to involvement with drugs and gangs.

One day, I realized there had to be more to life than ditching school and hanging out with the wrong crowd. I saw an advertisement for Job Corps that mentioned free housing, food and education. I decided to take the initiative and attend Columbia Basin Job Corps in Moses Lake.

Job Corps literally swept me off the streets. I earned my high school diploma in one year, becoming the first person in my family to earn a high school diploma. I got my driver’s license and a Certificate in Business Technologies. I was motivated by a new feeling of rising above the negative influences I had growing up.

A Job Corps college coordinator suggested I apply to attend Big Bend Community College. I was shocked, because no one in my family had ever talked about college. I thought I wasn’t smart enough, rich enough or even good enough to go to college. She saw something in me I didn’t see in myself. Not only did the college coordinator motivate me, but she helped me complete the paperwork, and I was accepted into college! At first I had no idea why I was even there or what type of career I’d choose or even how I could do it. But sure enough, I learned that college wasn’t so bad.

The faculty and staff at BBCC supported me step-by-step. BBCC faculty and staff provided resources, challenged me and shared wisdom on reaching goals. Other students motivated me and showed me college is not impossible. I took much of what I learned and passed it on to fellow schoolmates, and of course my family members, as I am a first-generation college student.

Today, I am a member of Phi Theta Kappa, a Peer Advocate and am halfway to completing a transfer degree. Being a Peer Advocate in the Student Success Center is the first job I have ever held. This position has given me the opportunity to present at national conferences and share the successes of Peer Advocacy at BBCC.

Overall, this journey has not been easy, and it doesn’t end at BBCC. I plan to transfer to Central Washington University to enroll in the Interdisciplinary Studies Program. I hope to become a human resource manager in education and someday start a nonprofit organization that empowers young black girls to realize their self-worth.
In June 2010, I moved to Seattle, Washington from Kisumu, Kenya, where I had attended primary and high school. I was raised in Manyatta, the largest slum in Kisumu, with more than 200,000 people living in mud thatched houses with no electricity or running water.

In 1997, in the midst of the AIDS scourge, my mother started an orphanage home to serve children that had been affected and left as heads of households. Our home slowly turned into an institution that hosted more than 60 children on a daily basis. And we became siblings to the children that came into our home. We shared beds, clothes and food.

Since we were so many, just a few of us could go to school. I was among the lucky ones. I remember going to school, coming back every evening and teaching what I had learned to those who could not go to school.

When I arrived in Seattle, I was in awe of the abundance of resources, from the amazing infrastructure to reliable internet, water, electricity and educational institutions. Coming from a place where I had to work as a salesman when I was only eight years old in order to support our large family and pay for my educational needs, I was inspired to go back to school.

Even though I was married, working part-time for a nonprofit organization as an over-the-phone interpreter and developing my own nonprofit organization, I was determined to go back to school. I knew that if I went back to school I would not only challenge myself and earn skills to pursue community development initiatives, but I would also inspire many other young people from Manyatta to pursue higher education.

When I joined Cascadia Community College in the winter of 2013, I was ready and I felt welcome by the school community. I was amazed by the passion the instructors invested in us, the diversity of students in each of the classes I attended and every time I arrived home from school I found myself working on schoolwork tirelessly.

This is my fourth quarter at Cascadia Community College and, with help from my academic advisor, I am now focused on attaining an associate degree in business before proceeding to the University of Washington for a bachelor’s degree in business. The support from my English instructor at Cascadia Community College encouraged me to begin writing for magazines as a part-time job to perfect my writing skills and a few of my articles have been published. My nonprofit organization is also thriving because of the confidence I have earned as a result of the hope that success at school has brought me. My dream of inspiring other young people in Manyatta also began this year when, through my nonprofit organization, we began mentoring 68 youth with an aim of helping them realize their full potential.
In 1989, a young man walked into a recruiter’s office hoping to find money for college; not knowing where life was going to take him. On this journey, he would fight in two wars; witness the birth of his children, a nation attacked, and a wife die of cancer; turn to spirits to soothe his pains; find a college; and restart life.

After six years of hard work, that individual will walk the aisle with a bachelor’s degree and a job helping others as the new Veterans’ Benefit Specialist for Lewis County, Washington.

Hello, my name is Patrick Zandecki. I am this individual and this is my story.

The first time I came through the doors of Centralia College 20 years ago, I poked my nose in, tried a few classes, got scared and left. I had zero confidence. I was convinced I would not be able to do this. I ended up bouncing from the military to outside jobs and back to the military, until I found myself in the biggest heartbreaking challenge in life: My wife had cancer.

While I was overseas in the Iraq war, I was sent home because my wife’s health took a turn for the worst, and she passed away in 2007, ripping me apart. I was still in the military, widowed and left with three children. Doing what I thought was the best for my family, I left the military in 2008 and went into college.

The images of my previous try in college kept flashing through my mind. Was I going to be able to do this? Was I going to be able to succeed through all of these stressors in my life?

I did. Through the impressive talent, charisma and caring of the faculty, I was able to adjust and overcome my obstacles. I have gone from a hard-drinking soldier, a person who could barely make two words come together in a sentence, to an individual who has not had a drop of alcohol in two years and can stand in front of hundreds and give a presentation.

If I could, I would give everyone at Centralia College this award for they are more than mentors to me. They are friends, family, teachers and fellow students. They are the driving force that gave me the skills and confidence I have today. I have gained back my confidence to the point where I will be able to stand with the most elite of students at Centralia College, the first four-year class ever to graduate from there, and I have landed a job caring for my fellow veterans, with the opportunity to go on and get my master’s in public administration.

I write this with the greatest gratitude to Centralia College and those who were there to help me along the way, especially the professors who have worked long and hard to build the new bachelor’s program that has given me these new opportunities in life.
Everyone has challenges. Life, with its many tests and trials, can feel overwhelming. Change can appear impossible. What I know now is that I have a choice in how my life moves forward, regardless of how difficult my past has been. Each day that passes, I can decide to do something to change my future and my children's future or I can do nothing and stay stagnant. It is, ultimately, my choice.

When I started classes at Clark College, I was a returning student in my early 30s with three young children. Learning to organize and prioritize my family obligations, my school work and my job would be my first challenge. I got great help from the many resources available at the college. Engaging in programs, committees and working as a work study student in Career Services would ultimately be my life-saver.

Two years into my journey, the father of my children passed away suddenly of a heart attack. He was 34. Our children were two-, three-, and seven-years-old. At that time, I had almost completed my prerequisites for nursing. My life seemed unmanageable; success, impossible. But my instructors, my fellow students and, especially, my coworkers in Career Services convinced me to keep going.

In 2012, I completed my associate of science in nursing degree at Clark College, with honors. Due to the partnership Clark has with Washington State University in Vancouver, I then completed my bachelor of science in nursing degree, graduating Summa Cum Laude in May 2013. During these years, I maintained my job in Career Services, was involved in Clark College's community and continued to be present for my children.

Regardless of my educational success, finding a job in the Portland metro area as a newly graduated registered nurse with no experience is incredibly daunting. Thankfully, I was fortunate to have had exposure to the resources in the career center, including resume building, mock interviews and career fairs.

In June 2013, I accepted a position in the Legacy Health System, through the Versant residency program. This program is an extremely competitive, highly sought-after position. I was one of 48 people chosen out of 700 applicants. I believe that my success was due to Clark College’s life-changing program and services.

Currently, I have nearly completed my orientation as a Progressive Cardiac Care Nurse. Additionally, I began my master of science in nursing program through Western Governors University and expect to graduate in 2015.

My opportunities going forward are endless and my gratitude for my success is immense. I know that all people have challenges to overcome, often beyond imagination. If I could share only one thing with those who feel so burdened, it would be that time is going to keep moving by. You can choose to let time pass or you can decide to take the next step in creating the life you want and become the person you want to be. Have patience, give yourself the gift of time and change your life.
Rebekah Powers  
*Clover Park Technical College*

Five years ago, I was a homeless, alcoholic drug addict. Having just left an inpatient treatment facility, I moved from place to place sleeping on the sofas of family and friends, unsure how I would ever get back on my feet.

A 10-year abusive marriage had ended, sending me into a whirling vortex of self-pity and destruction. Newly sober and without a penny to my name, I fervently searched for employment in an attempt to become self-sufficient.

Due to the steadily declining economy, my efforts appeared to be in vain. Countless resumes and applications proved fruitless and panic started to set in.

Just as despair was setting in, a dear friend made a suggestion that would change my life forever: college. Unsure of where to begin, I followed her suggestion and called Clover Park Technical College. The helpful staff instructed me to come in and take the COMPASS test. After scoring well in all areas, I was ready to begin!

Once the decision to go to school had been planted in my mind, there was no doubt about which program I intended to pursue. I wanted to help other alcoholics and addicts who were still struggling with active addiction. I wanted to give back what was so freely given to me. Enrollment, financial aid and program registration in order, I set off on my journey. I have to admit, I was initially terrified. I was penniless, newly sober and had not set foot in a classroom for 11 years! Needless to say, I entered my first class with trepidation.

Almost immediately, fear gave way to excitement! I loved the diverse population at CPTC and felt right at home on campus. My classes were engaging and I loved the mental stimulation. Success in my first course bolstered my confidence and encouraged me to continue on. As the months flew by, I continued to succeed in both the Human Services and Chemical Dependency programs. Before I knew it, I had completed both programs. Words cannot express the sheer joy I felt in accomplishing what had once seemed an improbable, if not impossible, task. I had earned an associate degree in human services and a chemical dependency specialist certificate.

My time at CPTC was full of challenges and victories. During that two-year period, I regained shared custody of my daughter and gave birth to a son, all while maintaining sobriety. A mere six weeks after earning my degree, I was hired in my field. My success at Clover Park cemented my decision to continue on with my educational pursuits. I transferred to a four-year university and went on to earn a bachelor of arts in psychology. I am currently enrolled in graduate school and am pursuing a master of arts in marriage and family therapy. The life I live today is far beyond my wildest dreams and I am proud to say it is built on a foundation earned at Clover Park Technical College.
Marisela Sarmiento  
*Columbia Basin College*

My life was transformed the day I decided to go back to college. It was the hardest decision I've ever had to make because I have seven children who depend on me.

The reason I decided to go back to college was because of my ill daughter. At five months of pregnancy, they found out she had a tumor and heart problems. I had to stop working because it was a high-risk pregnancy.

It was difficult for me to stop working, especially when you depend on two incomes to survive, but I had to figure out how to live on one income, pay all my bills and take care of my children. At this point in my life I decided to go back to college and pursue my dream of getting my degree in business.

I knew it would be a struggle with seven children and one with medical conditions, but I told myself, “Anything you want in life you must put your mind to and get it done.”

I looked into resources to see how I could get help with my children and get help with financial aid. I knew how hard it would be to care for my kids and go back to school but I also knew I could do it.

I applied for FAFSA and Need grants, which helped me pay for my tuition fees and credited me with 80 credits. I did most of my classes online because of my daughter. I am so happy that I was able to get help with daycare and could return to classes. I dedicated myself to school and my family.

Since I’ve returned to college, I have made the dean’s list twice with a solid 4.0 grade point average. I want my children to look up to me and see me as their role model. I feel it will teach them that they can accomplish what they want in life as long as they work hard for it.

Currently, I am in the BFET program and have received help with childcare, which is an amazing program.

I am very close to getting my AAS in business at Columbia Basin College. They have given me a lot of support. Without it, I would not be where I am today.
Timm Lovitt  
*Edmonds Community College*

I joined the military on September 4, 2001, to make something of myself and explore the world. I had no idea that one week later America would be at war.

I served for five years in the Army and took two tours, one to Iraq and another to Afghanistan.

I left the military with many questions and started looking into undergraduate programs. Community colleges seemed better suited to my immediate needs because they are all about community and that’s what I was looking for. They also weren’t as overwhelming as larger universities and resources were easier to access.

While studying at Edmonds Community College, I faced many academic struggles. At the time, I didn’t know they were a direct result of my experiences in the military. While overseas, I was involved in numerous combat situations — including surviving a suicide car bomb — that created invisible wounds, such as a traumatic brain injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These invisible wounds, which I had no idea I had, impacted my cognitive abilities, specifically my reading retention and attention span and the PTSD made it hard for me to attend class and get involved.

Luckily, I was introduced to Dr. Peter Schmidt at Edmonds CC, who helped me to deal with the struggles I was facing. He was encouraging and empowering. At his suggestion, I sought out resources on campus such as Services for Students with Disabilities, and it was determined I would benefit from listening to books rather than reading them, which helped improve my grades. I subsequently made the dean’s list every quarter.

My instructors were committed to my success and challenged me to engage and get involved. I took their advice and chartered two student clubs: Students Alliance for a Viable Environment and the Veterans’ Club.

My experiences with campus activities helped me realize that, although my time in the military had ended, my service to my nation and those around me had not. It inspired me to commit to helping make the community at large a better place through hard work and making connections. The highlight of my time at Edmonds CC was seeing a “Boots to Books” monument installed on campus. My hope is that it helps veterans understand that they have value to their community and that the college is committed to helping them succeed.

After leaving Edmonds CC, I earned my bachelor’s in public affairs from Seattle University and a master’s in business administration from Western Governors University. I hope to earn my doctorate degree and work with student veterans. I am committed to lifelong learning and am a firm believer in the power of knowledge. My education has helped — and will continue to help — make me a better steward for my neighbors and community.

My advice for student veterans is to seek out available resources and reach out and establish relationships. People will guide you during your journey, give you a shoulder to lean on and help you laugh when you need it.
Jacquelyn Julien  
*Everett Community College*

My name is Jacquelyn Julien and it is my pleasure to be able to share my experiences with you on how attending Everett Community College has transformed my life. When I reflect upon my life and the adversity I've faced, I realize I have a story to tell.

Childhood was especially grueling and, as far back as I can remember, summer vacations consisted of picking every edible berry imaginable in order to survive. My eldest sister was pregnant at the age of 12. Drugs, domestic violence and abuse were common. From any early age, I knew the odds were stacked against me and, at the time, dropping out of school was merely another method for survival.

I dropped out of high school in the 12th grade and was married at 19. Many people can't fathom how someone could get so close to graduation, only to drop out. The truth is, of my six siblings, no one had ever made it past the 9th grade. After 10 years, my marriage ended when the mental/emotional abuse from my husband turned physical. With only a 12th-grade education, I was terrified that I had no means of supporting myself or my four children.

That is when I embarked on my journey at Everett Community College. When I started community college, I had no idea who I was or who I wanted to become let alone if I would be successful. I honestly feel that attending community college has saved my life and has altered the lives of my children. Community college has introduced and nurtured the leader within me to rise up and advocate for those whose voices are oppressed from brokenness. I am determined to do my absolute best to give back to my community what has been given to me.

I currently work with at-risk, homeless, sexually exploited teens while attending the University of Washington Bothell full-time in pursuit of my BA in society, ethics and human behavior. This would not have been possible had I not attended community college. Community college is where I established self-worth and recognized who I could become. I am forever grateful for having attended -- especially for those who believed in me, invested in me, encouraged me and with much patience helped me develop and to be liberated. I may not have known who I was or what I wanted when I started at EvCC but, without the support given to me from my mentors, advisors and the resources available to me, I would not be the woman I am today.

Everett Community College is where I learned how compassionate others can be, which has inspired me to share what I've been through to help those around me. I truly believe that I am encouraging others with my success and I am forever grateful above all because now my children see endless possibilities in their own futures.
Stephanie Becker
Grays Harbor College

Everyone should have a ray of hope. I did not. My life felt devoid of hope from a young age. I was sexually assaulted repeatedly before kindergarten and lacked the ability to describe to anyone what was going on. At age 17, I moved out and attempted college for the first time. Not understanding the cyclical nature of alcoholism, I started using drugs at 19 and became a single mother by age 21.

I was poorly prepared for the challenges of motherhood. I faced tragedy after tragedy as I watched my fiancé die in front of me on the way to our wedding, then lost my kid sister – my best friend and roommate – in an accident that claimed the lives of nine people. I was crushed.

I got sober in 2005. I re-established meaningful relationships with my children and my family and cleaned up the wreckage of my past. I had a job I loved, met my husband-to-be, and seemed to turn my life around, although not without incident.

Grays Harbor College welcomed me back! I had taken classes here at times in order to obtain necessary job skills and now school was my job. As I progressed through my program, subtle changes started to happen. I always took care of family and friends and it had never dawned on me to treat myself with the same compassion. I began dealing with unresolved issues before I considered helping others. I had tolerated unacceptable behavior at home. Eventually the true nature of the beast came out and, in an episode of appalling violence, my marriage ended.

I leaned into Grays Harbor College and dug deep. I interned at Beyond Survival, a community sexual assault resource center, and found a connection with this work. In that position, I faced my demons and finally put the monster to rest.

At school, I dived into Students of Color, Power of One and Leadership Training as well as CUSP and the WAAC Conference and became a TRiO student – all of which were life-changing. I began to feel a way was being made for me. I served for Phi Theta Kappa, as project manager, for the Honors in Action Program. We created “A Message of Hope” – a resource to aid in suicide prevention. The project took first place and I began to really feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. I interned at the Equity & Diversity Resource Center and explored areas that interested me. I began to bring more awareness of human rights issues, social justice and personal freedoms to campus. I learned equity and equality and realizing are different things. I asked: What do I want to be? The answer was: A competent facilitator of diversity.

Transformation has occurred in my life on so many levels through this community college journey. In the beginning, I had no hope. Now, I dare to not only dream of better things to come for me, my family and community – I am able to go forth and make change happen.
I came to Green River Community College as a first-generation, remedial college student in fall 1997. From the beginning, I endured statistical challenges. Upon entrance to GRCC, I became one of 24 percent of all undergraduates who are first-generation college students. Because of the steadfast support I received at GRCC, I persisted, entering into the five percent category of first-generation students who have succeeded in transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution, earning a bachelor’s degree. After eight years of running a successful sustainable business with my family in Alaska, I am one quarter away from completing a two-year post-baccalaureate teaching certificate program at one of the west’s best teacher training schools (Western Washington University).

GRCC offered me a second chance in mathematics. The pace was just right and the instructors in my courses helped me see possibilities of applying math in the real world. While at GRCC, I realized that I could do math. Consequently, the doors to science were opened for me.

I always felt a passion for the outdoors and conservation. I thought that by studying science, I would discover how the world works and how I might help to save it. In 1998, I took one of Roland Vieira’s Environmental Science classes that inspired me to become an ecologist or environmental scientist. Without the “hook” of taking that class and the seeds of career ideas that Roland planted, I might not have found motivation to take on the challenging coursework that a B.S. requires. I was encouraged by teachers who knew and supported me in my interests. At the time, it seemed a big challenge for me, a young woman fresh out of high school with a strong history of lackluster success in mathematics, to be entering the sciences. But I had so much staff support and encouragement that I could enjoy and apply concepts from the courses.

Looking back after my time at the four-year university, I can see now how different my experiences and inspiration might have been if I hadn’t completed those core courses at GRCC. The staff at GRCC inspired me to keep at it. I was welcomed into the coursework; the instructors took their time and worked with me one-on-one as I needed it. I was able to make connections and gain experiences with real world activities because of the relationships I formed with instructors and their knowledge and experiences in the sciences. Because of the support I received, I showed huge gains in academic success during community college. I was then offered multiple scholarships, which encouraged me to continue on with my four-year degree. The counselors and instructors at GRCC took a lot of time with me to help me understand the transfer process and to make sure I was set up well to begin at the four-year university.

GRCC gave me a chance to see the world of education and the enrichment to life that learning brings. I am inspired to teach science to others now. After I finish my teaching certificate at WWU, I will work as a teaching assistant for the biology/environmental science departments at WWU while attaining my masters of science degree in environmental science. GRCC truly instilled in me a love of life-long learning that I hope to pass on to many others throughout my career.
Laura Yanez  
*Highline Community College*

I was born in Cucuta, Colombia and suffered from the consequences of violence at an early age. Some family members have had guns pointed at their heads, my mother was threatened with the life of her children and an uncle was shot numerous times in the head.

My mother, despite all these hardships, emphasized the importance of education. She believes education makes us better decision-makers and most of the problems in society can be addressed with education. She used to say, “You can lose everything, but no one can ever take away your education.”

Now I believe that a well-rounded education equips one with the required knowledge to make a positive impact in the world.

Being raised in Colombia and seeing my mother struggle to protect us from violence and provide us with an education made me appreciate education. I have dreamed of a college education ever since I was child. This dream is now a reality and I believe everything is possible if we are willing to work for it.

My family came to the United States with the dream of a better life. I did not speak any English but was determined to achieve my goals so I joined classes for English language learners. I did not think a college education was a possibility for someone like me but I was determined to make my dream a reality. I worked, attended English classes and saved money. I started in the Jumpstart program at Highline Community College (HCC). I was living my childhood dream and was one step closer to achieve my goals.

I am currently pursuing an associate of arts degree at HCC. I work at the Transition Referral and Resource Center and serve as president of Highline’s ESL club. My goal as the president is to encourage ESL students to dream of higher education. Thanks to the support of people at HCC, I am able to attend college so someday I can make a difference in the world. In the future, I plan to pursue a degree in psychology and a graduate degree in education at Seattle University. I selected that university because of its commitment to form leaders for a more just and humane world. My brother attends that university and inspired me to share with the poorest of the poor. Last Christmas, he collected more than 200 gifts and gave them to children living in violence and poverty in Colombia. This year, I am continuing his tradition.

I will always thank my mother for her unstoppable commitment to provide my siblings and me with an education. In our family we say, “When we came to the U.S. we spoke no English, but America is the land of opportunities for those who apply themselves.” My sister will soon become a dietician, my brother will enter a doctorate program and I plan to receive an education that will transform me and society.
Juan Rodriguez  
Lake Washington Institute of Technology

I am the quality manager at Skyline Steel's Manufacturing Mill at the Port of Longview in Cowlitz County. Our facility is the largest of its kind on the west coast and Skyline Steel, as a wholly owned subsidiary of Nucor Corporation, is the largest producer of steel in the United States. My job enables me to provide for the living needs for my entire family. As the father of three and a husband, this has been my dream for some time. I am no longer on public assistance of any kind and am paying back into the system that was there for me when I was laid off and my family was in need.

I am a child of migrant farm workers who crossed the border every year from our home in Tijuana, Mexico to work the strawberry fields of Watsonville, California.

In high school, I became a true case study of cross-border politics as I was living with my family in Tijuana; however, being born inside the United States, I was a U.S. citizen. At that time, the Mexican government would not allow U.S. citizens to attend government funded high schools so I had to leave my home every day in Mexico and cross the border into the U.S. to attend classes. As one might imagine, this became unsustainable and eventually I had to drop out due to the financial expense of just getting to school.

At a young age I decided to leave my siblings and parents in Mexico and move to San Diego, California where I enrolled in a welding training program at a federally funded Job Corps Facility. With my new training, I was able to venture out and land an entry-level job as a welder. As I gained more training and skills as a welder, I moved into an elite class of inspectors that allowed me to seek higher paying contract positions.

In the fall of 2012, I was laid off from one such position with a company in the state of Washington. I found myself at the Redmond WorkSource office and it was there I made a life-changing decision. When my savings ran out, my family began to rely on federal food assistance, or SNAP. I found out I was eligible for the Basic Food Employment and Training program offered locally by the YWCA, whose staff connected me with Lake Washington Institute of Technology’s Workforce Education team. I then realized that, if I invested some time in completing an educational training program, I could finally move from being a contracted employee to being a full-time, permanent employee with benefits at a major company.

I hit the books hard and completed my associate of applied sciences in welding technology at Lake Washington Institute of Technology. When I graduated LWIT in June 2013, I had the training, knowledge and education necessary to move into the higher paying and permanent position that I had long desired. From June to October 2013, I interviewed with several Fortune 500 companies before finally accepting the offer of my current position at Skyline Steel.

I deeply appreciate the training and educational opportunities that the state of Washington offers at its community and technical colleges. If it weren't for the training and education I received, I might still be stuck in limbo between temporary opportunities and public assistance.
Coming from a rough childhood where my mother was in and out of prison and both parents battled drug addiction, I started off my young adulthood on the wrong path. I dropped out of high school a few times before deciding to take another approach, which was when I decided to come to LCC and enroll in their Career Education Options (CEO) program.

After completing the high school requirements for the program, I started college classes, which I continued for two years in pursuit of a degree in administrative assistant. During this stint, I was given an opportunity to work for both the CEO program and the business technology lab. The people I worked for were persistent with me and I gave serious consideration to pursuing a bachelor’s degree. After nearly finishing the terminal administrative assistant associate degree, I decided to go big or go home and pursued a degree in engineering. Within a period of two years, I went from being a high school dropout with no direction to a successful college student pursuing a challenging degree in science.

I decided to pursue engineering because I have always had abilities in mathematics and problem-solving. Engineering also is a great career with lots of opportunities for advancement and entrepreneurship. My goal is to graduate with honors with my bachelor’s degree from Washington State University-Vancouver in the hope that will give me an opportunity to apply to a reputable graduate program to pursue a master’s degree in mechanical engineering.

Throughout my studies at LCC (six years), I have had the opportunity to work for and be involved in many programs and clubs as well as pursue my own athletic goals. I have worked for the CEO program, the computer lab, I.T., tutoring, Student Support Services (TRiO) (as a peer mentor) and the business technology lab. In addition, I was also the Information Specialist Officer for our chapter of Phi Theta Kappa for the 2011-2012 school year.

Although I have gained valuable experience, relationships and knowledge through each one of these opportunities, tutoring and peer mentoring have provided the most experience and knowledge that I can apply, not only throughout the rest of my college career and post-college career, but also in life.

Tutoring gave me an opportunity to practice explaining, communicating ideas and other interpersonal skills. Peer mentoring allowed me to learn and apply different leadership skills, such as leading group projects, guiding less experienced students and learning about my own leadership strengths and styles. All of these are very vital skills and experience for a future engineer.

This college has changed my life and has given me an opportunity to find myself and what I want out of life. I am a more open-minded, healthy, knowledgeable and confident person because of my experiences and the encouragement I have received from my instructors and the friends I have made at LCC. As I move on to Washington State University-Vancouver, I hope to continue to grow as a person and, in turn, help others grow as well.
The day I walked out of Two Rivers Correctional Institution was the day I began to live my life with purpose. The 75 months of incarceration was the greatest test of my character and will to survive.

On release, I was fearful for my future and unsure if I could readapt to society.

I grew up in a dysfunctional family, living in terror of my father, surviving his hostile rages and never fully comprehending his suicide when I was a pre-teen. I was never able to form lasting friendships, never found a sense of self-worth and struggled to believe that I was worthy of good things.

My fears became self-fulfilling; I dropped out of college shortly before graduation and joined the Navy out of fear of unemployment. My emotional issues caused me to be discharged honorably shortly before my end of service date and I once again found myself adrift.

I landed in Oregon and, with the support of my family, I rebuilt a life, eventually gaining employment at the Oregon Lottery. It was during this time that I discovered surfing and for the first time allowed myself to believe in myself. The strength and fortitude I gained while struggling against the elemental forces of nature started a fundamental change in my sense of being.

My life abruptly changed when three people broke into my home, believing it was an empty house. It wasn’t and, in the events that followed, I accidentally and tragically shot and killed a person. I was devastated to my core that I had taken a life no matter what the circumstance. I vowed in prison to become a better person and to believe in myself.

After release from prison, Michael Robinson at WorkSource veterans’ outreach encouraged me to go back to school. At Olympic College, Sarah Miksa of Air Washington welcomed me and convinced me that, even though I had a felony conviction, I would fit in. She believed in my success before I did. Stephanie Thompson of Air Washington was instrumental in facilitating my acceptance to the program. These people saw me for who I could be and not what I had done. With their help and support, I enrolled in the Manufacturing Technology certification program.

My Olympic College instructors were practical, knowledgeable and professional. Brian Petty has a wealth of knowledge that he freely imparted. Andy Ryan offered encouragement and to be a professional reference. Joe Moore had the patience to put up with my endless questions. Sandra Kint, Air Washington career navigator, helped me understand that employers will hire a person with a felony.

I received my certification and graduated with President’s list honors. I now work for Armstrong Marine and am rebuilding my life. I am thankful to all the people who supported me in this part of my journey. I am proof that, with support, a person can overcome hardship and prosper.

Don’t let your fears stand in the way of your dreams.
Billie “Jo” Henderson  
*Peninsula College*

I enrolled at Peninsula in 2006 and quit in the summer of 2007. My husband was a troubled combat Vietnam veteran. Our lives were filled with instability, unpredictability and abuse. In order to protect our children, leaving was not an option; I had to be submissive and subservient.

I never felt there was any support, help or understanding for spouses of veterans and their families until moving back to the Peninsula. Our grandson (raised from infancy) was now depressed and suicidal. A Peninsula College professor and personal friend, a wife of a Vietnam veteran, shared her story which paralleled my own. She referred me to Kathy Murphy-Carey, whom I contacted and learned to trust. This would be the beginning of many pivotal moments adding to my success at Peninsula College.

In 2010, I enrolled in IT Admin System and Cisco programs, carrying as many as 28 credits per quarter. I continued to care for my husband, whose health was deteriorating, fulfilled family obligations, homeschooled our grandson, was a Scout Leader, volunteered with veterans and fulfilled other obligations. Mid-term in 2011, I received a diagnosis of cancer. I began treatments and, with the support of my professors, VA services and administration, I completed the year.

In June 2012, our grandson graduated with honors, I graduated from Peninsula with an AAS-T and certificates in Accounting and Cisco. I was accepted in the BAS program, my husband passed, financial hardships accumulated and another surgery was scheduled. In order to begin the BAS program, I devised a plan around my impending surgery that afforded success not only to me but for my project team members and, with the college’s support and encouragement, I enrolled.

Higher education helped rebuild my self-confidence and provided hope in humanity and trust in others. I’ve accomplished many more personal goals in three years than I had in 25. My success is shared with those who supported me through the years, which include peers, professors, administration and countless others. I chose to remain at Peninsula over other colleges or universities because there I’m not a number; I am a person who is valued.

I learned in the face of adversity to never be a victim. Life happens – we choose the outcome. I value my peers’ opinions and viewpoints. I treat each person with dignity, respect and compassion. I strive to optimize opportunities, without taking advantage. I give back and help when I can. Challenges and adversity are opportunities for learning and growth. I strive to inspire, motivate, encourage and promote good will. I believe education is the cornerstone of knowledge and the keys to opportunities at any age. The opportunities presented at Peninsula College have added value to my current internship with the Economic Development Council.

My future goals include completing an MBA program, writing an inspirational book and becoming an entrepreneur using some of the profits to empower impoverished children and youth who are our future.

The imprint I wish to leave is to inspire one person, for that person’s inspiration is infectious and infections become viral.
The road to a college degree was not an easy one. I was a single parent and the attempt to move toward a positive direction seemed out of reach. I was a high school dropout with two young children before I was 20 years old. My search for steady, internally satisfying employment progressed with no success.

Eventually, I obtained a GED, and worked toward strengthening my office skills. Although I felt I had taken positive steps necessary to overcome my circumstances, my life still threw roadblocks in my way. Before I knew it, I had four children who depended solely on me. I found myself in an abusive relationship again and it was truly getting out of hand. With no clear plans for the future, my life was headed towards an unsuccessful path. I knew I had to get out of the situation fast. I was drained financially, emotionally and physically.

The blood dripped from my lips as I slammed his car door. Fear engulfed me like a bubble. His tires screeched in the background as I ran up the stairs wiping the bloodied stains and bruises he left on my face. “You’re never gonna be anything,” his haunting voice echoed. Embarrassed and ashamed, I held my tears back. His powerful fists were cowardly actions. This time he would see no tears; not this time, not ever.

This decision was made long ago, but I was still too afraid to follow through. At that point, there was no more holding back. I ended up at the front door to college. My life was finally taking a turn for the better. The competency and courage I gained from classes were only part of the instrumental role Pierce College played in my personal and professional development. The staff invested their time and confidence in me and it made a crucial difference.

The Business Program enhanced my leadership and problem-solving skills and helped me to advance. I made the honor roll, the President’s List and won Business and Multi-Cultural Leadership Institute Student of the Year awards. Eventually, I earned a bachelor’s degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a WAVE scholarship. The inner fire was lit and Pierce College helped lead me in a successful direction.

Becoming a four-year college graduate has had a profound effect on my family as well. One child is already in college and my other three are sure to follow. I now feel I have a “second chance” at a future filled with promise. I currently work in a public setting with a diverse population and am more prone to building strong positive relationships with others. Thankfully, I am no longer in abusive relationships. With aspirations for further education, I realized that books helped me develop knowledge, but it was the overall experience that empowered my survivor instinct. I don’t know where I would be without a college education and am forever grateful for being in my newfound position in life.
Sydney Jackola  
*Pierce College Puyallup*

I am a 2012 graduate of Pierce College. I reviewed the 2012 Transforming Lives video and thought to myself, “I don’t fit into the category of these brave men and women with their amazing achievements.” But then I realized: I do!

I am a 45-year-old single mother of two beautiful children. In 2009, I lost my job, which had been a career that fully supported my family without any help from the outside world. I have worked since I was 15 years old and did not have parents who thought college was necessary to achieve employment in this world, so I took the same attitude. I found out very quickly – especially in the down economy – that it didn’t matter that I had been doing human resources work and accounting and that I had amazing references, skills and abilities most people don’t achieve in a lifetime of employment. I realized that I was never going to have sustainable, lifelong employment if I didn’t go to college.

I am a survivor of sexual abuse and a survivor of physical abuse. I am a survivor of marital abuse and I’m a recovering drug addict. The journey I have been on in my life has taken me to places, hurt, anger and resentment that I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy. I refused to allow “life’s circumstances” to prevent me from being the person I deserved to be, the role model my children deserve to have and the woman I have grown to be.

Pierce College was the beginning of a journey and a life I never dreamed I would have! I learned so much more than just the curriculum. I learned that there is no such thing as failure! Not succeeding in something just opens more doors for you to make stepping stones out of stumbling blocks and I’ve had many falls in my life.

I have learned to be a coach, a mentor and a role model for so many people and it’s because of my professors at Pierce College, who pushed me to be brave, to be transparent, to get honest and to be accountable for the life I am living – a life for myself – instead of making excuses for the people and circumstances that tried to bring me down in life.

Because of the love, conviction, mentoring and coaching I received from my professors at Pierce College, I am now the owner of the first family-owned and operated Aveda Experience Center in the United States. Because of Pierce College and the love and support I was given, I am able to build sustainable, honest, ethical and genuinely authentic relationships with people in my community and help to rebuild the economy of Washington State through my business at the South Hill Mall in Puyallup. Because my professors at Pierce College believed in me, I am finally free of my past!
I am biracial, a unique mix of Korean and Cuban descent. I grew up in East Rutherford, New Jersey. I moved to Washington when I was 12 years old, after my guardian was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease and she had to move to an assisted living home.

I have overcome a lot in my life. Having a drug-addicted father and a mother who put me in foster care at the age of four because she did not want the burden of being a single mother, you would think that my future was bleak. Being a survivor of child abuse and molestation in my adolescent years could not break me.

Even being homeless for more than a year when I was 14, and sleeping in abandoned buildings and newspaper bins did not define my future. Instead, I grew stronger and more resilient than ever. I know how hard life can be, but I cannot let that stop me from being everything I want to be. Failure is not an option when it comes to my life. My best friends would say that I’m beautiful, despite my scars, loyal to the bone, and honest to a fault.

It took me a while to work up the courage to go back to school. This would mean a complete life change. I would have to quit my current job and move with my husband closer to my school. I wanted to be a medical coding specialist, so I researched the colleges in Washington that had this program available. I discovered that RTC had the best success rate at about 85%. So, like my favorite saying, “Go big or go home,” off to Renton I went!

The first few weeks were very overwhelming and I felt unsure of myself so I decided to have a discussion with my instructor, Sheila May-Farley. She assured me that I wasn’t nearly as lost as I thought I was. So I took that simple statement to heart and, with some amazing support from Sheila and my academic advisor, Debbie Rundle, lending a listening ear in times of distress, I was able to find my way.

I utilize the beautiful and spacious library almost daily to complete assignments and love using the private rooms for study group with my peers. Now I maintain a 3.5 grade point average and find myself helping others at times when they need help. My goal is to be in the top 10 percent of my class so I can be a highly desirable employee. When I graduate, I plan to move back to NE New Jersey where my family lives so I can establish myself and start a family with my beloved and supportive husband, Nicholas.

I am so excited to start my new career and I have RTC, as a whole, to thank for that. I am forever grateful!
Alise Hegle  
**Seattle Central Community College**

My greatest accomplishment is being the mother of Rebekah, my beautiful four-year-old daughter. If you told me four years ago that I could end every night by holding my daughter’s hand while we cuddled in my bed, I would not have believed you. After I gave birth, Rebekah was immediately removed from my care by CPS. I had a seven-year prison sentence that was looming over me and a meth addiction that engulfed my life.

I left the hospital spiritually destroyed and without an ounce of hope that my life would ever be different. I prayed for God’s will for me and was blessed with an opportunity for treatment. After completing treatment, I faced termination of my parental rights. I’ll never forget the judge telling me I had one chance to prove I was the best fit for my daughter. That moment became my catalyst for change.

As much energy as I had put into the negative path I was on, I funneled into positive activities that strengthened me as a woman and mother. On my 26th birthday, I found out my daughter was coming home and I immediately enrolled in the Social and Human Services program at Seattle Central Community College. I felt I had a purpose to assist others during their journey of change and the only way I was going to do this was by receiving an education.

From the moment I first arrived on campus, I was embraced by the faculty and students. Two instructors, Peggy Martin-Waters and Bob Groeschell, taught me how to use my passion for advocacy to inspire others to be their best. They believed in me as I worked hard to believe in myself.

In 2012, I graduated, earning an associate degree with honors, and immediately enrolled in the bachelor of applied behavioral science program at the college. I am excited to say that I will graduate in June and currently have a 3.98 cumulative GPA.

My education has equipped me with the tools I need as I strive to give back to my community. I currently work with families involved with CPS to inspire them that they can also reunite with their children. Additionally, I have recognized that I have a passion for policy and have begun a new job learning how to best advocate for child welfare-involved families. I also serve on several committees and was recognized as a National Reunification Hero by the American Bar Association.

None of this would have ever been possible if I didn’t take that first step onto the SCCC campus. Without an education, I would not have the skills, confidence or the professionalism that is needed to promote social justice change. The message I am here to convey is that everyone has their own unique story and an ability to thrive and succeed if they put all of their efforts toward success.
For nine years I lived on the streets of Seattle, homeless with no hope and no goals. I was eating out of a free food line under the I-5 freeway for hot meals. I only dreamed of sobriety and having a better life. I called a place under the South Park Bridge my home when I finally got sober and overcame an 11-year addiction to meth.

I only had a high school diploma and desperately wanted a college education and career. I looked at many different careers and decided on medical assisting. I came to NSCC at the age of 48. I was nervous and unsure of my future but determined to make a change in my life and finally get an education.

After completing the prerequisites, I was accepted and entered into the Medical Assisting (MA) program. Since entering the program, I have been able to maintain a 3.5 or higher GPA and became a member of the Phi Theta Kappa International Honor Society of the two-year college.

In the spring of 2013, I was inducted as an officer in Phi Theta Kappa and now hold the position of project manager. When I came to NSCC, I honestly thought that it was a pipe dream to actually get an education; however, now I will graduate in June 2014 with a certificate of achievement in medical assisting and an associate of applied science degree in medical assisting. The day I graduate from North will be, without a doubt, one of the proudest moments in my life. Who would have thought that a homeless drug addict would be able to pull himself out of the depths of addiction, work to get himself off the streets and land a position as an officer in an honor society?

NSCC has inspired a new life in me. This school has shown me that the opportunities for my education are endless. I am now 51 and I am not done. After I leave community college, I plan to further my education and get a bachelor’s degree in social and health and human services.

Throughout this change in my life, I have not forgotten where I came from. I have gone back to the food line under the I-5 freeway, but this time to help serve those who are less fortunate. I ate in that same food line for years. As an officer of the honor society, I have been able to get others involved in volunteering to feed and help hand out clothing, blankets and sleeping bags to the homeless in Seattle.

I hope to one day work with homeless drug addicts and continue to use the education I have received here at NSCC to give back to the community.
David Morales  
*South Seattle Community College*

David Morales is the name that my parents gave me. This is what everyone has been calling me my whole life, but not many know the history behind the name. People don’t know about the challenges I’ve overcome and triumphs I’ve reached, such as the time my family and I moved to the United States from Mexico. Or how hard it was to adjust to this new life in a place where everyone spoke a language I had never heard.

It wasn’t easy standing in line for the food bank with my mother and sister on winter days and having to see my mom worry about whether or not she was going to be able to feed us. The food bank is where I began gathering my humility, work habits and honesty. It was there that I promised my mom I would one day make something of myself so I would not repeat the cycle my great-grandparents started, my parents followed and that, one day, would be my responsibility to break.

My dream is to obtain a college degree, become a police officer and help bridge the gap between law enforcement and the Latino community. I feel the need to serve this country, just as it has served my family and me. Going to college is just one of the steps I must achieve to become a police officer and have the power to change lives for the better.

Having to struggle and fight for what I want is nothing new to me. It’s something that was embedded in me and I have learned to use it to reach my goals. My diligence in school earned me the Jill Wakefield Endowed Scholarship last year after I graduated from high school. This scholarship has helped me immensely in my studies at South Seattle Community College. In addition to going to school, I am also raising a family. In my time at South, I have learned that hard work and a good attitude can help me reach great success. I have been placed on the Dean’s list and I’ve achieved exemplary grades. I also attended the annual honor roll ceremony, which was an encouraging experience since it gave me an opportunity to thank those at South who have helped me along the way.

I have proven with my dedication to education that, if presented with the opportunity for college, I would make the most of it. Attaining a college degree is the next step in fulfilling the promise to break a cycle I will not allow my kids to follow.

By setting an example of being educated, my kids will follow in my footsteps. One day, when you hear the name David Morales, it will be accompanied by: “...is one of the best police officers that Washington State has ever seen,” and you will be able to say you have played a part in that story.
Scott Vaughn  
*Shoreline Community College*

Before I enrolled in the automotive program at Shoreline Community College, I was homeless and lived in a shelter sponsored by the Youth Cares Organization. Because my mother was a drug addict, I ended up homeless. My father, who was a drug dealer, was murdered when I was only three years old. My childhood was very difficult and challenging.

When I was 18 years old, I was adrift. I did not know what I wanted to do with my life. What I was missing in life was direction. While living within the Youth Care Organization, I heard about Shoreline Community College and its highly regarded automotive program. That was a turning point in my life. While it seemed impossible to do, it was at that moment I realized what I wanted to do in life: I wanted to attend Shoreline's automotive program.

As a young boy I always loved cars, but didn’t know much about them. I immediately went to Shoreline and spoke with Scott Main, who told me what I needed to do to be accepted into the General Motors ASEP Program. It was a long list, but I knew I could do it.

I was accepted into the General Motors ASEP Program at Shoreline. It was there, under the guidance and instruction of a truly great teacher, Mr. Main, where I found my passion. It was hard work but I learned so much and, while in the program, I got a job working in a local GM dealership. Two years later, I graduated with an associate degree, a certificate from GM-ASEP, four of my ASE certifications and a Most Improved Technician award. I was well on my way to a new and exciting career.

One year after I graduated, I began to manage an automotive shop; I have been a manager now for more than three years. Each year, I am not only advancing in my career but also increasing both sales and gross margins for the company. I recently bought my first house, which we are remodeling and improving. Not only does it look better but it now has more value. I am excited to say we are now expecting our first child. I own five cars, including a 10-second race car and two classic show cars.

I have had an opportunity to be a spokesman for both Youth Care and United Way, helping them raise nearly $2 million. I have spoken to many different organizations, telling young people about my life, encouraging them to go to school and urging them to find and live their dreams.

I am so grateful to Shoreline Community College for what they did for me. I was a homeless kid with no direction or goals. Today I own a home, have a family and have an exciting and rewarding career. Now I have the opportunity to help others. Thank you, Shoreline!
Six months ago, I was homeless, had no money, no job and no car. I was walking past SVC and decided to stop and see what it would take to get my GED, knowing that, in all honesty, I wouldn’t be back. Five weeks later, I walked into my very first college classroom.

I remember the many times I questioned if I was making the right choice. I had every reason to think the answer was no. I was a high school dropout. I had no transportation to get back and forth to school. I was too old, not smart enough. Then I realized that what I thought were reasons were actually just excuses.

I was directed to Nelson Hall, Room 122 and, since then, things have never been the same. Alison Fernandez is the reason I am in college today. She talked to me about my GED, about other opportunities and my expectations for my future.

I had heard it all before: “Get a better education,” or, “If you get your GED, you can get a better job.” She didn’t give me a bunch of brochures to read or a business card to stick in my pocket, but instead, walked me through the entire enrollment process.

She helped me fill out paperwork and called me before the quarter started to make sure I knew when and where to go on my first day. She came into my classroom to see how I was doing. She cared and she believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself.

My instructors were incredible. My math instructor, Lisa, was so patient and taught at a pace we could all learn, yet knew just how far to push to challenge us. She always took time to explain things we didn’t understand…often more than once. It was nice to be able to not just learn, but also to enjoy learning.

My English instructor, Gretchen, always made time to help us as individuals with things we didn’t understand. And I know I was a challenge.

I have met so many wonderful people since I have been at SVC. My life is so different. I have a home, a job and now…a bright future. Fall quarter is midway through and I am taking composite manufacturing and technical design courses and I will graduate in spring 2014. After receiving my certificates, I plan to begin a career in the aerospace manufacturing/technology field.

Skagit Valley College is an exceptional campus. I believe many more people would attend college if they knew how much help, encouragement and support is here for them. I want to sincerely thank all of you for making a difference in my life.
I came to Shelton in 2010 after being on the run from a domestic violence situation for several years. I had placed my daughter with her natural father, who soon lost custody of her to the state.

My son and I entered a domestic violence shelter and I began my journey to get a degree in auto technology. I completed the 90-day program and was able to then move into the homeless shelter in Mason County.

They offer transitional housing assistance if you complete their 90-day program requirements. I was able to do that and continue taking classes for college.

Upon completion of the program, we moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Shelton. The transitional housing only provides assistance for the first year, so I signed up for low-income housing as well. I was able to get into the low-income housing just as my year expired.

Finally, having secured stable housing, I was able to focus on getting my daughter back home. I was granted temporary custody with department involvement. After six months, I became the first parent in Grays Harbor County to regain their parental rights. I believe that because I remained focused on my educational goals and continued to follow my dream, I had the strength to overcome these challenges.

To show my gratitude for the assistance we received from the shelter, I volunteer 20 hours a week during school breaks. I also spoke at the groundbreaking ceremony for a new shelter that will go in next year. Program Director Deb Neilson has labeled me their "poster child" for success, stating that I am a perfect example of how successful their program can be if you apply yourself.

I can honestly say that, since joining the auto tech program at SPSCC, I regained my self-worth and self-confidence. I see a positive future for my family and am very excited knowing I will be able to acquire a family wage position in my chosen field of study. Had I not been able to follow my dream and attend classes at SPSCC I may not have been able to accomplish all of these life-changing challenges and my dream to provide my family with the lifestyle we deserve would not have been possible. I may have been just another statistic on a list of domestic violence victims.

My current goals include finishing my degree in auto tech to specialize in engine drivability. I have acquired most tools necessary for the first year; however, I will need assistance in purchasing the tools required for the second year.

I am following my heart’s dream and am completely committed to success.
Amber Sweet  
_Spokane Community College_

I am a 29-year-old single mother of two girls, ages 10 and three. I was born in Spokane, but moved to California at one-year-old, where I was raised by my grandma. My parents were heavily into drugs and were not fit to be parents at the time, so my grandma stepped in. She gave me the best life she could, but in high school things turned bad. I was smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol and skipping school. When I was 16, a guy introduced me to methamphetamine. I used it for years and dropped out of high school. I became pregnant at 18 and my grandma moved me to Spokane to get clean. The man whose child I was carrying came with me and we got clean. We were doing well. My daughter was one and her father relapsed. He became abusive, physically and mentally, which lasted about four years. He was in and out of jail for domestic violence and, unfortunately, I would always go back to him, where the abuse continued. He made promises to stop, but it was clear that he had issues he needed to work on and things never changed. When my daughter was five, I went to a women's shelter where they helped me get a place and get into school. It was the happiest day of my life: I finally felt free. I spent some time at Spokane Falls Community College trying to decide what I wanted with my life in the chemical dependency program. I later took some time off school after a year. It was just too hard to pay my bills so I needed to work full-time for a while. I became pregnant with my second daughter, who is the second light of my life. I returned to school at Spokane Community College where, with the help of all my amazing professors, I was able to complete my associate of arts and I graduated in June 2013. It was my biggest accomplishment and I was the first one in my family to go to college. I'm now at Eastern Washington University in the addiction studies/social work program. Obstacles come up every day: unfortunately, I just learned I have hit my limit for loans and financial aid, so to complete my bachelor’s next year I will need to pay for it myself. Luckily, it all starts over for your master's, so I just need to get my bachelor's. I'm just hoping and praying for the best and trying not to get worried, everything usually works out. I'm honored that Geoff Bagwell thought so highly of me to recommend me for an award. I have never been nominated for anything and I would not be where I am today without the help from everyone at the community colleges, showing me that I can do whatever I set my mind to. Going to school saved my life. I've been clean for 10 years, away from abuse for five and I feel incredible. I owe it all to SCC.
Ryan Breithaupt
Spokane Falls Community College

I am very amazed, truly honored, that I was nominated for such an award. I have never thought of myself as being outstanding or exceptional. However, I have always been a very hard-working individual who does not give up.

I come from a family of hard-working people. I always thought I would continue that legacy working hard labor jobs. No one ever asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, so I didn’t really ever have any other dreams or direction. But SFCC was sure to change that.

On Easter day of 1989, during our Easter celebration, a five-year-old boy I had never met before asked me if I was good at getting kites out of trees, to which I replied, “Yes.” He asked if I would get his kite for him and I did. As I was carefully untangling the kite, a freak accident occurred. The electricity jumped more than 15 feet, blowing me out of the pole and stopping my heart. I fell 30 feet and hitting the ground re-started my heart and broke my pelvis in five places. Aside from the many physical issues the electrocution and fall caused, I was also left with numerous mental problems, memory problems and learning disabilities caused by the electricity, hitting my head or a combination of them. I battled depression and symptoms similar to bipolar disorder for many years and was diagnosed disabled and was able to receive Social Security Insurance.

Years later, I learned my ex-wife lost custody of my son. That was all I needed…it was like a switch inside me was flipped. I moved back to Spokane, started fighting for custody of my son, and decided I needed something more to provide for my son and me.

I decided I would look into going back to school…at 40 years old. When I walked into the admission’s office, I was terrified. I thought to myself, “What the heck am I doing here???”

I almost walked out when a lady behind the counter asked if I needed help. I reluctantly walked up to the counter and we had a very long conversation. I told her about being electrocuted and about being terrified to go to school. Thank God she saw something in me that I didn’t. She convinced me I was doing the right thing and she knew I could do it. She talked me into enrolling right then and there!

My whole experience at SFCC was a similar experience. Literally every instructor, counselor, and advisor were unbelievably positive and re-enforcing. It was truly amazing!!! Without SFCC, I would probably never be working with the disabled, which I am sure is my true calling and destiny. I have been working at my job for more than a year now and I have never been happier! I thank God for showing me the path to SFCC and my amazing new career.

If it were possible to earn a master’s degree at SFCC, I would still be there earning one!!!
I am a 52-year-old man whose life has been marred by violence, prison, homelessness, substance abuse and low self-worth. Growing up, I never attended junior high or high school, so my educational goals and dreams never flourished.

At the age of 44, my life took a dramatic turn. I found myself in prison for the seventh time and remembered telling myself, “Jeffery, you said ‘never again,’ but here you are locked up once more.” The uncertainty of spending the rest of my life in prison kept me company many sleepless nights.

Upon my release, and while working in a drug and alcohol treatment center, I discovered my passion for helping people. Speaking about my own challenges was a turning point. Soon after, I enrolled in TCC’s Human Services Program, where my advisor saw something in me that I didn’t see myself: A willingness to learn about how to help others. He sparked a desire in me to think critically and for myself. Until that point in my life, I hadn’t practiced that skill. I was encouraged to think and trust myself, which opened many doors.

My internship was in the Access Services department. I was able to interact with students of all ages, cultures and races. I found it extremely easy to speak openly and honestly with them about the struggles and triumphs of returning to school after 30 years. I learned that, by sharing my challenges, I could positively inspire others.

A deeper need to connect to others surfaced when I allowed a mentor into my life. I learned that by having someone look objectively and genuinely at my behaviors, I could correct those behaviors. More importantly, I learned I can be a nonjudgmental sounding board for others. When I gave myself permission to trust and take advantage of opportunities in front of me, a transformation took hold and has been shaping my character and path ever since.

A desire to make a difference has driven me to complete my studies and graduate with honors from TCC, where I received an Outstanding Student Award in 2013. I am currently a senior studying Social Science at The Evergreen State College Tacoma. I have also become a certified recovery coach and opened a clean and sober house for men with custody of their children. I was interviewed for a local program, Access to Recovery, which aired on KING 5 news in August 2013. That led to a Tacoma News Tribune article on my efforts to recreate my life and the positive outcomes that resulted from these actions.

Learning from my past is the greatest asset I possess. I didn’t know that until I allowed myself to trust my mentor. He encouraged me to dream big. Having mentors has stimulated my desire to overcome my past. I want to share those insights with youths struggling with their identity and self-worth. I plan to be that advocate and mentor for the youth of Tacoma, while continuing to turn my passion into action.
Joe Field
Walla Walla Community College

I grew up in poverty, coming from a family of addicts and dysfunction. I believed this is where I belonged and that was life. For many years of my childhood, I was severely abused in many ways and became a ward of the state of California, where group homes and foster care became my family.

At the age of 13, I became a drug addict, with heroin being my choice. Initially, I used in order to deal with the pain of having no family and to mask the painful feelings that came from being abused but soon it became a way of life and full-on addiction.

With addiction came crime and, at age 18, my incarceration began and continued for many years. There is so much to my story of survival, but my drug addiction lasted for 25-plus years and I became institutionalized. I always embraced the culture of prison; the other prisoners were my family and that was where I belonged. I was never judged there and always felt at home when I was behind those bars. It was my culture and I knew how to live in there. I actually embraced and loved it. Society scared me and I never knew how to function in the free world. I was always judged as a no-good troublemaker who wouldn’t amount to anything, which just made it so I wanted to go home every time I was outside of the walls of incarceration.

That was my life in the short version, but then in 2008, I got clean and knew I wanted to help addicts like myself. I thought I would try school, which I had not been to since 1981 (when I was in the seventh grade) and it took two years before I was brave enough to try.

In 2010, I found Walla Walla Community College (WWCC) and all I wanted to do was get a GED, but I was really scared. As I said, society scared me. I remember my very first day at WWCC. I showed up for my first class, which was sociology, and I had no idea what that even was. I stood in the hallway, sweating with anxiety, wanting to run out and go home (to prison) but I stayed.

That was the day my life began to transform, by meeting Susan Palmer, the sociology instructor. Though I tried to quit that day, she took the time to talk to me and told me that I was worth it and that she would mentor me through the process. So many things at WWCC have been a part of my transformation into becoming a human. I fell in love with education and am inspired by every single instructor there, the TRIO program, and many others. I graduated with an AA degree and was honored to give the commencement speech at the 2012 graduation, one of only six students who graduated with honors. I am now starting my second year at Walla Walla University, where I am studying sociology. There will never be enough words in the world to show how thankful I am to WWCC and their staff (Susan Palmer for sure) for showing me a whole new life transformed with education. My goal is to study hard and get a master’s in sociology so I can return to WWCC and give back for the freedom and transformation they gave me. WWCC is my home now and I love to come back and walk the hallways because it’s where I belong. If it weren’t for WWCC, I know where I would be: incarcerated and still hooked on drugs or even dead. Today, I can see why WWCC is the number one community college in the nation – because they help individuals like me transform into good humans.
Edward and Annette Aguigui
Wenatchee Valley College

There is no way we could each write a letter individually for this award, because our educational journey started together and together we have endured many trials. Yet we have still obtained many accomplishments along the way.

Our story goes way back to the days when Ed was serving in the US Army. After more than 20 years, we decided that Ed would retire and we would move to Alaska. On our way, we found two amazing little foster boys that desperately needed a family and a home. How could we say no? So our happily ever after in Alaska would have to wait as we added two new sons with special needs to our family.

As we settled into a new normal, Ed was employed as a construction manager until 2009, when the economy took a turn and construction came to a halt. Never before in the history of our family, now seven children strong, had Ed been without a job.

At the same time, the Veterans’ Administration began a program for those who served in the military after 9/11 and Ed would qualify for educational funding. I had always wanted to become a nurse, but put that dream on the back burner to care for my family. In the winter of 2010, we embarked on a journey with more twists and turns and ups and downs then we ever imagined. We knew we would have to work hard to obtain the grades to get into the WVC nursing program so we were serious about our studies, which earned us a place on the president's list, dean's list and membership in the Phi Theta Kappa honor society.

Spring quarter of 2011, we applied for the nursing program. Sadly, we would get our acceptance letter while planning the funeral of our 24-year-old daughter-in-law and unborn grandson. With our world completely shattered, we had a very important decision to make: whether to accept or decline our seats in the program and reapply later. We pushed through our grief and accepted our seats.

On the eve before our first comprehensive final, we got a call that changed our family forever. Our son had been arrested on charges of murder in Georgia! Again, we found ourselves at a huge crossroads. The answer was to continue on. So the next morning we headed to WVC to take exams that could very well have been the end of the road had we failed them. Needless to say, we did not fail nor have we failed since that awful day.

Together, with many prayers and support from the staff, faculty and fellow nursing students, we have achieved more than we ever imagined possible. After graduation, both Ed and I have received RN internships at Central Washington Hospital. As we pick up the pieces of life, we can see just how important our educational pursuits have been during this time. In the future, we will use our story to encourage those who face difficult times.
Rodrigo Garcia-Berguecio
Whatcom Community College

At the age of 40, after working more than 20 years in the construction field, I suffered an irreversible injury while working on a masonry job. Surgery on my left shoulder meant the chances of returning to my career were zero to none. My first question was, “What am I going to do now if I can’t work on what I have been doing since my 20s?” I picked an opportunity from Labor & Industries; they offered me two years of school as part of a retraining program.

Going back to school was frightening, menacing and virtually fiction. Considering I was 40 years old and English was my second language, the odds of achieving an associate degree were weak. I started school with Math 99, anxiety and depression, as I was grieving for my mother, who just passed away weeks earlier. Because Labor and Industries granted me two years of school, I was taking 20 credits every quarter. Anxiety attacks became my best friend to the extent that, in January 2012, I went to the emergency room at Saint Joseph Hospital with tingling in my left arm, plus problems with my breathing. The doctor told me I was suffering from grief and trepidation; I needed to take care of my health.

The director from the paralegal career center, staff members, instructors and advisors from Whatcom Community College brought the magic and the touch of optimism and self-confidence I needed. Without their support, my path into higher education wouldn’t have been as smooth and positive as it was. I became so attached to my college that, after graduating with my associate degree in paralegal studies with a 3.7/4.0 GPA, I decided to continue at WCC one more year to pursue a direct transfer degree. Additionally, in February 2013, I was selected to work at Student Life.

Overcoming dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, language barriers and many other challenges helped boost my self-esteem and confidence in my daily life. In school, I have learned that dedication, focus and a well-defined plan are the tools needed to make our visions a reality. My struggles gave me the experience to help other students, to encourage them and help them understand nothing in this life is easy and that hard work, long nights studying and big books to memorize will pay off with greater delights.

Today, I need a full-time job in order to continue my studies. To start a new career at 40 years old can be unfavorable and hard to overcome. However, I am going to persevere until I graduate with a bachelor’s degree. The one and only way I can become valuable to my family and community is with higher schooling.

I agree with Aristotle’s quote, “Education is the best provision for the journey to old age,” because to learn is to become enlightened with a higher conscience and a real awareness of our past, present and future. We are what we learn.
José Avila  
Yakima Valley Community College

Growing up, every summer my older brother and I found ourselves working from the early morning to mid-afternoon in orchards, picking many different types of fruit. If I close my eyes, I can still see it to this day; waking up before the sun would come out, taking a nap on my brother’s shoulder on the drive to work.

The work was labor-intensive and the hours long. We would both accompany our parents so that the week’s check could come in with a slightly higher figure. I thank my parents for taking us to work with them each and every day of my summer breaks while in high school. If it were not for them showing us the true nature of an honest day’s work, I feel I would have taken my whole education for granted. If it were not for my parents, I would not be so ambitious to pursue a higher education. Through their teachings, I have learned the value of a dollar and the importance of a good education.

I have been attending Yakima Valley Community College (YVCC) for several quarters, pursuing a degree in mechanical engineering. I have maintained an average 3.84 GPA so far. I have made the dean’s list three times. I am involved with the Phi Theta Kappa honor society, MESA Club, Chemistry Club and am president of the Math Club. I like to help people when I’m sure the advice I give or the help I provide is up to par. I am tutoring for MESA’s Academic Excellence workshops as a way to help out others and help myself at the same time.

I wish to become a successful engineer with important responsibilities. I want to have a family and provide for all of their necessities, be that as simple as a teddy bear to a home with a backyard for my children to play. As I have grown, I have come to realize that attaining a good education is a key piece in having this kind of future. It hasn’t always been easy. I’ve missed out some quarters because of not having the money to pay for tuition and books; for others, I’ve had to pay out-of-pocket.

Attending YVCC has allowed me to take the necessary steps in attaining my desired future. YVCC has allowed me to be part of a smarter and more intellectual community. I have been pushed socially and mentally in my time here. I have witnessed myself unfold from a shy, unconfident and timid boy into a well-known, respected leader amongst my peers. If it were not for YVCC being in my local community, I would probably have found myself working at a fast food restaurant chain or still being a part of the seasonal working community.
Washington Community and Technical Colleges: System Highlights

Programs, certificates, credentials, and degrees build economic prosperity

Professional and technical credentials – Community and technical colleges train students for good jobs available right now in communities and growth industries around the state, like advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, health care, and robotics. Seventy-eight percent of the students completing job-training programs in 2011-2012 were employed seven to nine months after leaving college, despite the sluggish economy.

Worker retraining program – In 2010-2011, 8,533 laid-off workers turned to community and technical colleges for retraining. Within a few months of completing their programs, 73 percent had jobs with 88 percent wage recovery for those who lost higher wage jobs, and 117 percent wage recovery for those who had lost lower wage jobs. Nearly two years later, 86 percent were still employed.

Employer job training – Community and technical colleges provide customized, affordable training programs for businesses across the state. Employees can learn at colleges or at the work site, and costs are offset by tax breaks or matching funds. Under a state law passed in 2013, small businesses making less than $500,000 in annual gross business income no longer have to pay a dollar-for-dollar match, only the employee’s or trainee’s usual salary and benefits during training.

Veterans – Twenty-seven Washington community and technical colleges are among the top military friendly schools in the nation, according to Victory Media, a media entity for military personnel transitioning to civilian life. The 2014 Military Friendly Schools list honors the top 20 percent of colleges, universities, and trade schools that do the most for the success of military service members, veterans, and spouses.

Tuition – Community and technical colleges provide practical, affordable higher education at all levels. At $4,000 per year for a full-time student, tuition remains an excellent deal for students and families. The Running Start program yields even greater savings. In 2012-2013, 19,624 high school juniors and seniors took classes at community and technical colleges through Running Start, earning both high school and college credit. Nearly 1,750 seniors graduated from high school with their associate degrees that year, shaving two years and thousands of dollars off their path to a bachelor’s degree.

High school/college alignment – Community and technical colleges are supporting implementation of the national Common Core Standards by working with local high schools on new approaches for placing students into the appropriate level of college class and developing new senior-year “college transition” courses in math and English.

Training the Emerging Workforce

A significant segment of Washington’s population lacks the basic math and reading skills, or English-language proficiency, to succeed at work. Only 89 percent of adults in Washington have a high school diploma or equivalent, and just less than 50 percent of these adults have a postsecondary credential. Adult Basic Education creates pathways to college and careers for this emerging workforce.

Competency-based advancement – Community and technical colleges use innovative acceleration models that dissolve the step-by-step sequence of coursework in college-readiness courses (aka remedial or developmental education). Students advance based on knowledge gained rather than time spent in a classroom.

Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training – I-BEST uses a team-teaching approach to combine college-readiness classes with regular, credit-bearing academic or job training classes. This nationally-acclaimed approach allows students to work on college-level studies right away, clearing multiple levels with one leap.

High School 21+ – Adults who are at least 21 years old and lack a high school diploma have a new way to get a second chance with “High School 21+,” a competency-based high school diploma offered at community and technical colleges. Advisors review transcripts and knowledge gained from life experience, and work with each student to craft an educational plan to fill gaps. This approach recognizes life competency in addition to classroom time and tests, and opens one more door to federal financial aid.