Transforming Lives
The Trustees Association of Community and Technical Colleges’ (TACTC) Transforming Lives awards recognize current and former students whose lives were transformed by attending a Washington state community or technical college. Each of the 34 college boards of trustees selected an awardee from among its current and former student body. From among the 34 students chosen, the TACTC Awards Committee selected five awardees to serve as keynote speakers at the January 28, 2015, Transforming Lives awards dinner.

Awards criteria
Boards of trustees could nominate current or former Washington community and technical college students who completed or made significant progress toward completing a degree or certificate that helped them prepare for, or be successful in, a competitive workforce occupation. Each awardee overcame significant barriers to achieve his or her higher education goals. The awardees’ experiences demonstrate how Washington community and technical colleges help transform lives through education and student support.

The 2015 Transforming Lives awardees are:

- **Raymond Power**  
  Bates Technical College

- **Chester Curtis**  
  Edmonds Community College

- **Angela Gates**  
  Lower Columbia College

- **Yadira Rosales**  
  Skagit Valley College

- **Sukhdip Singh**  
  Whatcom Community College

While just five students were selected to serve as keynote speakers, committee members found compelling stories of determination and success among each of the 34 awardees. All of their stories are shared in their own words on the following pages.

In these times of economic uncertainty, much attention is focused on the struggles and difficulties students endure. 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.
It begins in my past, but the past is what made my future. I will never go back, but I will look to it and learn from my mistakes. It started with me and my little sister. We were raised by our mother, who was disabled, so we grew up poor and our mom was sick all the time. We had no father and no real guidance. It got so bad one Christmas — we had nothing — so I wrapped up my toys for my little sister. But this was hard on me and we were alone with no father. I turned to the streets.

Growing up on the east side of Tacoma, I joined a gang looking for what I was missing at home — getting the fake feeling of family. This turned out not good. I was shot in the leg. After being shot, I turned to prescription drugs, which sent me in a whirlwind of self-destruction that landed me in prison. In prison I got some time to reflect. I knew this life was not what I wanted, but upon release, with no positive people to come out to, I ended up right back where I didn’t want to be. It went like this for about a year.

Then I met my wife. We were married and a year later expecting our first child. Right then I knew I had to change. So I went to DSHS and was placed in the community jobs program from the Goodwill. Part of the program was to get my GED. While there, I felt alive again. I had motivation I never knew. So I completed my program at the Goodwill and found a new home at Bates Technical College in the Facilities Maintenance Engineering class with instructor Dale Trombley. While at BTC my life changed. I had a good role model — my teacher — someone who believed in me and gave me confidence that I could do anything if I put my mind to it. That was what I needed: confidence in myself. So with my newfound confidence in tow, I began exceling in my journey called life.

Since starting at BTC, I have passed four of my six quarters, started doing motivational speaking for the Goodwill, also sharing my story on their website. I was on the news for the health department, sharing my success story. I have obtained my GED, I was appointed public relations for the student council, and also started helping around my community with at-risk youth. BTC has changed my life in so many ways. I went from not knowing what I wanted in life to thinking a whole new way. I want everything now: I want to learn, to teach, to tell my story and let everyone know you can change your circumstances for the better if you try hard enough. I went from having no goals and no plan to having a list of goals and lots of ambition.
Sierra Deplachett

Bellevue College

I would like to start by saying how incredibly honored I am to have been chosen to share my story. It has taken a tremendous amount of dedication and persistence to get to where I have in my life and not many have an understanding of it. I never thought that I would be one to go to college. Where I came from, it just wasn’t something that people did. I was born addicted to cocaine. The doctors told my parents that I had a 99.9 percent chance of becoming a drug addict. I was raised by a drug dealer, an alcoholic, and have been on my own since 14 years of age. Not one person in my immediate family has been to college. Growing up in an abusive atmosphere, impoverished and having to always look over my shoulder, survival was my only priority. Not only that, but I had an impoverished mentality that was branded into my spirit and I never considered myself to be the kind of person to fit into society in a normal fashion.

In ninth grade, I dropped out of high school to take on a job and pay my rent. I was pregnant at 16, with no family support and had legally emancipated myself. I spent the next 15 years of my life trying to reverse what had been instilled in me, with the knowledge that it wasn’t healthy, wanting more for my life than just the mess that you would see if you wrote my life out on paper. Through a series of life events and through the encouragement of people in my life, I found myself stepping into the unknown and enrolling at Bellevue College. My advisor was warm and encouraging and helped to simplify the enrollment process. I started school the next quarter, with the reminder to myself that nothing great is achieved while operating within your comfort zone. Dreams are turned into reality by taking risks and venturing into the unknown.

I love being in college, and I have since the first day I started. I feel truly blessed and lucky to have such an opportunity in front of me. There is nothing in the world that has given me more confidence and a sense of self than being in school has. I feel like a member of society. I have something to add to conversations. I have a future ahead of me, and my children do as well. I am in my fifth quarter with a 3.99 GPA and just accepted membership to Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. I have decided to go all the way — I won’t stop until I have my master’s, at the very least. Hard work and dedication pays off. Not just in the form of a paycheck or a high GPA, but even more importantly, in the form of self-worth, and that is priceless. I am turning things around for all of my future generations, and there is nothing more rewarding than that.
Heather Meyers  
Bellingham Technical College

When I first enrolled at Bellingham Technical College I was a high school dropout, a survivor of domestic violence, a former drug addict and a single mother. I was scared of learning and didn’t know if I could do it. However, I knew for a better future for myself and my children I had to do something.

There were two programs at BTC that interested me: welding and nursing. When I spoke to the women of my family they all sort of gasped at the welding choice and seemed to think I would be a wonderful nurse. With a nurse’s income I could support myself and my three girls.

I signed up for nursing classes and did fine with my general education but started to struggle with the medical prerequisites. Still not wanting to give up, I pushed through. I failed my first anatomy and physiology class. In my second attempt, I utilized all resources I could find to help me be successful as a student: tutoring, study groups and medical websites. I thought I was doing well but my final grade for the class was a B-. I was heartbroken and went into a state of depression because a B is needed to pass.

I felt like a failure to myself, my children and my wonderful instructors. After talking with advisors and friends, I decided I was obviously in the wrong program. The medical field wasn’t my passion and I wasn’t happy. I teach my girls not to give up, and I wondered what kind of example I would be if I did. I went to my oldest child, at her wise age of nine, and asked her if she would be disappointed in me if I wasn’t a nurse. She then looked at me and said, “Mom if it makes you this crazy, don’t do it.” Funny, why didn’t I think of that? I decided to switch to my first choice, which was welding.

I am now in my second year of welding and I am in love with it. Last year, seeing my GPA go from less than a 2.0 at one point to a 3.67 made me proud of myself. My daughters are proud of me and they enjoy saying, “My mama is a welder!” I enjoy not being so stressed and being able to breathe again. I now can be the mother that they deserve.

I find myself not dreading school. I read welding articles in my free time and study during vacation time from school. I enjoy visiting new places and glancing at buildings or objects that are made from metal and knowing that I can do that. I am excited for my future once I graduate from BTC. I have truly found my passion in life. I am also proud that I am an example to my daughters, that they truly can be anything they want to be.
Tabatha DeLong  
*Big Bend Community College*

I considered school as something that I legally HAD to do. There was no aspect of school that I enjoyed. More than 95 percent of the students at my elementary school were on free or reduced lunch.

I struggled in both math and reading. I tried working with tutors, but it didn’t seem to help. I graduated high school with no real idea of what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

I spent all summer applying for jobs after I graduated from Moses Lake High School in 2011, but I never got a call back. So my parents said I needed to go to college. My family didn’t have enough money to send me to a four-year university, so I started at BBCC with no idea what direction I was going.

I chose a degree in business simply because it was there. I was already a year into my degree when I learned that BBCC was reinstating its computer science degree. Over the years and in high school, I had always been the person that people called on to fix their computers. Whether it was minor errors or a sticky keyboard, I was always the one to be called. I had never thought much of it but I decided to enroll.

By the end of the quarter, I was hooked. The teachers were engaging and the idea of what I could actually do was overwhelming. Before I knew it, graduation was right around the corner. I graduated with an Associate Degree in Systems Administration in the spring of 2014.

One of the requirements I needed to complete in order to graduate was an internship. My computer science advisor found an internship opportunity with the BBCC Nursing Department that I found intriguing. I applied and was accepted. An internship that was only supposed to last one quarter lasted for three quarters. I spent the last year of my BBCC education as a student intern for the Nursing Department and loved every minute of it. Specifically, I helped implement the use of 3G Simulation Equipment.

Before I graduated with honors from the BBCC Computer Science Department, I was asked to continue working at BBCC. I applied for and received two Perkins replication grants so I could continue my work for another year. I was even sent to a Simulation User Networking Conference in 2014 through Title V funding to help me better understand the technology that I worked with every day.

Also, in September 2014, I began taking classes at Central Washington University. I am enrolled in 15 credits and hope to earn a bachelor’s degree in the Information Technology and Administrative Management (ITAM) program. I also hope to help BBCC organize and manage the simulation degree it is planning to offer in upcoming years.
My name is Crystaline Brown and I am currently a student at Cascadia College. I have almost completed my two-year associate degree and plan on applying to the University of Washington as well as other local universities to complete my four-year degree next year.

This is my first college experience. Although I graduated high school in 2005, I did not continue my education until 2012. This was a big step for me. College always seemed like too far out of reach since I am from a poor family and I am the first person in my family to go to college.

I experienced trauma and abuse as a child, which made me believe that life, in general, is just “too hard.” My father made daily life for my siblings and myself miserable and almost impossibly difficult. My siblings and I got justice when my father was sentenced and incarcerated to many years in jail, but I was an adult and the damage had already been done. I spent a couple precious years after graduating high school using drugs to cope with my emotional and mental anguish.

I isolated myself and hid my addictions from the rest of my family. When my life started to fall apart, I asked for help and my mother took me to a detox facility. I was 20 years old and weighed 88 pounds. I had to go to the emergency room a few times, but my health slowly improved after a couple of months. Looking back, I am so blessed to have made it out alive. I didn’t want to go back to that lifestyle, so I spent more than six years active in 12-step programs and adopted a new way of life that is about helping others when I can, as well as eating healthy, exercising and loving myself. Aside from getting clean from drugs, attending psychotherapy for two-and-a-half years totally changed my life and was the best decision I’ve ever made.

I always wanted to go back to school but was too afraid to apply since I had no money and neither did my family. With some support from friends, I applied for FAFSA and was awarded more than enough money to go to Cascadia! I didn’t know at the time that I was eligible for federal and state funding.

At Cascadia, I realized that my passion is in anthropology. All of my teachers have inspired me. During my first year, I got a 4.0 every quarter with presidential honors. My experience here at college has been amazing and I’ve proven to myself that I am capable of so much more than I imagined I would be when I was younger.

I am so grateful to everyone who has helped me along my journey and everyone at Cascadia. Today I feel excited about my future and know that, with a solid education, I can achieve all my goals.
Whenever there is an ounce of doubt, I always fall back on one word: “BELIEVE!”

Some of the obstacles I faced while growing up were being abused as an infant and overcoming learning deficiencies. Some of my life achievements were graduating high school, earning my Eagle Scout rank and becoming a positive role model for my community.

As a young kid, I struggled in school. I couldn’t read or write and had a hard time talking clearly. I was made fun of by my classmates, I was always picked on when it came to reading out loud and I was bullied to the point where I did not want to go to school. My classmates did not understand that my biological mother used drugs and alcohol when she was pregnant with me. At age seven, I was put into special education in order for me to learn.

I remember getting made fun of and listening to people saying that I will never be anybody. By my eighth-grade year and intensive learning and speech therapy, I was able to advance out of special education and learn with my peers. I was awarded for being the most inspirational football player for Adna High School. I ran for ASB president for my senior year and won. I also graduated high school and became an Eagle Scout.

Getting to college was a different story. I was scared, frustrated and didn’t know where to start. I was very nervous to go to the information desk at the college, but I did and met some really nice people that directed me to the right path. The person working at the information desk asked if I was a first generation student. I said yes and she directed me to the TRiO program where I met Lisa Preslan. Ms. Preslan was my counselor for my first year at college, and she relieved a lot of my stress by helping me choose classes, apply for financial aid and showing me all the opportunities that Centralia College has to offer.

My first quarter wasn’t the greatest, but I chanced upon a job opening with the student government. I applied and was hired as Senator for Executive Affairs. My advisor/mentor, Shelley Bannish, Director of Student Life, was one of the many people that have challenged me to do my best in my classes and at my job. I am currently serving my second term as the Associated Students of Centralia College president. I participate in several student-driven projects that directly benefit students.

One of my projects centered on improving our writing center by using student funds to purchase new tables and computers for student use. I believe without the help from the information desk from the first day of college, I would not be where I am at today.
My life began with many challenges: I was raised by drug dealers and had no confidence and very low self-esteem. When I was about 13, my mom said, “Pack your bags, we’re leaving.” She’d said that before, but this time we made it to the front door, where my stepdad stopped us. I remember my mother saying, “Why don’t you just kill her and get it over with?” I remember him putting his hands around my throat and then waking in my bedroom alone.

Graduating high school? No way! My choices came down to two options: leave and live or stay and die! I left, got married, then divorced, gave two children up for adoption and raised my oldest as a single parent.

In the summer of 2012, a friend wanted to go to the GED orientation at Clark. We attended and the facilitator told me, “You should already be in college.” Within two weeks I passed my GED! Two weeks later, I was enrolled in I-BEST.

Walking to class that first day was so difficult. Should I be here? Should I even try this college thing? I had an encouraging talk with myself, one that I would have throughout my college experience: I can do this; educated people believe in you; don’t listen to that negative voice, it’s kept you from too many dreams.

The first week was tough. When my instructors called my name I would get tongue-tied and sometimes cry. But my instructors didn’t give up on me, so how could I? They suggested I apply to be a peer mentor. They saw something in me that I did not! When I was hired, I began to believe in myself.

The following year I applied to serve on the Associated Students of Clark College (ASCC). I was honored to serve as president for the 2013-14 academic year. My classmates chose me as the Outstanding Penguin of the Year. When I was onstage looking out at the audience, it was the first time I realized I had had some sort of interaction with a majority of the people sitting there.

In June 2014, I earned my Associate of Applied Science in Business Administration and certificates in both Business Administration and Accounting Clerk. I am now earning my Associate of Arts-Transfer degree, which I should complete by September 2015. I hadn’t planned on pursuing a Bachelor of Arts, but that is what I am working toward now. And yes, I am still active at Clark. I have a position assisting in an English as a Second Language classroom and I am serving on four committees. I know that my voice, ideas and presence matter here.

All of this happened because I chose to believe a woman who said I could do it. My dream is to encourage, motivate and empower people for the rest of my life because I know firsthand the amazing potential that can wait hidden inside a frightened and shy person who needs someone to offer the right encouragement.
Dwayne Waller  
Clover Park Technical College

I am a middle-aged Air Force veteran and student enrolled in the Computer Networking and Information Systems Security Program at Clover Park Technical College. As a lead peer ambassador with the college’s Office of Student Involvement, I also assist other students on a peer-to-peer level. I expect to graduate at the end of winter quarter 2015 with a 3.0 GPA or better.

It’s the sincerity of the CPTC staff and faculty and their belief in my capabilities that helped me understand and grasp my studies. They have transformed me into a person who is confident in my skills. It’s because of their dedication and sincere commitment that I’m able to achieve my academic goals.

A few years ago, I was unexpectedly unemployed. I pounded the pavement for months and was unsuccessful in finding employment. My savings were depleted and I became homeless, sleeping in abandoned vehicles.

A friend of mine invited me to join a new program at The Rescue Mission in Tacoma called “Midway,” started by an Air Force veteran for homeless veterans that offered on-site counseling, WDVA regional networking, bus tickets and personal toiletries.

The Rescue Mission provided food, shelter and clothing and, in exchange, I provided 20 hours of volunteer service. It was there I learned of the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program, which offered up to 12 months of training assistance to unemployed veterans. Because of my background, education and experience, I felt the Information Technology field would be the best career choice to pursue.

I enrolled at CPTC nearly two years ago because of its proximity to Tacoma and highly-rated computer programs. The school directed me to necessary resources like the emergency grant, the bus ticket program and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches available in the student center. It was all invaluable to my success.

I felt compelled to help others in much the same way and became a lead peer ambassador. I hope to work with Veterans Affairs, CPTC and The Rescue Mission in an effort to help homeless teens and veterans receive an education/training for career placement.

I got on the road to success when I came to CPTC and every day gets better as I get closer to graduation.
I was serving in the Washington Army National Guard following my graduation from Connell High School in 2006. By the end of 2006, I was preparing to join my unit in Baghdad. The end of 2007 saw our unit coming home and we all began planning to return to work, find work, start school or to return to school.

I’d always been interested in learning about automotive applications but didn’t really know anything about vehicles or how they operated. I also didn’t have a career so I went to Columbia Basin College (CBC) where I met Monty Prather, who was an automotive instructor, and he talked to me about the automotive program. Later I met Sean Totten, another automotive instructor, who helped me through the tool purchasing part of the program. Monty and Sean were my primary instructors and advisors throughout the automotive program.

After a short time, I joined SkillsUSA, competed in several categories and went on to the National competition in Kansas City, Missouri, two years in a row. The first year, I went as a competitor in extemporaneous speech and the second year I was elected to attend as the Washington State SkillsUSA Voting Delegate and State President. When I began the automotive program, there were two women in the program, including me. When I graduated from the program, I was the only woman, and the only woman in the Tri-Cities to be working full-time as an automotive technician.

Shortly before I graduated from the CBC Automotive program, an advisor, Jason Schlegel, came to our class and talked to us about a new program at CBC. The new program was the Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) program in Applied Management. I had thought about higher education but wasn’t quite ready for it yet. Later, in 2012, after obtaining some career experience, I thought my career would probably benefit from earning a bachelor’s degree. My first thought was to return to CBC, largely due to the outstanding support by the faculty and staff at CBC, but I lived in Seattle. There was a change in my personal life and I found myself a single mother, jobless, homeless and back in Tri-Cities. It seemed like a good idea to return to CBC, begin a new career and earn my bachelor’s degree.

When I came back to the CBC campus to register for the BAS program, the staff recognized me and even knew my name before they’d touched their keyboard. When I met the BAS program advisor, I found that we already knew each other, too. My advisor was Jason Schlegel.

Coming back to CBC to earn my BAS in Applied Management has helped me become gainfully employed and I purchased my first home earlier this year. The BAS program staff has been instrumental in helping me plan for graduate school and I am on track to apply for graduate school next year.
A year after graduating from high school, I joined the U.S. Army. I left my hometown of Crestview, Florida, at 19 and spent four years in the U.S. Army as a Combat Engineer, including a 12-month deployment to Afghanistan, where I went on hundreds of missions and earned a Combat Action Badge.

I have found that veterans are very unique in character and have a great deal of versatility. They’re accustomed to uniform policies and structure but can adapt to dynamic situations. They tend to possess leadership and teamwork skills and are committed to the organizations to which they belong.

After my time in the military, I sought to utilize these underlying traits and skills that I — as a veteran — comprised. I had worked in construction since the age of 14 in some capacity or another; however, I had sustained combat injuries resulting in hearing loss and back pain that I felt prevented me from working in this capacity again.

I decided to take advantage of my educational benefits and enroll in the Energy Management program at Edmonds Community College to learn skills that would augment my construction knowledge and lead to a new career. The first year at Edmonds was a big reality check for me. In addition to my physical injuries, I also suffered from PTSD and other invisible wounds. Rather than focus on my injuries, I sought the help I needed and looked for opportunities to lead and make a difference. I served as secretary for the Energy Management Student Association, president of the Triton Student Veterans Association, and vice president of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. Additionally, I was the first community college student to serve on the National Student Veterans Council.

Although receiving veteran’s educational benefits, I found that — because the benefits lapse during academic breaks — money was very tight. I had to budget carefully every quarter so that my dollars would stretch to cover my expenses during breaks. When asked to participate in the Boots to Books and Beyond campaign, I was happy to volunteer. I felt that I had both experience and insight that could improve the student veteran experience at Edmonds. Through my campaign work, I helped the college improve its Veterans Resource Center and encouraged the college to implement gap funding to support student veterans financially during breaks between quarters. I knew that this posed a significant financial challenge for all student veterans.

I graduated with an Associate in Applied Science-Transfer degree in Energy Management and a certificate in project management and I work as a project engineer at McKinstry. I plan to earn my Bachelor of Arts and, ultimately, a Master of Business Administration in Leadership from the University of Washington.

When I first set foot on campus, I never imagined I’d have such a positive experience. Edmonds Community College not only gave me stability and camaraderie, it gave me an outlet where I could serve, lead and make an impact.
Jerry Amesquita was laid off from his Boeing production line job in 2009. He collected unemployment and sought work while the recession continued. Over the next three years, he exhausted his unemployment, sold all his material assets, worked odd jobs and really began to sink into an economic hole.

In 2011, Jerry had a very hard year. He and his wife divorced and she moved to Texas with their 13-year-old son. In a short time, she contacted Jerry and told him she did not want custody of their son after all, so Jerry found a way to bring him back to Everett. The two of them struggled with homelessness and hunger, reaching out to friends for temporary shelter. Finally, a friend suggested he go to DSHS to see if he qualified for assistance. Jerry did not want to do this, but seeing his teenage son go hungry and deal with the stresses of extreme poverty made Jerry swallow his pride and reach out.

On the way to DSHS, he passed the reader board for Everett Community College, which was promoting the upcoming school quarter and, in particular, the new Composites Program in the Advanced Manufacturing Education and Training division. This was something he felt he would be good at and could be hired to do. With only days before school would start, he saw a case manager at DSHS and explained his circumstances and hope to enter the training program.

He enrolled in the WorkFirst program and they set up a meeting with the EvCC’s WorkFirst staff for the following week. When Jerry left the office, he decided he could not wait until the next week. Instead, he went right up the hill to the college and caught the program liaison just as she was leaving for the day. She turned around and helped him with a plan to begin classes on the following Monday in the composites program.

Jerry soared in the program! He attended for two intense quarters — 40 hours per week in training and education. He finished the program with a 4.0 GPA.

Jerry has just been hired by Boeing as an Experimental Composites Fabricator with a starting wage of $15.75 per hour and scheduled raises every six months. There is a strong probability that he will be moving into work on top secret projects since he now has specialized skills and has passed all high level background checks. This work pays $34.82 per hour as an apprentice working with a composite engineer.

These events have truly transformed Jerry’s life.
Deidre Pearson
Grays Harbor College

I dropped out of high school in the 10th-grade. I was a teen parent at 17 and again at 19. I was in a domestic violence relationship with the father of my daughters until the age of 22. During that time, I completed cosmetology school and began supporting my daughters as a single mother.

After leaving my first relationship, I started dating a man who had two children of his own. We married, bought a house in Vancouver, Washington, and raised our four children together. I became a stay-at-home mom and used my time to volunteer as a Court Appointed Special Advocate in Clark County. During this time, I had a son and felt that my life was calm and stable.

When my son was very young, I learned that my husband had been sexually assaulting members of my family. Charges were filed and my ex-husband is currently serving a 35-year sentence for these crimes.

My family has struggled with poverty and hardship ever since. We stayed in Vancouver but we had to move into a converted attic. I sold many possessions to survive. After the trial, I began working as a cosmetologist again. It was difficult to work long hours and still raise three children with no child support coming in. Eventually, I also took in a family member when she was three years old due to her mother’s problems with substance.

I went back to school and earned my license in cosmetology instruction and began working as a teacher at a beauty school. It was much easier, but still offered low pay and no benefits. I was laid off in 2011 right before Christmas.

Not knowing what else to do, I moved back to Hoquiam and began to draw unemployment. The job market is worse than in Clark County, but at least the rent is much cheaper and it seemed like the best choice. While attending a mandatory class at the WorkSource office, I was given a chance to go back to school and I was thrilled.

I have loved being a student, and I am so grateful for this chance to not only escape poverty, but to be in the conversations and research the topics I am engaged in. I feel so privileged to have access to this environment. It would mean so much to be able to help teenagers though my work. I love to think about helping young people overcome obstacles and become successful.
As a young boy, I was shy but did well in school. As I grew into adolescence, I entered the seventh-grade and was introduced to marijuana. At first it started out as a casual activity but soon led to drinking alcohol. After a while, the frequency of my usage increased. Some friends and I would skip class and drink or get high on a regular basis, to the point where it seemed I spent more time away from school using drugs than in class. Deep down, I knew I was doing the wrong thing.

I was a senior in high school when I realized I did not have enough credits to graduate with my class. So I made a hard decision and I simply just walked away, leaving me to feel the most terribly I had ever felt. I was one of the only kids in my class that did not graduate. I was arrested shortly after leaving high school for being a minor in possession of alcohol.

I continued to use drugs and drink alcohol for more than a decade while bouncing around from job to job; working but without any lasting fulfillment. I moved around a lot and continued to party my life away without ever building something I could call my own.

Eight long years passed by before I finally got my GED. It was a proud moment and a huge milestone for me and for my education but the depressing truth was that I was still a user. I struggled with my relationships and there was something always holding me back from reaching my full potential. In my darkest moments, I have slept on park benches and even stayed in two different homeless shelters. By the age of 21, I had taken heroin intravenously.

Finally, after being imprisoned by my poor decision making, I had enough of my life. I was sick of lying, cheating and stealing. I wanted to be a man and live with some dignity. I have been drug free for six years and have worked diligently to turn my life around. Currently, I am enrolled in a community college and working on my courses. I am well over the halfway point in my field of study, and by this summer I should be graduating with an Associate of Applied Science in Automotive Technology.

I have never been so proud of my personal and professional achievements in my life. I am well on my way to fulfilling the goals I have set for myself, which is to be a self-sufficient person who can stand on his own two feet. When I graduate from college, I plan to obtain the eight needed ASE Certifications required to become an ASE Certified Master Technician.

I am finally on a path that is taking me in the right direction. I have no intention of going back to my previous life but only to keep focused on my promising future.
Statistics show that 75 percent of African Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 are strung out on drugs, heavily into gangs or incarcerated.

I knew that going back to school would allow me to be part of the 25 percent that are willing to be successful. September 21, 2012, is the day that changed my life forever: I received my GED and was accepted to Highline College the following year.

After I had dropped out of high school in 2009, my cumulative GPA was 1.3. After attending Highline for the past 18 months, my cumulative GPA is now 3.2. Without reliable transportation and a steady roof over my head, I have still managed to keep my GPA at 3.2.

With the help of some of the staff members here — Professor Darrell Bryce, Moses Woody, Tracey Brigham, Susan Landgraf, Teela Foxworth and my mentor, Miss Elizabeth Word — I have gained knowledge on the great truths of life: How to use my resources efficiently, communication is key, time management, and what profession will be perfect for my future endeavors.

Highline is the best thing that has ever happened in my life. I thought that being homeless would be hindering, but being at Highline has taught me that I can overcome any barrier in life. My reformed philosophy on life is that, if your desires to succeed are greater than your fear of failure, then everything is possibly for one who believes.

I truly thank you for this opportunity.
I was born and raised in Poland and came from a highly educated family. After the collapse of communism and with the transformation of systems to capitalism, very difficult times followed.

I moved to the U.S. to pursue a better life. I started my own family and began taking ESL classes at Edmonds Community College. I then transferred to Lake Washington Institute of Technology in 2002 to pursue a career in dental assisting. This proved extremely challenging for me as English was my second language. I graduated with a certificate from the Dental Assisting program with a 3.8 GPA and, in 2003, I began my career as a dental assistant. Unfortunately, in 2008, my husband and I separated. These circumstances played a humongous part in my decision to take another step in continuing my education.

In 2008, I returned to LWTech and began taking prerequisites for the Dental Hygiene program. I was juggling full-time work, school and my children for the next four years. During this time, I met my present husband. We combined our families and together we shared in the responsibilities of raising our children.

In 2012, I was accepted into the Dental Hygiene program at LWTech. It was the biggest challenge of my life and I had to quit working for the next two years. During the second quarter of my hygiene program, I found out that I was pregnant. This was bittersweet news because of the extremely rigorous and demanding hygiene program. I was very dedicated to my studies and did not miss any school up until my daughter was born. I took only one week off from school to recover following delivery of my daughter. I completed the Dental Hygiene program in 2014.

Today I am a registered dental hygienist. I passed seven dental hygiene board exams and graduated with a 3.69 GPA and cum laude award. Through my education at LWTech, I obtained an Associate in Applied Science-Transfer degree in Dental Assisting and an Associate in Applied Science-Transfer degree in Dental Hygiene. I consider myself a great example and role model for my children, who were present and witnessed all of my struggles and efforts in order to achieve my dream. I am proof that if you desire something, you can achieve it by working hard, despite obstacles.

I realized my plans and I now have a better life. Today, I can provide for my children and also inspire them in accomplishing their goals. They understand the value of education, not only do they know how much time and dedication is involved, but also how big of an impact it makes in transforming people’s lives for the better. I am thankful for all of the programs at LWTech: the Opportunity Grant, Basic Food Employment and Training, and the Financial Aid department and its coordinators, Adria Sneed and Katie Viola. They were always eager to offer their help and advice. Without their support, I wouldn’t be where I am today.
The easiest way to let you know why I feel Lower Columbia College has changed my life so dramatically would be to start at the beginning.

My father went to prison when I was five years old. That was the start to the first change in my life. Within a couple of years, my mother remarried. Life was hard as my stepfather was an abusive drug addict who didn’t shy away from beating my mother right in front of me.

I always felt guilty when my parents were fighting and never quite knew what to do to help, even though, looking back I know it was best to stay out of the way. This continued until I turned 11 when, during a visit with my dad, I was told that my mother had passed away. That was the hardest day of my life and I was in shock that I would never see her again.

My father was in no financial or emotional shape to take on responsibility for me so he left me with my aunt. I had only met her once the previous week for a short time and then the following week I moved in. It was all so much to take in and it seemed very surreal.

I moved out with my boyfriend at the age of 17 and we married and had our first daughter within that first year. Our marriage struggled over the years — we had four beautiful daughters — but problems started to surface. He admitted to having a methamphetamine addiction and went into treatment, but by that point there was too much distrust to continue with the relationship and we eventually separated.

I started attending Lower Columbia College and it has been the best thing I have ever done for myself. I continued on and off with school over the years and finished my prerequisites and was accepted into the nursing program, from which I will graduate in March 2015.

While at Lower Columbia College, I have acquired confidence that I never thought possible. I am a member of Phi Theta Kappa and club president of Global Medical Brigades. I have traveled two different times, once to Honduras and this last summer to Nicaragua on Medical Brigades, which I’ve discovered I have a passion for. I look forward to my life as a registered nurse and being able to help others.

My education will not end here because I plan on continuing for my bachelor’s degree. Life has not been easy but I know that I can work hard and achieve any of my goals. The advising and nursing staff has helped with my self-esteem and confidence and I believe that I am capable of achieving anything, which I wasn’t 100 percent sure about when I started this journey.

My success has everything to do with coming to Lower Columbia College and being accepted for who I am. I know I am in charge of my future.
A career in healthcare is the perfect medium to merge my logical and curious mind with my compassionate and service-oriented heart and personality. I will use my education and service orientation to benefit society, one individual, family or community at a time. I will promote optimal health through education, health screening activities and comprehensive nursing care for the treatment, rehabilitation and restoration of health. It is my sincere honor to be of service to patients and provide excellent, comprehensive and compassionate care in support of their treatment and healing and sometimes end-of-life processes. I understand I may be a significant component of my patients’ support system.

I have achieved and maintained a high grade-point average through hard work, perseverance, resilience and commitment. I have faced significant health and financial challenges and have overcome them through a “failure is not an option” attitude, as follows:

- In 2001, I took care of my mother in home hospice, as she was terminally ill with anaplastic, papillary and follicular metastatic thyroid cancer. The hospice nurse was exceptional. She provided me and my family with education and information that helped us navigate through unfathomable grief and fear. Her compassion, knowledge, skill and support enabled us to make very difficult decisions and manage my mother’s dying process by maintaining her comfort and dignity. I learned firsthand what an incredible and important role nurses fulfill in people’s lives.

- In 2009, I almost lost my 20-year-old daughter to sepsis as a result of a rare condition. Her phenomenal healthcare team saved her. I lost my job of nearly five years, as well.

- In March 2011, while I was completing my nursing prerequisites, I was diagnosed with papillary thyroid cancer and underwent surgery, radioactive iodine treatment and stabilization on thyroid replacement medicine. I had to ask for an incomplete in algebra so that I could finish my coursework and did so with a 4.0 GPA.

- While taking nursing prerequisites at Olympic College, I was homeless for five months, living out of my van.

I come from a family that strongly supports higher education. In honor of my mother, following her death I asked that donations be made in her memory to fund a scholarship through Central Washington University’s Foundation office. She was a respected administrator at CWU for 30 years and the first woman in her family to obtain a four-year degree. I will be the second. I have served as a student volunteer with the Olympic College Foundation for three fundraising events and was a speaker in support of the Fund-A-Need for textbooks for students. I understand firsthand the tremendous importance and impact these programs and funding have on students, the community and the greater good.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to share my story, goals, and aspirations with you. Olympic College has transformed my life and the lives of my daughter and grandchildren!
At 15 years old, I found myself homeless, pregnant and with little hope of ever having a successful career or even a high school diploma. A few short years later, I had a second child and was left to raise my girls on my own. I waited tables to pay the bills, strove to be a role model for my daughters and worked every day to ensure that they would have a future that was much brighter than mine. The struggles I faced as a young, single mother were never easy, but they have shaped the woman I am today and it has been a hope and determination for a better future that has driven me to persevere.

In my late 20s, my life completely changed. I met my current partner, had another child and, as my life became more stable, I worked up the courage to go back to school. I had no idea what to expect as I hadn’t even sat in a classroom since I was a young girl. Just the thought of attempting to get my GED was terrifying, but what I found at Peninsula College was a complete surprise.

Surrounded by incredibly supportive professors and staff and encouraged by my wonderful family, I found myself not only excelling in my classes but also enjoying them. After receiving my GED, I started to explore where my interests might lead me, and I was shocked to find within me a love and talent for mathematics. While I had originally intended on getting a nursing degree, I found myself traveling down a new path I could have never imagined — engineering, math and environmental science were the subjects that called out to me.

For the past few years, I have become a part of a community that has done so much for me. Incredible professors and administrators have become my allies as I pursue my goals and they are constantly looking for ways to provide me with opportunities and encouragement. I serve as president of PC’s chapter of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and I work as a teaching assistant and math tutor for the college. Donors from the college and community have generously invested in my future by providing financial support to help me get through school, while other students have inspired me and become a part of my life.

Returning to school was one of the most difficult decisions I ever made. I had to examine myself and ask if I truly trusted my determination and work ethic to provide me with what I needed to get my degree and create endless opportunities for myself. What I found is that I am only a fraction of the equation. With the help of my family, friends and the staff at Peninsula College, I now have confidence to be someone for my girls to look up to and I can have a positive impact on the world.

Grace Tulsi Marshall
Peninsula College

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At age 46, I came to Pierce College to transform my life. For more than 20 years, I was homeless off and on, addicted to drugs and doing whatever I could to find food.

One day I was selling crack cocaine in California when I nearly got beat to death, so badly that my own father could hardly recognize me. After waking up and realizing I needed to clean up my life, I voluntarily admitted myself into a treatment center to recover for the next 18 months.

Once I achieved sobriety, I found work in road construction, and I also started my acting career. One day on the job, I was injured while shoveling extruded curb mix off the back of a truck and herniated a disk in my back, which required surgery. This recovery process led me to Pierce College to train under a worker’s compensation benefit.

I graduated from Pierce College in 2014 with a 3.2 GPA. During my time at Pierce, I was inspired by my professors to write, produce and act in a short film. My film was selected to be featured in the largest independent film festival in Hollywood (HollyShorts Film Festival).

I started a non-profit organization called “Right Now Today!” which is dedicated to helping people understand how each person can help others in need. Our latest initiative is to create “bags of love” to hand out to homeless people in need of personal care items such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, socks and other necessary items.

I can now be seen in television commercials and television shows such as Grimm and Leverage. I continue to grow as a contributing member of society because of my experience at Pierce College, which has helped me to learn how to sell my abilities to potential employers in the film industry and other non-profit organizations needing my talents.

I credit my professors and the experience at Pierce College for giving me the courage, strength and knowledge to move forward in life to achieve my aspirations. Going back to school at Pierce has truly helped me stay grounded and develop the skills I need to prosper in life.

I can’t change what I’ve done in the past, but thanks to the people I’ve met at Pierce, I can focus on what I will do next. I’ve come to realize that you can do anything in life if you surround yourself with the right people.
“You’re wasting time when you should be looking for work. You’re not smart enough with math to get a degree.” Looking back at a blog entry from July 19, 2013, it dawned on me how much change there has been since I pushed myself to take the assessment test for college.

I was recently asked to complete an assignment that included one happy childhood memory. All the tasks were completed except the happy childhood memory because I could not think of one. Instead, I remembered being physically punished because I could not memorize math, losing my adored stepfather the year I was scheduled to graduate and losing my mentor in choir to another school district the same year. I lost any motivation and remaining belief in myself and failed to graduate high school by one credit.

In early 2003, I was diagnosed with aggressive, recurring malignant myxofibrosarcoma, with dismal 50 percent survivability statistics. In 2004, I lost my mother to a scuba diving incident. Any hope of a higher education became insignificant and unattainable as I battled one day at a time.

My metamorphosis began early June 2013. Unemployed for two years with only a GED, I was a frustrated telecommunications network engineer and angry about so many things. Depressed more than I was happy, I knew something had to change. Wanting to take a class — any class — while waving my unemployment paperwork at the poor lady in registration, she suggested that the first class should be in the PierceWorks! Program. The first day of class I was resentful and doubtful that it would have much efficacy except to help me shine my resume, but I sat through it wanting the “easy” 20 credits. It was anything but easy, and my journey began.

My first Goliath on this journey was walking on campus to take the COMPASS test. I sat in the Fort Steilacoom parking lot hyperventilating and wanted to run away and never return. My next obstacle was algebra. As a result of my challenges with memorization, I cried my first week, trembling in fear. I conquered them both. Then I was required to take English 101, a perceived easy “A” class. It was shocking to receive a below average grade on my first thesis paper. I asked myself, “What is the purpose of this, and why was I never taught this in grade school?” I mastered that as well.

While pondering these emotions, it has dawned on me that Pierce College has been my homecoming with a changed attitude and a different self-communication. My college experience has transformed me through a journey of conquering many fears and finding my dependable strengths. I now challenge my old beliefs.

I’ve encountered an amazing group of staff members that encourage me to ask questions with critical thought and to focus on success in my endeavors. I have learned to spread my new wings and soar. I am home.
My journey for education started in a prison segregation unit. Being in the “hole,” I realized that the sensory deprivation was causing a form of brain damage. I noticed it in others as well. The longer they were segregated from the general population, the more withdrawn and violent they became. What was going on was that my brain and their brains were atrophying. The brain, like muscles, is “use it or lose it.” If they are not being used, the body strips them away to allocate those resources for other more pressing concerns, those concerns being energy from the fat and protein they provide. This, in combination with a poor diet, can make a nice person angry and an angry person violent.

The path I chose was to spend the rest of my 21 years in prison educating myself. Instead of the prison being a punishment, it became a university where I could study constantly. I involved myself in Victims Impact Groups, where the victims of violent crimes came in and gave us firsthand accounts of the thoughts and emotions they had or have surrounding the crime(s) against them. I began to feel more for others. My brain was growing. I was a member of the Restorative Justice Group and we brainstormed on ways to restore victims and offenders to a healthy new normal.

This is why I chose RTC. In prison I was not able to pursue my formal education. I am mostly self-taught. When I was released in 2012, I set out to get my formal education. I chose to start at RTC to earn an Associate of Arts degree and planned to then transfer to DigiPen Institute of Technology. However, with the new arrival of the bachelor’s program in Computer Science at RTC, as well as the excellent training I am getting, I am choosing to stay here.

RTC has changed my life. In addition to excelling, with a 3.97 GPA in the classroom, I also serve as a student leader. Through this service, I have become more engaging with others and I am thinking in different ways.

My eventual goal is to start my own software company programming and designing new vehicle interfaces. RTC has enabled me to see the potential for this market through the exposure I have had with their diverse programs and students. I have learned that there are many facets to innovations. And throughout my career, I will help others in an equitable way, paying forward the support I received.

I began my quest seeking education. I am now trying to become an artist of life. That is, to live my life as artfully as possible, treating everyone and everything I come in contact with to the best of my ability. Being empathic and seeking to understand are the tools I use to accomplish this.
Bryce Kasota  
*Seattle Central College*

There I was, in the physician’s office, hiding my bruises and bite marks, hearing those shocking words: “Your pregnancy test is positive.” My original shock turned into an overwhelming state of fear. I was only 16 years old, with no money and a high school drop-out. However, sitting in that office, hearing the little beating of my daughter’s heart was the most changing moment of my life, more powerful than I could ever imagine. This little life inside of me sparked a deep love and special place within my soul.

Every person in my life insisted I get an abortion, but I just couldn’t do it. I finally got the strength to leave my abusive boyfriend of three years. I knew my path ahead as a new single mother wasn’t going to be easy. However, I decided instead of letting this bring me down, I was going to turn my life into something positive and create a wonderful life for my daughter. I got myself back into school and found as many resources as I could to grow as a parent and person.

Seattle Central College has changed my life and sparked a deep love for learning. I started at the very lowest college level courses with no confidence. I was told growing up, “You just weren’t given the smart genes,” and I didn’t think I had the intelligence to pass even a single class. However, with the guidance of my instructors and tutors, I quickly found out my potential was greater than I ever knew. I started getting 4.0s in all my classes. The support I’ve received from the college has been life changing. I’ve had to struggle working full-time during the nights just to pay bills and childcare then go to school during the day, desperate for sleep. I’ve been in the cold and dark several times with no heat, not able to pay the electricity bill. The different programs, such as BFET and childcare, have made it possible for me to continue school. My instructors have helped me gain the confidence and knowledge I need to succeed and I’m now only two quarters away from graduating the nursing program with honors.

Every morning I look at my daughter and see incredible potential in her eyes. Her caring heart and unbelievable intelligence strikes my curiosity for her future. Whatever path my daughter chooses in life, I know it will be a positive one. I’m making sure of that every day. With my own hard work and education I’m creating a path she’ll feel confident to walk along. I keep a positive attitude through it all, but it definitely gets hard at times.

My dedication is stronger than ever to accomplish my goals and dreams of becoming a nurse. I plan on working with underprivileged, struggling populations such as the American Indian communities, teen parents and homeless youth as a public health nurse and eventually a nurse practitioner. I believe providing care to others is an honor, a privilege and a blessing. I am very grateful I have this opportunity to be building a career of giving back to others in my community.
I am four quarters away from completing my General Business Associate of Applied Science degree, which is an accomplishment I never could have imagined for myself several years ago. Going back to college has transformed my life in so many ways—it’s hard to name them all.

I have overcome many challenges in my short life, including: having my formal education interrupted by being a witness in a murder trial at the age of 17, dealing with related symptoms of PTSD, becoming pregnant at 21, then getting married and consequently divorced two years later and becoming a single parent. Despite these experiences, I have always managed to find a silver lining and persevere against all odds. This trend has continued through my college experience as well.

After my divorce, I realized the smartest thing I could do for myself and for my son was to go back to school and get started on a career path. This is not as simple as it may sound, however. Being a single mother has its challenges. One of the most difficult aspects is our financial situation. I don’t have the luxury of a two-person income, so I have to rely on programs like food stamps for food; The Seattle Milk Fund for childcare expenses; and financial aid grants and loans for books, classes and transportation costs. I’m also an Education Fund Scholarship recipient at my college, which helps offset some costs. Even with this assistance, I am always just barely scraping by.

When I was chosen to receive an Education Fund Scholarship last year, I felt so much relief and gratitude, I have a hard time expressing it in words. Suddenly the financial burden was lifted completely and I was free to put all of my energy into my education. This has made such a difference for me. I am now a proud member of Phi Theta Kappa, the national honors society. I just recently received letters from several Ivy League universities expressing interest in me as a potential student in their undergraduate and graduate programs. I have a 3.8 cumulative GPA, which is absolutely incredible to me considering I ended high school with a 1.9. I tell you these things not to boast, but because I credit my success to the fact that I have such an amazing support system at my school. Without the help of my teachers, advisors and numerous invaluable resources on campus, I wouldn’t be in a position to crow about these achievements.

I have come to the conclusion that anyone with a dream can succeed. It is simply a matter of believing in yourself and surrounding yourself with people who believe in you. I am so glad that I chose to go back to school, because it has given me the opportunity to pursue my dreams, succeed beyond my wildest expectations and create a brighter future for myself and my son.
I graduated from high school in 2008 in Iran. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the opportunity to continue my higher education because I am of the Baha’i faith, and Baha’is are not allowed to attend college.

For the sake of education and due to financial limitations, my family and I decided to go to Turkey and seek refuge from the United Nations to come to America. While waiting for the process to be finished, we were not allowed to work as refugees. Consequently, we drained our savings. To lessen the burden on those around us, my friends and I formed a group to teach English to refugees in order to help them communicate in their destination countries. Teaching English was a great experience and motivated me to improve my own English.

Finally, after two years of waiting, I was accepted to America. I came to the United States — two months before my family — in October 2012. Alone, I braved the uncertainties of a complex new environment. All I knew was to pursue my dreams in the land of opportunities.

I started going to college in the spring 2013. I was excited for the first quarter because I was back to school after almost five years. However, I still faced obstacles balancing work and school simultaneously. During this time, I was working a part-time job in retail and also serving the campus as a tutor for the TRiO program. In the TRiO program, which helps underrepresented students in higher education, I tutored students in math and science courses.

Despite these obstacles, I was able to move forward with South’s help. Not only did South give me the support and encouragement I needed to persevere during this time, they also gave me important academic help. The tutoring centers helped me get through the challenges from my advanced math and science courses. Financially, I received numerous scholarships from South’s Foundation. This gave me the courage and financial resources I needed to be a successful student.

The next step in my education will be studying at the University of Washington (UW) as a Martin Achievement Scholar, which is awarded to the top community college students in the Puget Sound. This would not have been possible without South’s guidance and personal attention during the application process. With this full-ride scholarship, I’m getting closer to achieving my dreams in the world of science. Currently, I have chosen to major in Environmental Health. Here at South, I’m a part of the Ready! Set! Transfer! (RST) Academy, which has fueled my passion for science and will ease the transition to UW.

With the help of South, I have taken the pain of my life and used it as strength to confront the obstacles of the future. I am thankful to South’s staff and faculty for their support, which has brought me closer to realizing my dreams. I am thankful to everyone at South. Their support encourages me to work harder toward reaching my goals.
“Oh! Look at her. She is black.” This is what I heard everywhere I went, during my entire childhood.

My name is Linh Thi Nguyen. I was born biracial in Vietnam. My grandfather was an African American soldier, so my father and his children have a very dark skin color. We lived in a country where people’s skin color is yellow. We were different than others and suffered discrimination.

In 1996, my father decided to leave for America. We were poor, so my family couldn’t come to the United States at the same time. My mother, my sisters and I had to stay behind in Vietnam. After 11 years, my family was finally reunited in the United States.

I came to the US in 2007 with no English language skills. However, I was glad to start a new life. I dreamed of going to college but I had to finish high school first. I was admitted into Mountlake Terrace High School as a sophomore at the age of 17. I had already finished my junior year in Vietnam but I needed to learn English. It was hard to be the oldest in class.

After I graduated high school in 2010, I applied to Shoreline Community College (SCC) because I had heard that SCC is a great school for any major, especially nursing — my passion and my career goal. SCC provides many very helpful resources for students to get through their hardships. I was in the ESL program for my first six quarters to learn English and communication skills to prepare for higher level classes. I also frequently used the Reading and Writing Studio, Math Learning Center, Biology and Chemistry Center, and my advisor to support my courses. I finished all my prerequisites at SCC in the spring of 2014.

I have applied for the Nursing program at SCC and am waiting for the results. If I get accepted, I will go back to school in the winter of 2015. When I finish the Nursing program, I will be the first person in my family to graduate from college.

The financial resources that the college offered, such as reduced fees for ESL classes, financial aid and work-study, were very important for me to stay in school. I have really valued my work-study job on campus working with students with disabilities in the Community Integration and Employment Program (CIEP) in the Office of Special Services. This program serves students that have significant challenges and barriers to overcome.

Going to SCC, succeeding in my classes and seeing other students overcome their barriers has made me grow every day and given me confidence in my abilities and value as a person.

I have found my dream and Shoreline Community College has been a life-changing staircase and door for me to achieve my dream.
Born in Mexicali, Mexico, I come from a family of agricultural workers who have spent more than three generations working in the fields. With only elementary school educations, my parents saw how difficult that life was so, in 1997, they moved us to Mount Vernon, Washington. My dad knew our lives would be different — no more field work for him and college educations for us.

When we moved, I was nine years old, didn't speak English and was ignored in class. I learned English within a year and became one of the best writers in honor's and AP English classes. In my freshman year, my parents divorced and my mother became too ill to take care of us. My sister and I moved in with my dad, slept in one tiny room with a stove, a small refrigerator and a bathroom. That didn't bother me — I used it as motivation to advance in life.

Since my parents had only graduated from elementary school, I never thought of college until high school. I had no vision of what that meant. During my senior year, I had my first son. When I held him, I was motivated to provide him with everything I had missed in my life. I set my goal to be an example for him and to make sure he knew he had a mother who would stop at nothing to accomplish her goals.

During AVID senior night, a Skagit Valley College (SVC) counselor heard my speech and saw a poster I had created about my college aspirations. She became interested in my story. She believed in me and looked beyond the fact that I was a young mom. She not only offered kindness but also validation. The counselor guided me and connected me to SVC staff. They received me with open arms and provided me with encouragement and additional financial opportunities to begin college. Without their help, I wouldn't have been able to go to college.

I was also awarded a Champions of Diversity scholarship from SVC’s Multicultural Student Services. This scholarship recognizes superior contributions to diversity, helped alleviate the financial burden and gave me support from my Latino community. Now I knew I had the means to attend SVC. Because of these experiences, I knew I was in the right place.

Not only did I graduate from SVC, I also earned my bachelor's in 2012 and my master's in 2014 from Western Washington University. SVC supported me with scholarships for my master's and helped me grow as a professional, first accepting me as an intern in their counseling department and a year later hiring me as an educational planner in Multicultural Student Services.

My experiences at Skagit Valley College were the foundation to the success I have had over the years. The relationships I have built and the support I continue to receive have motivated me to continue with my higher education and pursue a Doctorate in Leadership, Education and Administration so that one day I will be a college president.
Over the last couple years, my life has changed drastically. I am not sure where I am headed, but I know I am heading in the right direction. At times I feel lost and confused, but I hold my head up high and continue moving. College is just one of the many steps I have to take to get where I am going.

I have always loved the medical field. Being a registered nurse is something I have dreamed of doing for a long time. South Puget Sound Community College (SPSCC) has helped me be able to grasp that dream.

SPSCC has given me the opportunity to keep going to school. I am receiving state assistance, and for me to get that assistance and go to school, I need to be working. SPSCC offered me a work-study position and now I am working in the Career Services center. I still struggle making ends meet, but not nearly as much as if I was not in the work-study program. During this last summer, I was offered a temporary position in the Financial Aid department at SPSCC. I was so thankful for that position. If I did not have a job while going to school, I would have lost my state assistance and would be struggling to provide for my family. SPSCC has offered me so many resources to help me get through college.

I have extensively utilized the science and math tutoring lab. If I did not have those tutors, I do not think I would have maintained my current GPA of 3.79. This school wants to see you succeed.

I am proud of all the obstacles I have overcome. I got out of an abusive relationship and I am raising four kids by myself. To continue on my journey, I need to get my degree in nursing and I can do all the things I enjoy. I am so thankful to have such a wonderful place to be going to school.

SPSCC has made a big impact on me. I know I have a lot of work ahead of me and I am really busy, but I am focused. My world is forever changing.
Darci K. Saucedo  
*Spokane Community College*

Along with being a full-time student for the past two years, I am a father to a darling six-year-old little girl and a husband to my wife, who is also a full-time student at SCC. While we’re in school, my daughter attends Trent Elementary as a first-grader. She seems to be enjoying school as much as I am.

I receive no financial assistance from my parents, since I am the third oldest of seven children. Throughout high school, I had to work in apple orchards and grocery stores to get money for my personal desires and needs. I am now proud to say that, out of five brothers and one sister, I am the first to attend college. I go back to my hometown, Brewster, every summer to work as a forklift driver at Gebber’s Farms to get some money to help my family, and I get through the school year with my salary earned over the summer.

I attend college every day and always make the best of it. I enjoy going to my professors and tutors for help when needed. I’m enrolled in the Network design and Administration program at SCC. I truly enjoy working with technology. My Network instructor, Laura Kier, has helped me tremendously.

Before I started college, I didn’t know how to fix a computer or talk to people because I was really a shy person. Now I am proud to say that I can build, design and troubleshoot enterprise level computer networks and now I can speak to a multitude of people without being afraid of public speaking.

I am proud to say that I was one of 10 students from the United States and Canada selected for a special trip to San Francisco, California, to build a wireless network for 25,000 attendees. Cisco Live 2014 was the name of the event where I helped Cisco Network engineers deploy a massive computer network infrastructure.

I am aware I need to continue to work hard and manage my time wisely if I want to achieve my dream. My dream is to work of Amazon or Google as a network engineer. I know success means less time with my family; the sacrifices will be for the best for all of us. Obtaining my goal will be challenging but I have or will have to take a couple of steps to help achieve it.

Being a father has pushed me to pursue my dream to further my education. I know receiving my education will allow me to provide my daughter with the tools she will need to pursue her education, passions and dreams in life one day just as I have been able to do.

I am confident I can accomplish my dream of finishing college and make my family proud as long as I continue to work hard and persevere through all the challenges of life.
I was born to a young mother and a non-existent father. As a child, I was molested by my mother’s numerous boyfriends. I was eventually put in one nightmare foster home after another and it was then that I became a kid in the system. My mother would gain custody of me for short periods and then return me to the vicious cycle of abuse.

As an adolescent, I gained an instinct to survive and do my best to grow up and be OK. As a child in the system, I prayed for a way out. At the age of 11, while I had been in numerous foster homes — family members’ homes — where I was molested and abused physically and mentally, I was subjected to the brutal murder of my sister, Rachel, who was 18 months my junior. I recall many times asking them to hurt me so that she could be spared. She was the one person in life that I trusted and loved above all others and she was gone in the blink of an eye. A huge part of my soul died along with her that day.

With anger in my heart, I went to a couple more relatives’ homes and even more foster homes where the only thing to look forward to was more abuse. When I was 16 years old, I finally took a stand and said: “NO MORE!” I came out as a lesbian to my mother, who kicked me out. I lived with many different friends for a couple of years. I wanted nothing more than to stay in school and graduate.

I call it resilience to a system that only wants the system kids to fail. A caseworker once told me that I would be a dropout, pregnant at 16 and on welfare, doomed to repeat a vicious cycle. I chose not to.

Since my sister’s death, I ask myself, “Why wasn’t I the one that was killed?” I realized a few years ago that I was left here to help other children and youth. Realizing my purpose was vital for me. It was in an English class at SFCC that we had to write about past and future goals. It was then that I really honed in on my desire to become a social worker. This was my first quarter back in the classroom after my first attempt back in 2003, where I failed out of college due to being a young, queer, homeless youth.

Coming back to school, I knew I would need a lot of support so I immediately joined The Alliance club. It was there that I found true family comfort and love and a place that I would grow well beyond my dreams as a young adult. Every day was a struggle to get my Associate of Arts degree, but the difference this time around was my support system at SFCC was not going to allow me to fail or quit — it just wasn’t an option.

I’m proud to say that I graduated with honors from SFCC and recently graduated with my bachelor’s from EWU with a Bachelor in Social Work.
Michelle Brownlee  
*Tacoma Community College*

I came to Tacoma Community College two and a half years ago. Determined to succeed, I entered the Human Services program so that I could turn my personal story of self-destruction, which had left me broken, into triumph.

I enrolled in college to show my kids and family that out of bad, if you have integrity and drive, that which once seemed impossible now had me reaching for the stars and all things are possible.

In 2009, I was faced with a prison sentence of 50 months, with a drug offender sentence that would send me to prison for 18 months and 25 months of community custody. While in prison, I did anything to better myself, from parenting classes to drug treatment, and I received my GED. Upon my release, I was faced with homelessness and unemployment, not to mention a single mother’s struggling to survive. Staying clean was my first and foremost priority.

I faced my demons and a past that once destroyed me, and I learned to love myself and take care of me so that I could be the best mom for my kids. In my darkest days, an advocate would come every week, always believing in me and never giving up on me. This is what made me want to be in the human services field. I wanted to be the person sharing my story and helping others to overcome their life issues with empowerment and education.

I have spent the last five years rebuilding my life and it has not been easy. I never felt like belonged to anything in my life as I do with my peers at Tacoma Community College. I strive to be the best I can be on a daily basis by having high honors, being a senator for Tacoma Community College and being the president of our Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society’s Chi Gamma chapter.

I personally do not think I would have ever made it this far without my past failures and lessons being the bricks in my foundation to my future. I am committed to being the best role model that I can be and I exemplify that by leading by example.
Rick Myers
Walla Walla Community College

I completed the Associate of Arts-Transfer degree at the Walla Walla Community College in June 2013 and am currently enrolled at Washington State University studying Criminology and Psychology. I am a disabled combat veteran who honorably served my country for 17 years.

This in and of itself to some would not be worthy of an award and I would have to agree if that is where my story started. My story actually starts over 50 years ago, when a 15-year-old girl had a son. She gave her son up to be raised by foster parents until the age of six when he was taken from the only home he had ever known and the only people he had ever loved and sent to a place where he was not wanted.

It quickly became evident that I was an “intruder” as far as my younger brother was concerned. I was not very good in school, particularly when it came to mathematics. When I would ask for help, I didn’t understand the help I was receiving. I was knocked to the floor by my stepfather or mother and called stupid. After a couple years of relative happiness, my world quickly changed.

My mother, brother, sister and I found ourselves living on the streets or in abandoned homes by the time I was eight. I would have to steal food so that my family and I could have at least something to eat. At age 10, I was taken to my maternal grandmother’s, along with my brother and sister, where my mother left us under her and my uncle’s care. It was at this time that the abuse really started. If you can think of an abuse suffered by a child, I suffered them all.

In intermediate school, when I had my math classes and didn’t understand simple division or couldn’t get my multiplication tables down, the teacher had me leave the classroom and after a while I quit going to math class. There were many times were I was beaten up, simply because I didn’t know what 12×12 was. I was not allowed to graduate with my class because I didn’t pass the California competency test in mathematics. I was able to get a diploma from another school district because my grades were good enough to have one and that is how I joined the United States Air Force.

I had contemplated several times about going back to school and getting a degree, but the deep-seated fear that I had in regards to mathematics had always stopped me. With the love of my wife, I went back to school. My first day of school at Walla Walla Community College was more terrifying to me than any combat I have been in, but the instructors, particularly the math instructors, gave me understanding and compassion that I should’ve had all those years ago and was able to walk down the aisle with the biggest smile you’d ever see on anybody’s face.
Sporadically, I still get flashbacks from that journey my family and I took when I was six. I didn’t understand why our mother was putting us in harm’s way; why were we crossing the border to a country we didn’t belong to. I still remember hiding from the border patrol.

When we arrived at the small town of Bridgeport, Washington, mostly populated by Mexican immigrants that work in agriculture, I began school. I recall the first day was a huge blur. I didn’t understand the language, the customs, and I didn’t understand why I looked so different than everyone else there. I was enrolled in ESL classes.

As I learned English, I began to excel in the classroom. My dream was to attend the best university in Washington state, and as I was graduating from Bridgeport High School, I realized that was possible. I had the grades, I was top in my graduating class, I was on the honor roll every quarter, I was president of national honor society, captain of our soccer team, class vice-president, etc.

I was devastated when my high school counselor told me I could not attend a college because I didn’t have a social security number. No loans, no scholarships, no college! I knew that was wrong. A teacher encouraged me to apply to the nearby community college: Wenatchee Valley College at Omak. Though it wasn’t my first choice, it was the best choice I ever made. This community college helped mold me into the student and servant-leader I am.

At Omak campus, the staff and faculty reached out to me. Suddenly, I belonged there! I was elected freshman representative in student government. Second year, I became the first Latina student body president. The education I received at WVC at Omak went beyond the classroom. It was there that I learned who I truly was and tapped into my potential. I can’t express enough the significant impact this community college in a town of 5,000 people had on me.

I was interviewed for the EWU magazine and the reporter asked, “How did you overcome the barriers? Your mother was single, uneducated and monolingual in Spanish. Your family was poor. English was not your native language. You were undocumented and no one in your family had ever gone to college.” She was right: the odds were against me. Gracias a Dios for WVC at Omak, I grew through those barriers. With the loving support of good advisors and a strong teaching faculty, I graduated from WVC at Omak and later from EWU.

Now I am working to be that same help for others in my job at Columbia Basin College. I am studying for my master’s degree at WSU and dream of a Ph.D. from Harvard one day. I am thankful every day for God allowing me to attend that tiny community college in Omak, Washington. I grew into a scholar there. It has become like a home for me and an academic family-of-choice.
From my lived experience, I have learned that each and every day of life is a challenge, a battle and a learning experience. Despite this fact, I can boldly say that my life is awesome! I have been raised in very diverse communities and places. Being born in Greece, spending five years in Australia, two years in India and another seven years in Greece before coming to the States, these experiences have shaped me into the being I am today.

In Greece, I went through racial prejudice almost on a daily basis. People would stare and make inappropriate comments about me, the police would randomly stop me as I was walking on the street and check me merely because of my skin color and turban, and the security in stores would follow me as if I were going to steal something. Despite the great anti-immigrant spirit that has spread all over Europe, I managed to persevere and learn from those experiences.

I feel fortunate that I have arrived here in the States, the land where dreams come true, where such prejudice, although it does exist, is at a much lower rate. Here, however, I am under extreme financial duress. My mother has a disability, making my father, who is a taxi driver, the only source of our income. Because of the recession in Greece, my father hardly makes $20,000 annually to support my family back home and my education.

However, the financial constraint has not brought me down. This is because of the support systems available at Whatcom. The faculty and staff are incredibly supportive and willing to help and what I like best is that their help is genuine. Whatcom has enabled and encouraged me to grow, learn and become stronger by using my past experiences as fuel to help me accomplish what many others fail to accomplish.

The campus has enabled me to get involved and make a difference. I hold a 4.0 GPA; am a member and officer of Phi Theta Kappa; am on the student leadership team of the Programming and Diversity Board; and am a member of the ASWCC Social Justice, Equity and Pluralism Committee. When my family found out about my accomplishments, they literally broke into tears and the pride they felt cannot be described with words. I have led challenging discussions with students and have spoken before more than 500 of WCC’s administration, faculty and staff about my past experiences and how Whatcom and these experiences have changed my life. One of my biggest accomplishments this year will be having a Turban Awareness Day here on campus!

The college has been my ally and has helped me come to the state I am today, getting me closer to fulfilling my dream of becoming a physician and leader. I, in return, will also someday be an ally to other students struggling like myself to accomplish their goals.

One thing through all these years that I have come to realize is that, “Hard work conquers all.”
Analuisa Aguilera  
Yakima Valley Community College

Upon graduating from Granger High School in 1998, I attended Yakima Valley Community College (YVCC) in the fall. This was the only college opportunity my family could afford at the time. My parents always encouraged us to further our education and even though they couldn’t afford to send me to a university, they worked hard to pay my way through YVCC. For this I am truly grateful, because if they hadn’t, I’d probably find myself working in the fields like they did all their lives.

After much hard work and dedication, I graduated in the spring of 2001 with two Associate of Arts degrees, one in Business Accounting and another in General Business. My parents were very proud of me. Later that year, I started working for the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic (YVFWC). YVFWC is the largest Health Care Facility in the Northwest, serving the underserved, which is something I am very passionate about because I came from a low-income background. After holding various positions within YVFWC, I was able to climb the company ladder and hold onto my current position as their Business Analyst for almost 10 years now.

The degrees I received through YVCC opened doors for me that wouldn’t have been possible without a college degree. Although I am very grateful for the opportunities I’ve received thus far, I can no longer move up the company ladder without furthering my education. Upper management positions require a bachelor’s degree at the minimum, which I do not possess. You can imagine the excitement when I heard about the new Bachelor of Applied Science in Business Management (BASM) program now being offered at YVCC. This was the opportunity I was waiting for. It’s local, convenient and it couldn’t have come at a better time. I am ready to continue moving up the company ladder and this program will help me secure my future dreams.

I have to give credit to my five-year-old son, Antonio, for encouraging me to further my education through one simple conversation we had. My son is a curious boy and one day he asked me how a person becomes an adult. I stressed the importance of school and good decision making. I explained, “You will graduate from high school, go to college and hopefully graduate with your master’s degree. You will find a job, meet someone special, get married, buy a house and start a family of your own.” (At least, that’s what every parent dreams of for their children.) My son asked if that’s what I had done. I was honest and replied, “Yes and no. I graduated from high school and a community college, but I wish I had continued my education to attain my bachelor’s and then my master’s degree.” He jumped up and said, “Mom, I know, you can go back! Then we can both be in school.” He was right. It’s not too late to go back to school and fulfill my lifelong dream.

I owe this next chapter in my life to my son. I never imagined that one day my child would encourage me to conquer my fears and continue my education. It had been more than 13 years since I sat in a classroom, eager to learn. I now find myself attending the Bachelor of Applied Science in Business Management program offered at YVCC and I could not be more proud. I look forward to completing the BASM program in 2016 and taking advantage of all the great opportunities completing this program will offer me, not to mention the management role I strive for every day. Thank you, YVCC, for giving me the opportunity to further my education. Without your programs (past or present) I would not be where I am today.