2015-2016 Transforming Lives Awards Committee
• Joanne Schwartz, chair, Centralia College
• Karen Seinfeld, Bates Technical College
• Diana Clay, Edmonds Community College
• Jackie Rosenblatt, Pierce College District
• Lisa Parker, Yakima Valley Community College

Celebrating Student Achievement

Timothy Woodiwiss
Big Bend Community College

Angelica Gonzalez
Green River College

Andrea Fast
Shoreline Community College

Armando Garcia
Spokane Falls Community College

Tyler Gilmore
Whatcom Community College

A special thank you to SBCTC staff Katie Rose and Nanette Angel
Transforming Lives
The Association of College Trustees (ACT) 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 ACT Awards Committee selected five awardees to serve as keynote speakers at the January 24, 2016, 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 2016 Transforming Lives awardees are:

- **Timothy Woodiwiss**
  Big Bend Community College

- **Angelica Gonzalez**
  Green River College

- **Andrea Fast**
  Shoreline Community College

- **Armando Garcia**
  Spokane Falls Community College

- **Tyler Gilmore**
  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.
Anthony Hickonbottom  
Bates Technical College

I was born in Iowa to a little girl who, at just 13 years old, became pregnant. Though abortions were uncommon, my grandparents wanted me aborted. If it wasn’t for my great grandma’s objection — may she rest in peace, it would have been another lifetime before my existence.

At four years old, in our basement, I recall sitting on top of the freezer and being told to inhale. I remember coughing, then, being asked if I had a buzz. Yes, my mother and an uncle had me smoking marijuana.

During kindergarten, I remember asking my mom for money to buy ice cream at school. She said she didn’t have any. So, I went into her purse and found plenty, and that act started my habit of stealing.

By 1979 in Tacoma, someone introduced my mom to freebasing. She left me alone for days without food. Finally, she dropped me off with my grandparents, and never returned.

I shut down and remembered how weed made me feel numb and connected to my mom, who I missed like crazy. By age 12, my habit was too much, and stealing was second nature.

Peer pressure came to a head when they suggested I snatch a purse. While being chased, I intentionally dropped the purse, and ran across the freeway to escape.

I turned myself in for the robbery, and I was introduced to mental and physical imprisonment I would experience for many years.

I pause for those reading who have been affected by crime. For that, I sincerely apologize for the pain and distress that situation caused.

For 18 of the past 33 years, I attended a “university” commonly referred to as prison. Each time I left, I thought I’d graduated never to return — however, there were plenty more lessons I had to learn, including forgiveness, patience and spirituality.

Today, I no longer participate in activities that indicate I’m afraid of success. I realize adversity has the seed of a greater benefit. I know sometimes things that seem like a disaster can turn out to be a blessing in disguise. My troubles were created so I could find the answers inside myself.

Because of what’s transpired in my life, I’m giving back to my community. I pass out food to the less fortunate and speak to transitioning individuals, among other endeavors. It’s like seeing God create a galaxy or the feeling you get when the underdog succeeds.

By March 2016, I’ll earn an AAS in HVAC, and will pursue a peer-mentoring certificate to help struggling youth through sharing my story.

I’m honored to have Bates Technical College as my educational partner. Employees who know me are 110 percent supportive of my educational and life goals.

In closing, we all have a story. Regardless of our upbringing, challenges, obstacle’s and circumstances, it doesn’t matter how far you fall, it only matters how you’re able to stand up and continue to do so successfully. Whatever your story, I hope mine helped you heal in some way.
Nina Nesterenko  
_Bellevue College_  

I am from a small village called Novodmitrovka in Ukraine. When I was 10 years old, my family won the green card lottery and came to the US in 2001. We did not speak English and it was difficult for us initially. My father worked in a factory and the family was able manage but when my mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia, life became difficult for us. Maneuvering the health system in the US and trying to get help for my mother was challenging for my father. My mother became very abusive towards my sister and I. My sister who was 18 years old moved out but since I was a minor, I was put in the foster care system. My father could not handle my mother’s sickness, so they returned to the Ukraine, leaving my sister and I behind. My father thought that my sister and I would have more opportunities in the US than in the Ukraine. I stayed with a foster family an average of two months and had to move from one school to another. It was difficult to catch up on school work and I fell behind and dropped out of high school.

When I got out of the foster care system, I worked full time to support myself and made just enough money to pay for my bills but did not have any extra money. I got married at 19, had a daughter and divorced soon after. I was in a domestic violence relationship and knew that for my daughter’s sake, I needed to get out. It was at this time that I decided to seriously think about my future and how I would support herself and her daughter.

In 2013, I started attending Bellevue College. I initially took certificate courses because my case worker did not think that I could complete a college degree. Many times, the case worker encouraged me to work rather than go to school. The case worker advised time and time again to quit attending Bellevue College and work in places such as Wendy’s, Target and Denny’s. The caseworker thought that it was best for me to work in a low paying job than to go to school.

Last year I started working at Student Programs as a Program Coordinator for the Peer to Peer Mentoring Program. My dream is to complete a BSN in nursing so that I can support my daughter and myself. I also want to prove to myself and teach my daughter the importance of education. I have completed 81 college credits at Bellevue College with a 3.18 GPA. Achieving this has been difficult balancing motherhood, school and work but I am proud of what I have accomplished thus far. It has been a difficult path for my daughter and me but I know that I must continue with my studies so that my daughter and I will have a good future.
I’d like to share one student’s story about how higher education, the resources they utilized, and receiving a scholarship changed their life.

A few short years ago there was a student who had been struggling with a 20 year addiction to prescription pain meds. The student had been traveling down the wrong path for some time and landed in Whatcom County drug court for a charge related to their addiction.

During the year and a half spent in drug court, they had to prove to the court they could successfully make some major life changes. The Judge recommended attending Bellingham Technical College (BTC); the student didn’t have much choice and enrolled in the legal administrative assistant program. The thought of going back to school was absolutely terrifying, yet had to be done in order for the charges to be dropped and to avoid more jail time.

One of their first classes was CAP 101 and on the first day, the instructor introduced herself and gave some of her background. She reassured the students that she was approachable, non-judgmental, and could probably relate in some way to every student there, which immediately lowered the student’s anxiety level. The relationship with that instructor, who was also the student’s faculty advisor, was instrumental in the student’s success.

At that time, the student was estranged from their family, had been living in a court appointed clean & sober house for 2 months, and was receiving about $300 a month on state assistance. Almost enough to cover rent, but certainly not enough to buy textbooks or replace a laptop they had lost to a pawn shop during more desperate times.

It was a clerk in the Financial Aid department who suggested applying for the BTC foundation scholarship. She also informed the student of their eligibility for the BFET program which they applied for and received. The student applied for the BTC Scholarship and was shocked when notified they had received it. With those funds, they were able to purchase a laptop and printer and managed to put a down payment on a vehicle.

If you haven’t figured out by now, I am the student. My name is Cheryl Alvis, I have graduated from BTC and am now employed there as the clerical assistant for Advising & Career Services.

I utilized about every resource BTC had to offer, including having my resume critiqued by my advisor, from which I received invaluable advice that obviously paid off. I received $300 from the urgent funding team for an emergency car repair. I also utilized Accessibility Resources.

All these resources might seem like routine tasks to an employee of a college, because they are part of their job, but to students like me, they have made all difference in the world. I am the complete opposite of the person I used to be, and that didn’t happen overnight. It happened because I finally wanted to change and my college experience and the resources I received were life changing.
I dropped out of high school after the ninth grade. It was a poor decision that I regret, but I am thankful that I was given a second chance at Big Bend Community College. After working four years at McDonalds I had the motivation to attend college, but two seemingly overwhelming obstacles stood in my way. The first being my lack of education and the second being my overwhelming fear that I wasn’t smart enough or good enough for college. I can say without a doubt that the support and opportunities at BBCC allowed me to overcome my fears and inadequacies.

Without the remedial classes offered at a community college I would have never been able to attend college in the first place. BBCC offered so much more than just instruction. Everyone at BBCC was supportive and encouraging. I was truly impressed with the enthusiasm with which my instructors taught their classes. This positive environment was exactly what I needed to overcome my fears. It was a godsend to be able to drop in anytime and go over material with my instructors. This provided the one-on-one time I desperately needed. Although I wish I had the time to express how all my instructors at Big Bend Community College helped me, I would like to cover in depth how two teachers made a difference in my life.

English and mathematics were my two weakest subjects and I was far behind my peers. But two teachers at Big Bend allowed me to overcome these weaknesses. Mrs. Whitney was instrumental in helping me make up lost ground in mathematics. I was touched by her desire help her students succeed. She possessed a very gracious and positive way of answering my very simple questions without making me feel inferior. Attending Mr. Sullivan’s English composition class was a life-changing time for me. Walking into his class I possessed no confidence in my ability to write papers or understand literature. It is hard for me to put into words how much this man impacted my life. Mr. Sullivan opened my eyes to the beauty all around me and showed me how I could convey that beauty in my writing. Quite simply, Mr. Sullivan believed in me and the potential I possessed.

I graduated with honors from Washington State University in 2015 with a Bachelor’s of Science in Biochemistry with minors in microbiology and animal science. I was accepted to attend the University of Washington School of Medicine in spring of 2015. Who would have thought that I, a high school dropout nobody, could have accomplished this?

I had many educational short comings before attending Big Bend, but it wasn’t until after moving on to Washington State University that I realized how well Big Bend had filled in the gaps and prepared me for the next level of my education. I will always be proud to say I attended Big Bend Community College, the best community college in Washington state.

I have served eight years in the Washington Army National Guard, with deployments to Iraq and Bahrain. I am also blessed to have a beautiful wife and precious young daughter. I live a truly blessed life and much of it is due to the support and opportunities that were afforded me at Big Bend Community College.
My life in the United States started five years ago when I won the Green Card Lottery. My two sons and I left the Ivory Coast and we found ourselves in what I can describe as a bitter then sweet adventure. I’m married and my wife couldn’t travel with us as she had to take care of her disable young sister. Our host family was in Bellevue. I could not speak English and I was struggling to get my first job. I realize that getting a first job goes along with speaking some English. Therefore, I contacted the Bellevue Community college for some ESL classes.

About four weeks after our arrival, my son and I received an eviction letter from the apartment complex manager as my host family was on a Section 8 housing program. We had three days to leave the apartment and on the last day of our stay, I had an appointment at the Bellevue College for an English placement test. I went to my appointment and told the adviser that we were evicted. I did not know where to go with my two and three years old boys. The shift in our life came from this appointment. The adviser referred me to Hopelink and our housing issue had started to have a much happier ending. We were moved to a shelter in Kenmore, and ended up in a much stable apartment in Kirkland. I truly believe that without the Bellevue College assistance, we would have experienced homelessness.

Once in Kirkland, I found a job in a retirement facility and the kids were also in school. I had to cook for my kids, took then to school and back home after I was done with my shift late in the evenings. In 2013 my wife finally got her visa. My family was united, and it was time for me to plan my future via academic education. As a little boy I was always amazed by bridges and roads. My childhood dream was being a civil engineer. I’m taking my civil engineering requirements at the Cascadia College and I’m planning to transfer to the UW next year.

Today, I have a full time job as a contract driver in the Seattle area, I live in Tacoma, and I commute to Cascadia for my classes. The school is known for the multicultural orientation and its flexible class schedule that helps me balance between family and work. My goal is at least a Master degree in civil engineering. I just want to be an example to my boys. I want them to learn that “if Daddy did it, we still can do it”

Two educational institutions brought brightness in my family life. Bellevue College helped with the housing when we were almost on the street, and the Cascadia College gives me the opportunity every quarter to work towards my goal. I don’t even want to think about what my family would have been if I hadn’t decided to head back to school for a brighter future.
Andrea Pinkerton  
Centralia College

How has attending Centralia College changed my life?

I was afraid to enter college; it had been too long, I felt I was too old, and a brain injury earlier in my life was sure to affect how I was able to learn and participate with students that may be half my age. I decided to give college a try regardless of my fears and enrolled at the Morton campus.

I started in January 2014 working towards a certificate degree (Office Assistant) but eventually determined that it wasn’t the right path for me. Although this wasn’t the program or direction I ultimately wanted, it got me inside the college and I knew getting an education was a step in the right direction.

The Morton Campus provided me with small, friendly surroundings that fostered a spirit of growth and support. I applied for and was awarded a maintenance student worker job and was encouraged to expand, design and execute a landscaping plan for CC East. The dean gave me permission to do the creative work needed to give the front of the little college a face lift and the chance for me to earn some money.

In the fall of 2014 I had a marketing class at the main campus in Centralia. I enjoyed the energy and collegiate atmosphere and by the end of fall quarter I decided to change my degree path and enroll in the Energy Technology/Power Plant Operations program.

I have had to overcome some obstacles along my life’s journey; an unfortunate fall off the back of a semi/fish pump ladder left me with an injured right knee and a fractured skull. I had to undergo surgery and a week following the operation I experienced a pulmonary embolism (blood clot). This series of events left me without my life skills; I needed to learn my life functions again – I knew I was in for a long recovery.

While I was recuperating, my house was set on fire by an arsonist and all my worldly possessions were destroyed. In the spring of 2015, I once again was a victim of fire when the travel trailer I was living in was destroyed by a shop fire – I was parked next to the shop and once again lost all of my belongings.

Regardless of all the external deterrents to my education, I persevered and persisted. I continued to enroll in classes and work diligently in my PPO classes. Then, in the summer quarter of 2015, I returned to my locker in the gym and found that it had been broken into and my computer, backpack with school books, financial aid money, and purse had all been stolen. Fortunately, the thief has been arrested and charged.

I continue to enroll in classes. I know the ultimate goal of receiving my degree will reward me with a good job later. I have had to keep my chin up and the support and encouragement of ALL the people at this college have helped me. I know if I continue to put one foot in front of the other I will be able to give back to a community which has helped me so much.
I am immensely honored and grateful to be nominated for the ACT Transforming Lives Awards. This will forever mark a pivotal point in my life and career. It has motivated me the more to aim higher and unlock more of my potential. Being here at Clark College has truly transformed my life.

My name is Takunda Masike. I am an international student from Zimbabwe. When I initially came to Clark College I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I’ve always had a rigid belief that all higher institutions do not devote time to student success and you’re basically on your own. I’m happy to say Clark College proved me wrong and debunked my preconceived notion. Clark College is undeniably devoted to student success at all levels in and out the classroom. It is evident with the number of effective and engaged students. Any student can be assured success with the stellar student support services offered here.

Services like the tutoring center have been very helpful to me. I go there regularly with difficult concepts I may have. Recently, I have also successfully become a tutor! The support I received at the STEM Tutoring center encouraged me to do the same to help students improve their academic achievement. I tutor biology, chemistry, and math through to higher level calculus courses. Helping students understand challenging concepts is something that I am immensely privileged to do and profoundly enjoy. It is amazing how every instructor I have come across is wholeheartedly willing to help every student prosper. Knowing that everyone at this institution is committed to my success is in itself motivating. The more I advance in my career and education here at Clark College, the more I understand that education is not merely a doorway to a career but rather, a doorway to make positive change in whatsoever career path you choose.

Being an international student can be very daunting. Switching to a whole new culture and education system is difficult as I experienced first-hand. This is why I decided to apply to become an International Peer Mentor. I wanted new international students to have a smooth transition and help them familiarize with the resources that have helped me succeed at Clark. As an international Peer Mentor I have learned to, and continue to learn to communicate proficiently not only cross-culturally but in any day-to-day situation. I believe that this is an indispensable trait to become an effective global citizen. This experience also enabled me to receive an International Leadership Certificate.

I am currently pursuing an engineering associate degree. After I transfer, I hope to enroll in a biomedical engineering program. Biomedical engineering is the perfect marriage of my love of math, science, and improving the health care system. The human body is made up of intricate and multiplex systems. These systems are what makes the human body the most glorious and enthralling machine. However, in all its splendor therein lies the proclivity to malfunction. Engineering principles can be harnessed and implemented to make advancements that would have been otherwise impossible with traditional medicine.

I wait upon the day I can give back to community through my profession. I hope one day I can inspire and encourage other students to achieve their goals in education just as receiving this nomination has to me.
I am a single mother who did not choose the easy path to college. As a teenager, I bounced between parents and had a hard time making and keeping good friends. I stopped attending high school because my dad disliked my boyfriend, and then ran away from home. I missed so much school that they dropped me. I moved in with my mom and because I could not attend the school I wanted, I did not finish high school.

My dad passed away when I was 17 and my world fell apart. My mom pushed me to get my GED® and driver's license intending for me to get a job, but I chose to roam the streets instead. I never kept a job, and by age 20, I had a baby and was in an abusive relationship.

At age 25 I decided to pull my life together and I got a job at a gas station. I worked there for years and had another baby at 30. As a high school dropout with only a GED®️, I thought that was where I would always be, but I became interested in what was going on outside the station, and all the requirements to keep the station up to code. I asked questions of the workers and found all of them had gone to college in the environmental field. A few even told me they also had not finished high school. I had hope!

I applied for assistance and enrolled in Clover Park Technical College’s Environmental Sciences & Technology Program 17 years after dropping out of high school. I thought school would be too challenging, but I am excelling in the program. Maybe it’s the pressure of trying to be the best for my sons, that school is my job, or that I’m more mature than before, but whatever it is, I’m doing well enough that I decided to continue on to earn my bachelor’s degree.

Clover Park has been a huge stepping stone into the world that is ahead. I was fortunate enough to receive financial aid, and advising helped me to get the funding I needed. Since I started last winter, I’ve made new friends, learned valuable information on field trips, as well as made contacts for future job opportunities. My instructors have pushed me to realize my potential, which has helped give me the courage to continue on. I have been able to volunteer numerous times with things that will help improve our environment’s future.

My goal is to be a biologist for the state so I can make a difference while doing something I love. My hope is to provide a better life for my sons, and to be a role model for them. I know my future in the environmental field will help them grow up in a more sustainable world.
We all recognize the career opportunities a college degree can offer, but I had no intentions of getting a degree when I walked through the door of the Worker Retraining office at Columbia Basin College in the summer of 2014. After 27 years at home raising six children, the youngest had just graduated from high school. I had been planning to look for a job and had no doubts I would be able to find something but I could not settle for minimum wage. My husband had been laid off in December, 2013, and his unemployment had just run out. We had no income. An advertisement for the Worker Retraining program at CBC had me thinking that taking a few courses before looking for work could enhance my resume. I was especially interested in taking classes to be more proficient in Word and Excel.

My life changed dramatically when I met Nicole Salter in the Worker Retraining office. Nicole explained that to be eligible for the program, I would need to choose a degree or certificate from an approved list, and the program would pay for tuition and books for one quarter. No problem. I had attended CBC 30 years prior and only needed two quarters to get a Business Administration degree. I chose that program, knowing I was only going to go for one quarter in order to have something current on my resume, then start looking for a job. Little did I know the impact Nicole would have when she placed me in classes with Tammy Wend and Gene Holand! I thoroughly enjoyed the accounting and business classes! I wanted to stay in school!

The problem with continuing my education...my husband was still unemployed. How would I pay for school? I should be looking for a job, shouldn’t I? Our savings was dwindling. Maybe I could come back when our finances improved. Tammy Wend knew my situation and made some suggestions about possible tuition assistance. As I began investigating I was told to go back to Worker Retraining. “What could they do? They only pay for one quarter. I was told to try, so I went back to Nicole. Worker Retraining had funds available to provide me with tuition for a second quarter. I would be able to complete the Business Administration degree!

During my second quarter, my husband went back to work. I was able to pay for Spring Quarter to complete a one year accounting certificate. Though initially nervous about going back to school after 30 years, I completed the year with a 4.0 GPA, and I was elected Recording Officer for Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society for the 2015-2016 school year.

Over the summer, I was recruited by one of my instructors, and I am now working as an account specialist in his firm. In September, I began the new BAS program for Healthcare Administration, on target to complete the program in 2016. One quarter became two years, one certificate, two degrees, and endless opportunities!
Two years later, I had a seizure on board the ship during a short underway period off the California coast. I was taken to the hospital, and then transferred to the Transient Personnel Unit while a medical board decided the future of my career and my ability to complete my naval contract.

Adjusting to learn with a brain that needs additional help was a constant struggle, especially with memorization. I tried taking classes online which didn’t have that personal attention that I needed.

When I started searching for local community and technical colleges, I found out that Edmonds Community College not only had one of the best engineering technology programs in the region, it was also a welcoming institution to veterans. How right they were.

The faculty and staff were ready to work with me and ready to provide me with the tools and resources I needed to achieve. It was faculty members like Patrick Burnett and Deann Leoni who did more than just teach; they opened the doors to new possibilities while taking the time to work with me every step of the way.

Some of my favorite moments as a student happened while working in the community. Events like volunteering at the Lynnwood Rotary rummage sale and the elementary school science night shaped my student experience.

My campus and community involvement also provided me with a platform to serve as an advocate for student veterans across the country. I was proud to not only serve as the president of the Student Veterans Association, but to represent this college at the National Student Veteran Association Conference and highlight the groundbreaking work being done at Edmonds CC through initiatives like the Boots to Books and Beyond campaign which raised more than $1 million for student veterans.

I now work as a Technician at AdvanTac Technologies — a supplier of body armor and other materials — in Lynnwood. I help build mobile, waterproof containers to fill orders for the U.S. military. My job is to install hardware and test the completed products.

My education and experience at Edmonds CC taught me the importance of becoming engaged with my community and that while there may be obstacles you have to face, persevering through those tough moments make you stronger as a person.
Cerise “Reese” Robinson  
*Everett Community College*

I fell in with the wrong crowd in high school and started experimenting with drugs. Unfortunately, I didn’t know when to stop. By the time I was 19, I was plunged deep into a meth addiction that quickly destroyed every positive in my life -- I lost jobs, my family stopped speaking to me, and I was homeless. To support my habit, I eventually turned to selling drugs and stealing. Friends were murdered, others went to prison for life, and I thought that, even though I was staring ruin in the face every day, I was immune.

The fact that I was able to have a single moment of clarity at age 23 and reach out for help in itself was a miracle. It took me several tries to get clean, but I did it. I got a decent job as a grocery store clerk, but I knew that it was only a matter of time before I got bored, or was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I knew I had to do something to push forward, so I decided to get my GED and enroll in community college.

I chose Everett Community College because of its programs that would allow me to continue my education past my AA. My first quarter, I rediscovered my love for English and writing. I started tutoring in the Writing Center, which was absolutely critical for my leadership and interpersonal skills. The most astonishing thing was that I was learning how to be a human being again. I was making and keeping commitments. I was being kind to others. I was reaching out and asking questions and allowing myself to be curious. I realized quickly that this was the real me, and I could do whatever I wanted.

For my BA (now I wanted to take as much English literature and writing as I could), I applied to both Western Washington University and the University of Washington. I was accepted to WWU with distinction, but I decided to wait and see about the UW. It was my dream school — and they accepted me as well. in 2011, I graduated from the UW with honors, but I knew I wasn’t done yet. I applied to USC’s Graduate program in Film and Television Production, the top film school in the world and one of the hardest to get into ... and I got in.

I finished my Master’s degree with a 3.55 GPA last year. I now work in audio post production in Hollywood, the beginning of a career that I absolutely love, and I will be celebrating 10 years free of meth on December 21st. I am only here because of the faculty, staff, and fellow students at Everett Community College. That environment nourished me in a way that no other could, and gave me the skills and support I needed to hit the ground running and conquer my dreams, one right after the other.
Joseph Gillette
Grays Harbor College

I am a fighter. It is a miracle I am alive to tell my story. I have battled through being diagnosed with Wegener’s Granulomatosis shortly before my 16th birthday leaving me close to death several times, my kidneys failing a year after having beaten this setback, to then being diagnosed with the crippling physical and mental pain of fibromyalgia shortly after my kidney transplant. To this day I am still disabled as a result of the fibromyalgia. This is only a short list of what I have endured, but I have refused to let them define me having only grown as a result of my struggles.

While my life has been delayed, for the past two years I have been diligently pursuing my dreams of obtaining a college education on my own terms to challenge myself to excel both academically and in my community. Every day that I go to class I am truly fulfilling my dream of furthering my education. I am more of a bookworm than anything else, and enjoy applying myself to the best of my abilities in all that I pursue. I was saddened that I couldn’t earn my high school diploma along with the rest of my class, although I understood the reason why. I missed out on classes, challenges, and a part of my life due to something out of my control which, to be honest, left a hole in my heart.

Since taking the leap of faith to attend college I have excelled in school as I did before. While not always easy, I have taken it one day at a time. I am in my last year to earn my AAS in Business Technology, a Certificate of Achievement in Medical Coding, and to take Spanish courses. I have been involved in my school community serving in the Tyee Club and in Phi Theta Kappa as our local chapter’s President in my last year. I have been active in my church serving in leadership positions, and look forward to being able to do so again when my health improves or my time demands become less.

I can speak of how much a scholarship helps in going back to college. I have won scholarships already that help to take the stress away from how I am going to pay for college for necessities such as gas, books, meals, and an endless list of items which allows me to keep my focus on classes and my health.

I have been deeply honored by the help that I have received, and when I am having a difficult day, I think of the wonderful blessing that I have been afforded in others believing in me and supporting my future to better myself. I am further reminded of the hard work and involvement that I have put in already inspiring me to keep going as I remember my countless goals I have already achieved while being uncertain of how it would turn out. This recognition only strengthens my desire and resolve to see through my dreams.
I grew up feeling powerless, sleeping on the streets and knowing true hunger. This affected my education, health, nutrition and self-esteem. Going through life, I saw no hope past the drugs, crime and generational poverty that surrounded me. Pregnant at 17, I was encouraged by my alternative high school teacher to apply to Green River Community College (GRCC). With much help and support, I enrolled and started attending GRCC. At that time I was homeless and living in a bad environment. To my surprise, I found what I was missing at GRCC. I utilized the tutoring resources and was able to, despite being behind academically, catch up to my peers and excel.

Not only was I able to excel in my academics, but I was able to come out of my shell in a safe environment. The staff supported me in many ways. GRCC has so many wonderful programs like student services, diversity services, clubs, women’s center, counseling and TRiO. Each one of these services played a major role in transforming my life and who I am today. It prepared me to be a leader and positively changed my life.

The sky was truly the limit at GRCC. Among many things, I became involved as vice president of Phi Theta Kappa, president of Latino Student Union, and President of Native American Student Association. As I began to successfully become a leader in my school, I began to mimic my leadership skills in my community. I was empowered and started volunteering in my community, serving in various leadership positions, advocating, and created my own computer scholarship project for students in need.

I eventually transferred to the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) and earned my bachelor’s in Political Science. Education opened my eyes to so much and ignited in me a passion to help others. For the first time, I realized that all that I had gone through in life was not just solely my fault but a path that many go through and few escape. I realized that obtaining an education is life changing to individuals and the people that surround them. Starting at GRCC, I became committed to helping people and social justice.

Currently, I am volunteering and advocating on a local and state level. I serve as an advisory member for the Department of Early Learning. I volunteer with the Washington State Professional Educators Standards Board on a project to help change current laws for highly skilled immigrants in Washington State and diversifying the teacher workforce. I am advocating for families, children and women of Washington State at a legislative level using various platforms including my partnership with Moms Rising. I plan to further my education through law school this upcoming fall. I want to continue to support my community, state and nation through advocating for social justice. I am a servant leader that was born at GRCC. Thank you GRCC for impacting my life and having a lasting affect that carries on and touches so many others.
Laura Garcia
Highline College

Single mom. Determined. College student. Forty years old. Domestic violence survivor. Successful. These are all words that describe me and the road I've been walking for several years. I am Laura and I am not your typical college student.

I've heard the saying “Life has a funny way of pulling the rug out from under you when you least expect it.” In my case, it had a funny way of pulling the rug out from under me while I helplessly watched. I landed on my parent’s kitchen floor. This is where I found myself, sobbing, in the middle of the night after fleeing my home with my three kids in tow. We had taken nothing but their possessions and my clothes. I had been home with my kids for almost 10 years and had no income, no job leads and no idea what to do. As I started picking up the pieces of my life I decided that I was going to start over. If my kids had to watch me fall, they were also going to watch me get back up. I rose up off the floor and started looking online at schools that night.

My family has been incredibly supportive of my return to school. They want me to succeed just as much as I want it for myself. When choosing a school I went looking for that same type of community. I wanted to surround myself with people who cared if I reached my goal, who understood and encouraged who I am as a woman, mother and student. My education matters to me and I wanted to matter to my educators.

At Highline College my classes have been small, usually 30 people or less. My instructors have all gotten to know me and my goal to become a Registered Respiratory Therapist. They have listened to my obstacles and guided me around them with support, advice and encouragement every step of the way. My initial plan was to transfer to a 4-year school and I was thrilled when I learned that I can receive Bachelor’s Degree for Respiratory Therapy without ever leaving Highline. I will successfully complete my college education and start a new career without amassing enormous student loans or failing to be anything but one of 200 students in a classroom. I am invested in my education and I believe my support team of educators, advisors and peers are invested in me.

This investment is paying off. I completed all of the pre-requisites for my program and began my first year of Respiratory Care in the fall of 2015. Going into the program I have managed to keep a cumulative 3.8 GPA and am a member of Highline’s Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. I have confidence in my determination and dedication to finish school. Picking Highline to complete my education has been a huge factor in my successful navigation of this journey and a decision I am grateful for every day.
Arianda Crosby  
*Lake Washington Institute of Technology*

The summer after my freshman year in high school, I started my first job through the Seattle Youth Employment Program. This is also the summer my mother’s drug addiction made her incapable of being a parent. By the time I was a high school junior, I worked two jobs to supplement the state assistance my mother received. I took on the responsibility of caring for her and my brother. This included buying clothes, food, paying bills and getting my brother to school every day. I was very involved in school as a Cheerleader, Associated Student Body Treasurer and a Gates Achievers Scholar. I also began the Running Start program.

When I graduated high school I was accepted to all three of the universities I applied to. Although this should have been a very exciting time, I was overwhelmed with the thought of leaving my brother with no real parental supervision. The Child Protective Services had been to my school and home multiple times during my senior year. I concealed most of what was occurring at home, so we could stay with my mother. Unfortunately, this meant that when I left for college, my 11-year-old brother would have to fend for himself.

I still decided to go after my dreams and I left for Eastern Washington University. Soon after I left, my mother went to jail. My brother was in our grandmother’s custody, who already cared for five grandchildren. During that year other tragedies occurred: a suicide and murder of very close friends. As a result, I left school to gain custody of my “troubled” brother.

When I got home, I started working full time and I changed my major to nursing. I attended both South Seattle and Seattle Central colleges to complete my prerequisites. In 2011 I graduated despite ongoing family hardships and parenting a teenage boy just six years younger than myself.

I am thankful for the flexibility of our colleges, as it made it possible for me to balance my personal life with my educational goals. After graduating from SSCC, I applied to Bachelor of Science Nursing Programs for three years without success. I got to the point where I was very insecure. I never thought about giving up, but I did reconsider my educational path. Lake Washington Institute of Technology accepted my application on the first attempt. My acceptance to the program was the exact inspiration I needed to continue.

LWTech connected me to resources for financial support and scholarships, and student and professional networks for people of color. These experiences helped me feel involved, connected and gave me a sense of belonging.

This past summer my younger cousin was murdered. This gave me another level of determination. I want to make a difference in the lives of our children. I wouldn’t change anything about my life. I share my story, not because it has harmed me, but because it has made me who I am: resilient, motivated and compassionate for all people.
My name is Shawney Garbe and I am enrolled in the Early Childhood Education program at LCC. Although I am presently busy with classes and homework, they are just one fragment of my life. The central and most valued part in my life are my family and my relationship with the Lord. My three youngest children who still live at home and my faith in God give me a reason to get up in the morning.

About three years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer and my children gave me the motivation to fight for my life because I didn’t want them to become orphans. You see, for almost twenty-five years I delighted in being a wife and doing things for and together with my husband, but when Otto suddenly passed away, my world was changed forever. Being a single parent or being the bread winner of the family sure wasn’t anything I had ever imagined, and I certainly didn’t plan for it. To be honest, it has been very difficult for me to accept this. Although it was not my vision for my life, God has allowed it, so I am doing my best to embrace it. When I was nine, and he was ten, I met my husband to-be. I married that farm-boy when I was still a teen, and we had a very wonderful life that included our seven children. Now, our four older children are married and I have six precious grandchildren. I mostly spend my free time doing things with my family and friends.

I have always lived out in the country, and some of my fondest memories are from when we lived on cattle ranches. My dad is an old-time cowboy who instilled the love of horses in me. Something that brings me great joy and satisfaction is teaching the children in my Sunday school class. Every other week, we go the nursing home and sing for the elderly. I feel a strong desire to honor my husband in the way that he would want our children to be raised, so I am endeavoring to do my best to provide them with the kind of life-style that we would have had if he were still alive.

I have a variety of interests in addition to my family, home and church activities. I greatly enjoy visiting my friends in Germany, advancing my knowledge and use of the German language, and learning more about my Germanic heritage.

By furthering my education, I am broadening my horizons and adding even further to my interests and activities with plans to use all of my life experiences as I pursue a new career and chapter in my life. I must admit that I have some fear of the unknown and feel a bit unsure about school, choosing a career and finding a job, but I know God has helped me thus far, therefore I take courage, knowing that He will continue to guide me each step of life’s pathway.
I have always been an optimistic person. However, when a man cannot take care of his family because he doesn’t have the skills or education he knows he needs and he runs out of options, he starts to think less of himself and starts to accept his life’s condition and that it will not change.

In 2012, I brought my family to Washington State for a fresh start and a job opportunity but my job fell through and our money ran out. We ended up on the streets, homeless. With my fiancé and son with me, never would I have thought that I would have my family living on the streets. The experience of living in tent city, in Seattle’s White Center, with my family was more than I could bear. Rats underneath the tent and the cold seeping in through the holes, looking into my son’s eyes I thought to myself, “This cannot be.” I felt desolate and trapped; I did not really know what to do.

It was on a cold winter’s day in Bremerton, Washington I reached my breaking point. I tried to stab myself but a friend stopped me. I finally got help. When my family and I were taken in by the Salvation Army, I was still depressed and wondered, “How did it get this bad?”

I got a job working for the Mariners during the baseball season and I felt good about myself until I came back to Bremerton and as a grown man, with my family living in a tent, it made me question if I was the man I was supposed to be.

In 2013, The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) offered me the opportunity to go back to school but as a 40+ year old man I did not think I would fit in especially in my condition; I did not think I could do it. With help from DSHS I enter into Olympic College’s CSALT program where I was walked through the process of registering for classes and financial aid. Olympic College not only showed me how it is possible to go back to school but also the possibility to get my degree is not just a fleeting thought anymore but an attainable goal.

My family and I were still in temporary housing and we were still struggling financially but Olympic College never made me feel like an “all we want is your money student.” Olympic College cared about what I needed to be successful. They wanted to know about my family and what their goals were. The counselors helped me stay on track and achieve my goals. The professors worked with me and helped me see that I am smarter than I give myself credit for. Olympic College started me to think about where I can go and how to make a better life for my family.

Olympic College made me feel like I belong. Olympic College is my College; it’s my larger family.
Nicole Perez
Peninsula College

I made the transition from junkie to the commencement speaker at Peninsula College in three years flat. I know it sounds like a remarkably fast turnaround, but my transformation began so slowly that I didn’t even realize it was happening.

In June of 2012 I hated myself. I had detached from society, and saw no productive role for myself within it. I was living in San Antonio, and had been an IV heroin addict for six years. I was stuck. I was 25 and living with my mother when she informed me that she was moving to Costa Rica. She told me she could help me get set up in San Antonio, or help me move to Port Angeles where one of my using buddies had recently moved, and managed to stay clean. I knew staying in San Antonio would be a death sentence. So, under the influence, I made the snap decision to move across the country to a place I had never been, and knew little about.

I detoxed my first two weeks up here, worked in fast food, and although I hated it—for once I was forced to manage my life out of desperation. I had no other choice. Several times that first year I told myself I had had enough, and was moving to Portland to be a street kid. But when I had those thoughts, I just took a deep breath and told myself Peninsula College was my way home. Just make it through the year and get in school.

In June of 2013 I walked into the BFET office at Peninsula College and enrolled in classes for summer quarter.

My first English class awakened my brain. I had been out of school for so long, and had worked so hard to turn off my brain with drugs, that this knowledge was food and quickly I became hungry for more. I decided to pursue Early Childhood Education (ECE) because in industry-poor Port Angeles, there may have been a shortage of jobs, but I could see there was no shortage of young children to be cared for.

Yvette Cline, ECE program coordinator, took notice of my work ethic. After my first year, she encouraged me to be her office assistant for three programs. I was later asked to work as a child care specialist at the Educare Center on campus.

Now, I work with people who love and respect me. I am no longer the person I was when I moved here. I have completed my AA in ECE, and am currently taking classes to transfer to City University to complete my Bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education, with endorsements in math and ECE. I’m in the business of building brains, and I take my work seriously. I finally feel connected.

My entire outlook has been transformed. Peninsula College helped lead me back to a person I lost a long time ago: my true self. What an amazing feeling it is to be found.
Ira Morton  
Pierce College Fort Steilacoom

My journey to college began as I made the choice to stay in high school until I turned 21. My homeroom teacher always looked out for me. She told me about a school that I can go to half of the day which is called New Market Skills Center. It is a technical high school that offers programs such as Early Childhood Education, culinary, finance, fireman just to name a few. I was awarded student of the month which give me the confidence to learn and grew as a student and continued to the finish line.

With the self-esteem and confidence gained, I was encouraged by my teachers, staff, family and friends, I sign up for college courses at another college. I went there for a few quarters, but lost interest due to lack of support from faculty and staff for accommodation. In spite of my mom seeking support and my willingness to strive, there was still the lack of support. My teachers and classmates were very helpful, but I still was still falling behind due to the lack of accommodation for my physical disability.

After researching several colleges, I decided to make the switch to Pierce College. Coming to Pierce was the best education decision I have made. Pierce College provided a combination of state-of-the-art technology with learning, making it the best two years of college education experience. I believe that Pierce College is setting the pace in community college education, by preparing students like me to take my place or to retrain in industries at the forefront of technological advances and anything we strive to do. One of many reasons I chose Pierce College for my academic goals is the opportunity to move more quickly through the curriculum with greater academic success.

Pierce College maintains a friendly atmosphere, with students benefiting from small class sizes and individual attention from professors. The programs here at Pierce College are the best, they accommodate students from all walks of life. I don’t know where I would be without such a wonderful staff, and many of my classmates. The disability service is awesome they have gone above and beyond to ensure my success in college.

Challenging situations make me feel uneasy. At times my shaking becomes noticeable, sometimes even distracting others so I tend to get really nervous around new people. My time at Pierce College has taught me that the best way to overcome anxiety is to embrace it. I am now the initiator of a conversation and am not ashamed or afraid to let others know that I have a disability. My disability is not keeping me from achieving my academic goals.

My disability has influenced me to become an inspiration to others. I want to be an example in young children’s lives by demonstrating that a disability may slow me down, but does not prevent me from achieving my goals. I strive to be all that I can be. I have learned that I cannot let obstacles keep me from obtaining my goals; success always involves a challenge.

After graduating Pierce College in the spring of 2015, I enrolled in Faith Evangelical College and Seminary where I am studying leadership. I hope one day to become involved in youth ministry.
The Pierce College Running Start Program has opened many opportunities for me. Being a part of this will allow me to graduate in June with my A.A. degree. Financially, this program has been a blessing because without it, I won’t be able to obtain my degree. Going to college so young on my own has been difficult at times. But I persevered because it gave me hope. I went from having a 1.9 GPA in high school, to having over a 3.3 GPA in my first quarter in college as a 16 year old. I truly rose to the occasion and did my best with the cards I was dealt.

I grew up in an abusive household due to alcoholic parents that were both emotionally and physically abusive. In my junior year of high school, the police told me that I needed to find a new home. I soon was jumping from house to house in order to sleep and have a place to do homework. While my peers were worried about who was going to win the Friday night football game, I was worried about how I would get to class the next morning. Instead of rebelling as a teenager usually would in this situation, I came to a realization that my home life did not determine my future, and that I had control over my life.

I spent countless hours at the Pierce College Library because it was warm and I was surrounded by literature. Through this, I realized my true passion for people and communication. This wasn’t just an amazing resource but a safe haven for me. I found educational support and encouragement there that most students get by their parents. I learned what the SAT is, how to apply to colleges and what student aid is. I found who I am; and that person is a leader. Finding who I was gave me the immediate drive and encouragement to push through the conditions and work hard to make something of myself and achieve my dreams. At that point, I didn’t need parents to take me on college tours or tell me to do my homework. The situations in my life didn’t necessarily get better. In turn I had to get another job, working 65 hours a week while going to college full time.

Pierce College wrote an article on me titled “The Definition of Busy” about my hard work but they have yet to know the story and conditions behind all the work. I became a part of the McKinney Vento program, a program for homeless students and also qualified for the book loan program that helped me financially with textbooks. Pierce College helped me find my passion for politics, which lead me to becoming chairman of my Young Americans for Freedom chapter. By leading these students I have had all expenses paid opportunities to travel to Washington D.C. often for conferences and training seminars- being able to bring leadership and knowledge back to students on campus. I have been able to do a lot of work with the state and have been offered to intern on Capitol Hill for Ted Cruz.

It has been difficult on my own, but I know that I will go to a University and graduate with my bachelors. I know that I can do this without family encouragement, a college savings fund or even a place to call home. Through this time in my life, I have learned that life won’t always be perfect and it is crucial to rise to these occasions in order to be constantly successful. With Pierce College’s help, I have learned to not let adversity destroy me, but instead motivate me.
I had been struggling with the idea of going to college from my fifth year in high school. Competency wasn’t the issue, neither really was time or finances as I always seemed to make due. I guess in hindsight my hesitation grew from the question of whether or not I deserved to cash in on the privilege after all the life I’d already lived. I’ve always been the type to jump in with two feet so after high school I sought something new and exciting which ended up being relationships, my career, my community, business ownership and parenthood. It seemed that school was something that I had missed out on during my shenanigans. As I was becoming a parent, survivor, community leader and business owner my peers were becoming teachers, lawyers, home owners, and travelers. It felt like life for me just didn’t include a degree, then my mom got her AAS in Administrative Office Management from RTC and I figured it was closer to a possibility. She and the rest of my family had always encouraged me to get a degree, which only increased after my mom’s accomplishment, but I never was very good at taking suggestions so I put it off a little while longer.

A year ago to the month, I stepped in to RTC and registered for the Small Business Management Program. I was intimidated by the time span and worried that I would grow restless and quit this just as I had my other attempts at other things. There were days in the beginning when I wanted to, but the comradery kept me here.

From November 2014-November 2015 I have been sexually harassed, lost a close grandparent, taken my son to his first day of school, done historic (and initially illegal) crosswalk painting in Seattle, marched, spoken, read, fought, loved, taught, learned, listened and grown.

When it was difficult to make it to class because of car trouble, depression or childcare conflicts both my instructor and my classmates were understanding and supportive with just the right amount of butt-kicking to keep me accountable. There is no way I could have made it through my program without my cohort. They have taught me their perspectives, listened to my rants, and been friends, counselors and truth tellers. There really is nothing else I could ask of them.

I saw a flyer back in February for a Black Student Union information session and went on a limb to find out more, that meeting lead to my involvement as the founding Vice President of the club here at RTC. Even with this great accomplishment there is no way I could have imagined then being a student leader to the capacity I am today. I am currently the BSU President, Chair of the Diversity and Equity Student Task Force and Executive Board Member of the Associative Student Government. I am also a mother, activist, survivor and soon to be graduate and I’d like to thank Renton Technical College.
I am an enrolled Coeur d’Alene tribal member. I am one of 10 siblings and I am a first-generation college student. I came from humble beginnings, and was affected by poverty and alcoholism growing up. I witnessed alcohol used as an escape from reality so I started drinking myself at an early age. My earliest memories of school were painful. I was bullied and the only subjects I liked were art and lunch because food was scarce at home.

This dysfunctional lifestyle left me with a sense of despair that worsened when I reached junior high. I was placed in foster care but my mother worked hard to reunite my family. This was supposed to be a time for me to build my character and self-confidence, but it was the opposite. The lack of financial stability in my family made it impossible for me to succeed. I had holes in my shoes, and I could not afford gym clothes and other materials, so it was easier to skip class. I lost interest and eventually dropped out.

I eventually earned my GED and did factory work throughout my teenage years. As time progressed, I reflected on the negative effects of alcohol in my life and decided to refrain from using it personally. Eventually I found a great job where I worked for many years until the economic downturn forced me to lose my job. I had a decision to make: I could either seek employment with my limited education or return to the educational process that represented so much negativity in my past.

I chose to attend Seattle Central College. I completed my associate degree along with a Chemical Dependency Professional Trainee certification. I chose this path due to the devastating influence addiction had throughout my life with the hope that I could help others avoid the pain that I had felt.

I then continued in the Applied Behavioral Science (ABS) bachelor’s degree program to gain a fuller understanding of policies, practices and procedures that affect public services in the chemical dependency field. The college’s Foundation gave me a scholarship assistance, which gave me the confidence to finish my education without financial pressure. Since I was better able to concentrate on my studies, I made the Dean’s list several times.

The ABS program has given me the confidence to be knowledgeable, skillful and aware of the different interactions needed to be a competent service provider. The faculty and staff are always ready to help me when I have questions. I have also found a great support network in my cohort. I have expanded my scope of interest to include working with entire families affected by the devastation of addiction.

I will soon graduate with a Bachelor’s of Applied Science (BAS) degree that will enable me to apply the skills I have learned as a professional in the Social and Human Service field. I now realize that my potential is boundless and I plan to attend graduate school in the future.
I was raised on the streets of New York City and in a foster system that didn’t care. I wouldn’t call what I did living so much as surviving. I survived intense physical and emotional abuse. I survived being sold at age seven to men so that my birth parent could use drugs. I survived rapes in foster homes. I survived attempted suicides. I survived hunger, homelessness and even never being loved by the very people who were supposed to. This story isn’t over yet but it’s just begun. For starters I knew I needed to leave my home state and wipe the slate clean.

I stepped off an airplane with one small suitcase and a sleepy three year old waiting for my fresh start in life. I brokered a deal with a lady who offered to take us strangers into her home. I did not have time to stop once my feet touched the ground. I needed housing, employment and further education. I had one month before Fall Quarter. I applied for any and all colleges that offered my desired field of Early Childhood Education and waited. I went to DSHS for help on my housing and found that it was in North Seattle College. I was surprised at this because in New York City such a combination of services does not exist. While applying for DSHS services, it was suggested because of my interest in college that I speak to someone at the school.

I, in that one day, received more help than I was prepared for. Workforce Education, Advising and Financial Aid all made time to see me and try to help. Everyone was patient with me and my hungry child. I rode the bus every day to North Seattle College to continue taking steps toward starting in less than 30 days. North Seattle saw someone who seriously wanted to work hard and get a degree. In the end, days before classes were starting, I found out because I was so late in applying and most funding had already been distributed I could not afford to start. North Seattle did not give up and Workforce allotted emergency funds to cover my semester and even books. My first class started on October 1, 2014. I enjoyed the classes, instructors and college. In my classes I was able to network and find employment in my field of study. I worked overtime and felt empowered by those around me. However, I could not get funded into Winter Quarter because I was not a Washington State resident yet.

I waited one whole year and changed my residency status just to come back and finish taking classes towards my degree. I was readily received when I was prepared to take classes again. My instructors remembered me and my tribulations. They were touched by my courage and determination. I know that, as someone not originally from Seattle and having no roots here, I could not have gotten this far without North Seattle College. My story isn’t over yet.
Myron Ramirez  
*South Seattle College*

It was one of the best days of my life — June 12, 2015. That was the day that I graduated from the University of Washington receiving a bachelor's degree in Construction Management.

My parents immigrated to the United States from the Philippines, and although they did not graduate from college, they did the best they could to support us. That day, I became the first-generation college graduate in my family. The feelings that I felt that day are indescribable, and it wouldn't have been possible without South Seattle College.

As a student at Cleveland High School, I was an underachiever. I rarely attended class, and I just did enough to pass my classes. I lived in the moment and wasn’t concerned about my future. In fact, I barely graduated. While my friends were getting ready to go off to college, I didn’t know what to do. Even if I had great grades, I couldn’t afford college tuition.

That's when South Seattle College removed that roadblock through their 13th Year Promise Scholarship. The scholarship is offered to all graduating students from my high school and paid for one year of college at South Seattle College. The scholarship gave me a sense of hope and inspiration to keep trying.

I became acclimated to my new school very quickly thanks to the campus-wide support from all the faculty and staff. Everyone was there to help me succeed. I remember there was one faculty member, in particular, whose help was indicative of the rest of campus, named Ralph Duffy.

I was struggling in his Computer Programming class in my first quarter. I sent him an email telling him that I was considering dropping the class. He replied and we met the next day. Over the course of the remainder of the quarter, he spent time with me outside of class and tutored me. I ended up not only passing the class, but I received a “B” in the class. His dedication to my success was a common theme that I found across the campus.

Thanks to people like Ralph, my confidence began to grow, and I even made the Dean's List a few times. Not only did my scholarship pay my tuition, but it also allowed me to focus on my studies. With this confidence, I wanted to continue my education at my dream school — the University of Washington which I graduated from last year.

Today, I’m a project engineer for a Bellevue-based construction company GLY. Like my parents did for me, I want to have kids someday and make their lives better, and I can do that now, thanks to my education.

Without the 13th Year Promise Scholarship and the help of South Seattle College I’m not sure where I would be or what I would be doing. South Seattle College not only made a difference in my life, but it also transformed it.
School is never easy for anyone ever, but many students have trouble everyday just to get to class and survive. My name is Andrea Fast and I am taking General Business Administration at Shoreline Community College. I will be graduating in spring of 2016 with my degree, and I am currently working on getting my Certificate of Proficiency.

Although I am on track to graduate with my class, not everyone knows my struggles or what obstacles I have overcome. I am a domestic violence survivor and a mother of two dependent children. We are currently homeless. I left my abusive husband in February of 2015, and since then I have managed to stay in school and on top of my studies. It has been tough to stay focused while moving around domestic violence shelters. I also commute from a distance now as there are no programs nearby equal to the degree I am pursuing at Shoreline Community College.

Many people insisted that I take a break from school or quit because of my situation. I didn’t feel like quitting just because of somebody trying to hinder my success or belittle my goals. I am not a quitter! I am very thankful that my instructors and counselors here at Shoreline are supportive of me in staying in school while dealing with the chaos in my life.

I work hard every day to make a positive change and influence my two girls. I want to set an example for them that it is not okay to be mistreated by a loved one or anybody. I want to show them that education is key to success. Without education I wouldn’t get far in life, nor could I support my family and get back on my feet again without depending on public assistance. As an Alaskan Native, I want to show the Native communities and tribes that standing up to domestic violence and going to school is a powerful stance. My perseverance has led me to accomplish my goals and my determination has led me to keep going, regardless of my situation.

As of summer of 2015, I have found temporary housing in a domestic violence transitional apartment that is good until May of 2016. I also started working on campus to help me gain skills for future employment and to financially help me during school quarters.

Despite my hardship and my struggles, I was recently awarded two certificates: General Business Administration and Retail Management during fall quarter of 2015. I know it is a big step and I am mentally preparing for bigger steps in my future education and employment, and I would also like to show others that barriers don’t have to hinder your goals and achievement.

Thank you for your consideration for this award. I know that this honor would help to validate all my struggles in continuing my education at Shoreline Community College.
The decision to begin studying at Skagit Valley College (SVC) was the catalyst for a positive change within my family. Until that point in time, my family had always struggled to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table. We were like so many other people, living paycheck to paycheck, but not seeing any real hope for a brighter future. Being a high school dropout, teen mother, former gang member, recovering substance abuser, non-traditional, low-income, minority, first-generation college student—I knew that my options were extremely limited. Against all of these odds, I was determined to change the course of not only my future, but that of my children. This is when I found SVC.

When I came to SVC in the winter of 2012, I was scared to death of the vast, unknown journey that was beginning to form in front of me. I had never really thought that college was made for someone like me. Once I began classes, I quickly became aware of all of the support that was available to me to via the SVC community. I began getting involved in everything that I could. I worked in the library, the Writing Center, became a mentor to first generation college students with the AIM High program and became involved in many student groups & clubs. This enriched my experience at SVC greatly & made me feel connected to the community in a much deeper way. Through student involvement in all of these areas, a sense of family is cultivated within the walls of SVC. I was fortunate enough to find my place among that family.

Until I came to SVC, my dream was to become a Registered Nurse. I took the prerequisites for the Nursing program for nearly two years. During that time, I took an internship with United Way of Skagit County. I was one class away from applying to the Nursing program when I made a decision to change everything I had been working toward up to that point. I sat with my adviser, switched majors, crammed 5 classes into one quarter, and graduated with honors with an AA-DTA. I am now halfway through my BA in Human Services with a minor in Education & Social Justice at Western Washington University, with the plan of continuing on to obtain my Masters in Adult Higher Education. My goal is to return to SVC as an employee, reaching out to students like me that may not see college as a possibility. It is my aim to give back to the community that has supported me while I conquered goal after goal, and always told me that I could — no matter what. Thankfully, due to my experience at SVC, I now possess the courage and tools to navigate and venture on into the next chapter of my future with the determination to make the most beneficial decisions for myself & my family. I am forever grateful to the Skagit Valley College community.
At 41 years old, I am completing my first years in college. Graduating from SPSCC with a 3.97 GPA while dual-majoring in a Human Resource Assistant Certificate and an Associate in Applied Science degree in Paralegal studies, both within two years, has been the most challenging experience of my life. More challenging than facing divorce and needing to re-enter the workforce after 6 years of not working outside the home. More challenging than taking the risk of transferring from Tennessee to Washington through my retail job making the federal minimum wage, with four children and what we could pack in a minivan. More challenging than watching my children forced to sleep on piles of blankets purchased from Goodwill, because we could not afford mattresses or eat meals on a cold floor for lack of chairs, a table, or a couch. More challenging than the difficulties I faced on the job that forced me into unemployment as a displaced worker. Without these challenges, I could not be where I am now.

SPSCC challenged me to succeed in statistical mathematics when I never passed pre-algebra in high school, and I had considered myself “not a math person”; to look at my coursework as potential portfolio pieces, worthy of an MBA program, as a favorite professor would later say of some of my work; and to treat each interaction I had, on campus and off, as an opportunity to network with the community.

Without the support of SPSCC faculty, staff, and students, my children would have gone without last Christmas, but for the generosity of a Shoe Box Gifting program implemented through the campus Christian Club. I would utilize networking opportunities to establish no less than three Independent Study programs for classes that were forced to cancel for under-enrollment, because I knew I had to stay on track for graduation. I had to complete this goal of graduating on time so that I could re-enter the workforce as I had when I was facing my divorce, but this time with education to show my persistence, transcripts to show my dedication, and references to compliment my abilities.

I began applying for work recently and quickly discovered that I felt as if I was still the person looking for minimum wage jobs, parading as a more educated person. Were it not for my professors, my work-study supervisor, and staff I met along the way these past two years boosting my morale and forcing me to look at myself as I truly am, I may not have felt the confidence I now do when applying for work in my career field; not just jobs that pay the bills, but positions utilizing my newly-acquired skills which will lead my family off the poverty cycle to a life that could never have been possible, without the education and support I received from professors and staff who guided me, the SPSCC Foundation for their scholarship opportunities, and students who worked alongside me at South Puget Sound Community College.
Sarah Hader  
Spokane Community College

As a 29-year-old single mom with a GED®, College was the scariest thing I could think of. I earned my GED® at the age of 18 at the ABE center on Monroe.

I went back to the same ABE Center where I had earned my GED® a decade earlier, not knowing the first thing about going to college, and simply asked “where do I start?” They gave me an aptitude test and a list of programs available to me. I immediately picked nursing and the woman helping me gave me a sigh and a frown. She informed me that the Nursing program was very competitive and the grades needed just to apply were difficult to achieve. I told her I wasn’t afraid of hard work and I would take my chances. I was encouraged to attend the college prep program to help prepare me.

I did and I believe very strongly that a huge part of my success is due to the basic education provided to me by the absolutely amazing and incredibly hard working teachers Heather Edwards and Anna Gamble from the college prep program at Spokane Community College. I spent the whole of spring quarter of 2015 learning all the basic ins and out of how to function as an effective student, how to apply for financial aid, how to enroll in classes, what would be expected of me as a student, basic English grammar and formatting, math both applied and algebra, and preparing for my college entrance exam the COMPASS test. I was also given support at college prep. I felt like I always had a place to come back to for help. I passed my COMPASS exam with flying colors and did not have to take any remedial classes. I go back and speak to the college prep students every quarter about how to be successful as a nontraditional student.

I went on to receive a 4.0 in English 101, Math 96 & 97, Biology 160, A&P 241 & 242, Micro. 260, Ps.y 100 & 200, Chemistry 121 and Health 147. I also received a 98 percent in blood-borne Pathogens & HIV and have 100 percent in a few fitness classes. I have an overall GPA of 3.99. I have over 100 volunteer hours at the Vanessa Behan Crisis Nursery and I have been a work study student at the Spokane Community College Library for three quarters. I’m on my last quarter of prerequisites and I’m applying to the nursing program in March of 2016 with 30 points.

I would also like to add how wonderful the Head Start and BFET programs have been at helping me care for my son and giving him a safe, stable and educational environment to be in while I made these accomplishments.

I look forward to a long and successful career as a nurse helping people when they are most vulnerable.

Thank you for considering me for this honor, Sarah Hader.
My farmworker parents often remind me the importance of education and even had a saying they shared with my siblings and I, “La educacion es como un llave de oportunidades que nadie te lo puede quitar”, education is like a key that opens the doors to success and no one can ever take that away from you. In the face of a serious language barrier, not being able to speak the English language, I also had to overcome a physical disability to pursue my dream of going to college. Due to an infection during infancy, my right leg was not fully developed. When I was five, my parents migrated from Mexico to work the fields in the United States and I was finally afforded proper health care at Shriner’s Hospital for Children in Spokane, Washington. Shriner’s fitted me with an orthopedic shoe that was 4 inches tall to compensate for the lack of length in my right leg. Although this shoe was customized to help me walk, it was also the target of constant bullying at school for having a “bigfoot” and because I limped. Throughout most of my educational years, my peers would laugh and pointed at me that lead to have early child hood depression and suicidal thoughts.

Fortunately, I persevered, making friends who encouraged me to ignore my peers and continue school. Through working hard to learn English and enduring the simple but strenuous challenge of climbing the stairs in school every day, I fought to break the cycle of poverty. Despite my perceived physical limitations, I did not allow myself to wallow in self-pity or become deter from typical school activities. I wanted to participate in soccer, track, basketball, football weight lifting, FFA and Gear up and I did. In the words of my farmworker forefathers, Si, se puede, which means Yes, you can. This was my opportunity to dispel the stereotype of disability.

In 2012, I had an osteotomy surgery at Shriner’s that required me to have three halo rings around my leg starting from my hip down to my knee. Although very risky, I was fortunate the procedure was successful. After a grueling, painful year of halos and pins, I slowly began the physical therapy process of regaining mobility in my leg and taught myself to walk again. My self-determination, and my family’s support kept me going during the darkest times as I overcame my greatest challenge. I have fully recovered. I enrolled at Spokane Falls Community College to complete my Associate’s degree and transfer to Washington State University. At SFCC I have participated in leadership trainings, stimulating classes and was selected to participate in the prestigious National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start’s internship program in Washington, D.C. There I worked for Farmworker Justice who advocates for migrant farmworker rights. After this experience, I realized I would like to major in political science with the ultimate goal of working on public policy for the good.
Justin Francisco  
*Tacoma Community College*  

**The Unlikely Dream**  

My story comes from an unlikely dream come true. I came from the Philippines, a third world country, living in poverty. Because of my mom’s determination to end the cycle of poverty in our family, she chose to go abroad. She left the Philippines when I was three years old, and finally, when I was 14, she was able to bring me to America.

As a 14-year-old 8th grader, I could barely read, write or do math. I was communicating at a three year old level only knowing a handful of English words. I was also going through puberty and suffering from culture shock. I was alone and very depressed. I wasn’t able to communicate and my relationship with my mom was weak.

During middle and high school I concentrated on school as a distraction from my unhappiness and lack of confidence. I participated in school activities and utilized tutoring opportunities to bring my grades from D’s to B’s and A’s. Next thing I knew I was nominated Student of the Month, Silver Award, Presidential Award, National Bilingual Award, and Honors Junior Society. Getting involved, I began to believe in the importance of my existence.

It was as a student at Tacoma Community College that my foundation for success was cemented. I was encouraged by faculty and staff to develop my leadership skills and I found myself wanting to always challenge myself. I gained confidence in my abilities and the desire to continue striving for the best. I have done more than I ever thought I could. I have been involved in extracurricular activities including being president of the Business Connection and the Center for Academic Support & Achievement (CASA) Club, member of the Black Student Union and a Student Senator. I volunteer with Write@253, the Point Defiance Zoo, and the “Student Voice Project.” I presented at the Students of Color Conference the last two years encouraging others to get involved in community college activities.

Currently, I will be the first person in my family to earn a college degree. I believe I am an example of someone from a developing country who came from poverty and is now living the American Dream and ending the cycle of poverty and becoming something more. I now share my experience on many panels nation-wide, encouraging and inspiring others about how I used my challenges and obstacles as a learning experience.

When I came to America, I was very shy and did not speak English well. Now I am a student activist empowering others to find their full potential. I do all of this because I found out that true happiness comes from the relationships you create and knowing that when you have passed on, you will know you have done and left good things behind to encourage the next generation. I have always wanted to make a difference in my community and now I am transferring to Central Washington to continue pursuing my dreams.
My name is Lexi Sturm and I received my Associate of Arts degree from Walla Walla Community College in 2013 after completing the Running Start Program. In doing so I transcended everything that was ever expected of me.

The first eight years of my childhood were spent learning when to get out of my father’s way. At a very early age I came to recognize the difference between a man high on cocaine, a man coming down off cocaine, a man drunk on whiskey, and a man drunk on beer. In all those instances I knew I needed to stay away from my father or at the very least keep my mouth shut. Whiskey and cocaine were always the worst and being quiet was often not enough to spare ourselves from his rage. My mother got the brunt of it, as my father never laid a hand on me, but I watched what he did to her and I learned that to him we were worthless.

After being separated for four years my parents finally divorced in 2008. By that time my mother had been completely manipulated by another man. Ray was charismatic and knew exactly what to say to trap my mother. After he had completely isolated us from our friends and family and moved us in to his home his charisma disappeared and he became the thing that I can now only describe as evil.

I came to understand why my father did the things he did. It was addiction combined with an awful and abusive childhood. Not that that in any way excuses his actions but for me it is important to recognize, because I was never able to understand why Ray did the things that he did. He seemed to do and say things to us simply for the enjoyment of hurting us. He smiled when he showed my mother a barrel of acid that he claimed would be her demise if she were ever to leave. He smiled when he calmly explained to me that I was nothing more than garbage and that I was the sole reason for my mother’s suffering.

I got to Walla Walla Community College when I was 16. Three days before class started my mother finally left Ray — we were finally free. I was excited, terrified, and broken all at the same time. I was fortunate enough to meet people at the Community College who helped me through the fear and helped fix my broken spirit. Without these people I would never be the woman I am today. I am a 20 year old senior at Whitman College, a homeowner, and a fighter for all those who have been silenced like I was. I discovered my purpose and my worth at Walla Walla Community College and for that I am eternally grateful.
Adam Amundson  
Wenatchee Valley College

Hello, my name is Adam Amundson, and I am a continuing student at Eastern Washington University (EWU) located in Cheney, Washington. I am in the final two quarters and hope to graduate in the spring of 2016 with a BA in Urban/Regional Planning, and I plan to return to my homeland and help my people in traffic safety on the Colville Indian Reservation with my knowledge that I have learned.

I started in my educational goals at Wenatchee Valley College Omak and while attending overcame a few barriers. I appreciate all the support this college gave me in my loss of my oldest son William, and I don’t forget where I came from. I have been reading a book by Stephan Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. It gives an example of the lighthouse theory, and how it got to a point about a captain of a ship that was not going to change his course because of his stubbornness. He had to after learning he was heading toward a lighthouse. This paradigm shift is one that I can relate to! Mine was a little different, a course of alcoholism and drug addiction. It was so bad that I had this same sort of paradigm shift in my life. I was on a crash course with this same lighthouse, and if I didn’t steer clear, I would have had a deadly crash.

This was a course my ship had been on most of my life, and then after making the paradigm shift in my life, I decided to jump into educating myself. I jumped in with both feet, and even after knowing it was not going to be an easy course, I chose it anyway.

I have a brain injury from a car accident I was in in 1996; I suffered in a coma for almost two weeks, and after coming out of it, I was basically left helplessly lying in a bed. It took me a few days to understand what people would say to me. My wife at the time explained to me that a doctor told her this was the way I was going to be for the rest of my life. Did I forget to mention that I died in this accident and was able to see through spiritual eyes? After I understood what doctors told my wife, I decided to show doctors differently.

I changed my paradigm shift again; it has been a struggle to get where I am today, but with a lot of hard work and being able to handle the loss of my two oldest children since I started my educational course in life, I am where I am supposed to be today. If I didn’t have a paradigm shift in my life, I wouldn’t be where I am currently, and I owe all I have accomplished to the faculty, staff and friends of Wenatchee Valley College at Omak.
If you knew me in high school, you would say I was a typical troublemaker. I rarely went to class, and when I did I was an extreme distraction to the other students. I wasn’t always like this. When I was in elementary school I was a great student. I participated in every sport available and I completed my assignments on time. My troubles started when my parents divorced. You see no one in high school knew my mother had kicked me out of the house twice because I was gay; they also probably didn’t know she hit me. In my family it was a sickness to be gay. I was kicked out because my mother didn’t want my brothers and sisters to become gay, too. My teachers never asked and they truly didn’t care. I was told by my vice principal that I was a lost cause. Neither my mom nor my teachers will admit their failures in raising me as an adolescent, and I can’t fully blame them for my failures. I honestly thought I was dumb. I don’t remember a single teacher telling me I was intelligent, or caring about my issues. Maybe they were too busy.

It’s interesting to reflect on my potential after attending WCC for just one year. I came to WCC to get a transfer degree with intent to attend WWU, but what I’ve received is worth more than any transfer credit could ever give. The amount of support I get from my professors on an academic and personal level is astounding. Whatcom allowed me the opportunity to explore my career options by providing low tuition rates, and it provided small classroom settings to get immediate and efficient feedback on my work. I am a direct consequence of divorced and abusive parents, and I’m the result of an amazing institution. The Veteran Center helped me feel safe and Jarrid, the veteran coordinator, helped process my paperwork making my transition to college life smooth and stress free.

The impact WCC has had on my life is priceless. I am part of Phi Theta Kappa as well as the honors program, I won the communication award last year, I’ve made the dean’s list every quarter, and I am the Director of Operations for the ASWCC. I think when you hear a story like mine you can really see the effect schools and parents have on individuals. We can’t choose our upbringings, but we can choose to allow it to break us or motivate us. I choose to be motivated. My inspiration comes from an intrinsic desire to succeed, and the hope that my successes will set a good example for my biological brothers and sisters and my fellow Marines. With WCC’s amazing faculty and a little fortitude, I’ve grown and matured into a successful student. I plan on leaving a positive impact on WCC. When faculty and staff work with a veteran they’ll expect great things. When they work with people from broken homes they’ll expect great things. I tell this story because it provides hope and as the great politician Harvey Milk said, “Hope is never silent.”
The story of how my life was transformed by enrolling at Yakima Valley Community College starts in the winter of 2007. I was 22, pregnant with my oldest child, living in Yakima and working full time as a skilled laborer in a factory in Sunnyside.

I had been homeschooled since third grade. At 17-years-old I had a job, a license, my own income and no formal education. At 18 I married my husband and moved to Yakima. I worked 12-hour days of grueling labor with limited options or opportunities for growth. When we decided to start a family, I realized I wanted something more for all of us. I thought long and hard about what that something else was and decided it was the example I wanted to set for my children. I wanted them to know that you didn’t have to grow up privileged; that with persistence, hard work, and a good education, anything was possible.

Therefore, I enrolled at YVCC as a three-quarter time student and began my trek. I walked onto campus that winter without knowing a soul, without knowing what the word “syllabus” meant, no GED or high-school diploma, and pregnant.

My first quarter of college courses went remarkably well and I began learning how to navigate a complex college system for which I had no preparation or reference. I learned quickly what the word “syllabus” meant! I also discovered engaged and committed teachers at YVCC with a passion for education and seeing students succeed. While I was attending college level classes I continued to work full time, began my journey as a new mother, and earned my GED. I decided that the end goal for all my work was a Bachelor’s in Nursing at Washington State University.

Three years of education at YVCC allowed me to shine in a way never possible before. I was invited to, and joined, Phi Theta Kappa. I earned my Associates of Arts in Science and an acceptance letter to the WSU Nursing program in Yakima.

I now have my Bachelors of Science in Nursing and work full time as a registered nurse at a local hospital in the emergency room. Overcoming all those barriers allowed me to join the work force as a well-educated professional with the preparation and ability to change the world around me in a positive and meaningful way.

I have worked as a nurse for three years now and I returned to YVCC in January of 2015 to work through prerequisites to be able to apply to medical school. YVCC changed my life in unimaginable ways the first time with the quality of their programs, and the dedication of their advisors and teachers. I have been able to be that example to my children thanks to YVCC and due to their initial transformation of my life I am continually able to transform the lives of others around me as a nurse; and soon, with hard work, as a doctor.
Transforming Lives Awards

Washington Community and Technical Colleges

January 2016

2015-2016 Transforming Lives Awards Committee

• Joanne Schwartz, chair, Centralia College
• Karen Seinfeld, Bates Technical College
• Diana Clay, Edmonds Community College
• Jackie Rosenblatt, Pierce College District
• Lisa Parker, Yakima Valley Community College

Celebrating Student Achievement

Timothy Woodiwiss
Big Bend Community College

Angelica Gonzalez
Green River College

Andrea Fast
Shoreline Community College

Armando Garcia
Spokane Falls Community College

Tyler Gilmore
Whatcom Community College

Washington State Association of College Trustees
1300 Quince Street | PO Box 42495
Olympia, WA 98504-2495
www.sbctc.edu/about/college-trustees | 360-704-4307

A special thank you to SBCTC staff Katie Rose and Nanette Angel