Celebrating Student Achievement

Transforming Lives Awards

Washington’s Community and Technical Colleges

January 2019

Arma Carneh
Bates Technical College

Esmeralda “Vita” Blanco
Clark College

Michelle Grunder
Edmonds Community College

Joseph Barboza
Olympic College

Rachelle Himmelman
Skagit Valley College
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 college district’s 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 21, 2019, 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 2019 Transforming Lives awardees are:

- **Arma Carneh**  
  Bates Technical College

- **Esmeralda “Vita” Blanco**  
  Clark College

- **Michelle Grunder**  
  Edmonds Community College

- **Joseph Barboza**  
  Olympic College

- **Rachelle Himmelman**  
  Skagit Valley 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. Stories were edited for length.

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.
Arma Carneh
Bates Technical College

We must return to the beginning of my life to understand the challenges that I have faced.

I was born in Liberia. After war came, my family immigrated to the U.S. For six years life was good. At 13, I returned to Liberia. While there, war broke out again, and my survival depended upon fighting. At 18, I finally escaped the war and returned to the U.S. In the U.S., I struggled. I attained a GED®, but it was difficult. I lost the academic knowledge I had before the war and was now far behind and struggling. At 20, I developed stage four liver cancer and underwent over 30 rounds of chemotherapy. Eventually, I beat cancer but was completely lost and depressed. I spent the next 13 years in trouble with the law and making bad decisions. I was hopeless and became homeless. I could not commit to anything. I was always on edge, not knowing where I would sleep or if I would see tomorrow. I craved a calm spirit.

One night, while sleeping in my car at the park, tired of my life, I decided to complete the FAFSA on my phone. I remembered the peace I felt fixing cars with my cousin, so I chose the Bates Technical College Diesel and Heavy Equipment program.

At Bates, my I-BEST instructor, Dr. Amy Robertson-Bullen, became my most important influence. She saw in me what I did not see in myself. She helped me confront and overcome the limiting beliefs that I had developed, which kept me from succeeding. She continuously encouraged me to not sell myself short and to keep seeking greatness. Many times, doubts crept in. I wanted to give up on school and life; if not for her, I would have. She has never given up on me. She has transformed my insecurity into confidence and has given me a sense of peace that everything will be okay.

That sense of peace guides me. It helped me sleep at night alone in the park, when everything was dismal. It is what awakened me in the morning, eager to take yet another step away from my past. It is what tells me I am on the right path. It brings me comfort by letting me know that I am more than the sum of my past choices and experiences. It whispers to me, telling me that I no longer have to struggle to survive. It leads me to aspire to complete a bachelor’s degree at Centralia College after I graduate from Bates.

Aziki-fôfé is destiny; what is for you shall see your face. You cannot escape it, but your choices can mask it. To be seen requires staying the course, even in the hardest times. I challenge struggling students, even in their darkest hours, to see their own faces, and to invest in themselves—just once—and watch the massive transformation. I also challenge them to identify the distractions that detour them from greatness. We all use distraction to avoid confronting our realities. However, in doing so, we deny our destinies and inhibit positive change.

With Dr. Robertson-Bullen’s help, I stayed the course, which has had profound effects. I am stable. I am safe. I am not homeless. I know my weaknesses and have identified and avoided my distractions. Committing to myself ensured that I will never again be a lesser version of me.

Aziki-fôfé: Bates is my destiny. I could not escape it; it was inevitably going to see my face. It was my transformation. To anyone who is lost or struggling, I ask you, what shall see your face?
When I immigrated to the US from Namibia in 2001, I spoke little English. It was hard to learn the language, let alone study in English. It also meant adapting to a new way of life, which is very different from my home country. But I was determined to make the best out of the opportunity in this country, including going to school and raising a family. Through hard work, I learned to speak English little by little and could communicate with my teachers and classmates.

For many years, I was in a good place until things went terribly wrong. I found myself in a relationship with someone who turned out to be very abusive. My life was turned upside down as I was subjected to psychological and emotional abuse while raising four children. In the end he abandoned us, and we ended up in a homeless shelter. Being a homeless single mother with four children hit me the hardest. I could not cope emotionally as I was in shock and not ready to take care of the children on my own. I suffered from anxiety and stress, but I saw a counselor at Bellevue College.

Despite all the setbacks, I continue to strongly believe that education is the key to a better life. In February 2017, I decided to enroll at Bellevue College. When I started at Bellevue College, I lacked self-confidence. This made me doubt myself and everything that I did. While studying, I had to reread my assignments in order to understand them, but I took advantage of the excellent and supportive learning environment at BC. I went for tutoring to get help with my writing.

Bellevue College is where I learned not just the technical skills that I have today, but also the people skills that are critical to any working environment and day-to-day dealings with others. I received support and guidance from many dedicated professionals at Bellevue College, in particular Professor Ann Minks and counselor Amal Abdulrahman. They were always caring, patient and supportive. This made it easier for me to excel in all my classes. In the end, I obtained a Medical Assistant Certificate, which will enable me to work in the medical field. I would not have succeeded without their support and guidance.

Completing my studies and obtaining the Medical Assistant Certificate was not easy. At times, I was overwhelmed and felt like giving up altogether. I sometimes had to be absent from class when my kids were sick. I learned to do my assignments ahead of time, in case of an unexpected absence. I am thankful for all the people who supported and comforted me throughout this painful chapter of my life.

Now that I have obtained my qualifications, my long-term goal is to find work in the medical field, where I can apply what I have learned at Bellevue College. I now work as a head start teacher at Bright Horizon. Though this is not my dream job, I enjoy it as I am learning new skills that I did not have before. When my kids grow older, I will switch to a career in the medical field.

To all those thinking of continuing their education but who may face some barriers or are unsure, I would say do not let anything stop you. No barrier is permanent. My life experiences gave me the strength to be successful. If I can make it despite all the challenges I faced, anyone can!
Jaylyn Boydon
Bellingham Technical College

I struggled with finding a place where I felt at home in higher education. When I first came to Bellingham Technical College (BTC), I did not feel confident. I had been a Running Start student at Olympic College to get away from high school life. I considered joining the Navy, but pursued education when I was accepted to Seattle Pacific University. I tried to integrate myself into the campus community there, but struggled to connect socially.

Most students can say that the final week of the quarter is one of their more stressful college experiences. Some students call their moms for a pep talk, as I found myself doing June 5, 2014. My stress was not because of final exams. I will never forget my mom telling me, “Do whatever it takes to stay alive, Jaylyn!” My mom was telling me to survive the shooter who had invaded the campus building where I was taking a math final. I was huddled up against a wall in a classroom with my peers for hours, not knowing much about the situation other than it was not a drill and we were not safe. That day lead to a lot of darkness and an impulsive decision to join the University of Washington’s Air Force Reserves Officer Training Corps (AFROTC) program, on top of holding two jobs, as an attempt to distract myself from what had happened. I was eventually academically dismissed from Seattle Pacific University, and quickly enrolled at North Seattle College but instantly felt myself stuck.

“The worse day in your life can be your best day.” – Tony Robbins

I attended BTC’s 2017 spring quarter New Student Orientation as an intended Dental Assisting/Hygiene student. During the student panel, a few of the students mentioned the Success Coaching, Tutoring, Academic Support and Resources (STAR) program. They attributed the program to helping them navigate time management and support systems. I was desperate not to be depressed again, so I signed up. In an initial visit with my STAR Completion Coach, I shared many of my experiences and struggles. She listened to me, connected me to counseling and continued to support me throughout the quarter. Through my involvement on campus I secured a position with STAR as a Navigational Peer Mentor, and I am involved as a student leader with the Associated Students of BTC (ASBTC). At BTC I discovered a student population that I identify with. My previous experiences with community college and university students were groups focused on impressing their peers and creating a new self-image.

At BTC I discovered a diverse and resilient student body who I could relate to and who are not concerned about image. This confidence comes from a decision to pursue a technical education that will prepare us for a career. My future goals are to secure a career as a Dental Hygienist and eventually become a Dental Hygiene instructor. I plan to volunteer time providing dental services to underserved populations. A personal goal I have is to create a community platform of support for people through shared stories of inspiration.

The piece of advice I have for students who are unsure about their ability to attend a community or technical college is take the time to do research on their own. Discover who they are and who they want to be. Figure out personal learning styles, passions, likes and dislikes. Take the words of others with a grain of salt because the life you are living is your very own. Create your own path and keep striving – even if the end of your path keeps changing!
Jim Leland  
**Big Bend Community College**

Roman philosopher Seneca said, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” I was introduced to Big Bend Community College (BBCC) when a lack of opportunity met a lack of preparation. REC Silicon had one of an ongoing string of RIFs, and I was abruptly and unceremoniously laid off on Nov. 2, 2016. Sitting at WorkSource with my hat in my hands, I needed to decide what was next. I could continue to punch a clock for someone else and accept the risk that had already led to two layoffs in as many years, or I could go back to school and put my destiny back into my own hands.

Unmanned Systems has fundamentally and irrevocably altered the way in which I view our world and how I perceive the future of industry and education. Along that path, there have been so many people instrumental in making that change possible—they are the pinnacle of professionalism and unequivocally deserve whatever recognition can be bestowed upon them, as their commitment to service and passion for excellence is improving lives and our communities on many levels.

Alicia Wallace, though now outside the college, was pivotal in getting me going with financial aid when the ink was not yet dry on my RIF paperwork, the wheels of government spun slowly and no TAA funding existed yet. Rafael Villalobos has tirelessly worked and reworked my training plan to fit a two-year program into a window of a year and a half because we had to wait for accreditation. The instructors all along the way have represented what all students should hope for in educators—knowledgeable, passionate, flexible, patient. Kristen McCrae, Tabatha DeLong, Andrea Elliott, Barbara Whitney, Brinn Harberts, Gary Baker, Byron Will-Noel, Drs. Patrick Ford and Patrick Barton, and many others—they have all worked with my extraordinarily complex needs and schedules, demonstrating unwavering commitment to me as a student and their selfless service as educators.

I had considered returning to school on several occasions in the past, but I was faced with a lack of time and money—I either had too much of one and not enough of the other, and frequently, too little of both. My life as a working adult, sole provider, husband, and father, did not lend itself to going back. In that sense, being laid off, especially from REC, created a unique crossroads. The staff and faculty of BBCC have guided me at every step to identify and seize the magnificent potential in that life-changing moment.

I’m coming up on the two-year anniversary of the RIF. I couldn’t have predicted the overwhelming changes that have happened in the interim. The relationships I’ve formed, the experiences I’ve had, the potential that exists—I wouldn’t have believed it possible, and all in so short a time. Because of our time at BBCC, my wife and I have started 360 Aviation. We have had the opportunity to foster relationships with realtors, agencies at several levels, and businesses across the state; worked on national precision agriculture projects; prototyped parts for businesses; and are developing proprietary solutions for commercial needs. We’re committed to advancing unmanned systems in industry.

To those potential students out there—it’s a rare case indeed to find a person as passionate and committed to your future as you are, who believes in you, perhaps more than you do. BBCC is full of those people. The training and resources exist to make any dream you have a reality; the only thing missing is you. Take that courageous step into going back to school—you can build a better future for yourself and your family.
Jordan Barde  
*Cascadia College*

My primary barrier to pursuing my educational goals has been my history with drug addiction. The first time I attempted to attend college, I was struggling to overcome a severe heroin problem—one that ultimately left me living in my car and unable to attend to any responsibilities, educational or otherwise. My addiction brought me pain, despair and hopelessness, and I disappointed both myself and the people in my life. Eventually, after sinking to astonishing lows, I was able to enter a drug treatment program. I moved into a sober-living halfway house and remained there for seven months while cementing my recovery. This path has led me to reconnect with who I was before addiction. I have rediscovered my love of nature, and previously unknown talents in math and the sciences. I decided to pursue an engineering degree, which will offer me a way to contribute to the pressing problems of environmental degradation and climate change. I believe that using my talents for service is a way to give something back to this world, to which for so long I contributed little.

As I began to rebuild my life, I wanted to re-enroll in college but found myself worried about the pressure school might place on my hard-won sobriety. Going back to school was terrifying, but somehow starting at a community college seemed less daunting. I wanted to begin slowly, in order to maintain a balance between my academic and recovery-based activities. I know that if I do not maintain my sobriety, I’m unlikely to succeed in anything I pursue. Community college offered an easier way in for me.

My adviser, Anna Stufano, has been very impactful. She is thorough, approachable, and seems personally invested in my success. She has been instrumental in helping me navigate academia. She consistently goes above and beyond, and her commitment to her work is clear.

I had serious doubts about going back to school because of how badly it had gone during my previous attempt, before I was sober. My advisor’s clarity, guidance and encouragement helped dissipate my fear and has enabled me to move forward more confidently. Having someone to answer my questions and offer guidance is both comforting and energizing.

My short time at Cascadia College has served to reinforce my desire to contribute to this world through innovation and creativity in engineering. I plan on completing my prerequisites at Cascadia before attending the University of Washington or Seattle Pacific University to complete my bachelor’s degree in Mechanical Engineering. Ultimately, my dream is to work as an engineer, developing environmentally sustainable technologies.

I would advise students that are feeling unsure about entering or re-entering school to start slow. Despite how it feels—especially if you haven’t been doing much with your life—there really is no rush. College is both stressful and an immense amount of work. Starting slowly can help ease you in. When you aren’t overwhelmed right out of the gate, you are much more likely to stay committed and succeed. I wish you all the best.
Jaima Kortlever  
*Centralia College*

Over the past 13 years, I have had the pleasure of raising three amazingly spunky, creative children, mostly on my own. For most of their lives, I have worked not one, but two jobs. I have spent my days sleeping and my nights working to ensure my children had everything they needed. Coming back to school was not something I took lightly, but with the advice from my children and other family I decided to try for my GED®/high school diploma. I enrolled at Centralia College and finished my high school education in two quarters. I started my first college classes in spring 2017.

Deborah and Gene Shriver in Transitional Education really helped me see my potential academically, and as a person. If not for them, I likely would have left Centralia College after receiving my high school diploma. But I didn’t look back. I kept going.

Deborah and Gene would check in on me to see how school, work and home life were going. At one point, Deborah knew I was feeling defeated with my GED® pre-test scores, and I was having car issues. She would tell me that she would get my address, pick me up at home, and take me to class every day if that is what would keep me going to Centralia College. Just having Gene and Deborah express their care for my education and for the well-being of me and my family made it easier to come to class with fewer worries. I knew I had people who cared.

From a young age, I have dealt with my share of ups and downs. I lost my father to cancer at the age of eight, and I had open heart surgery at 12. At the age of 18, I had my first son. I had another son at 21, and a daughter at 24. I overcame these obstacles to attend Centralia College by having a positive attitude and knowing my resources. By understanding myself and my strengths and weaknesses, I began to understand how to reclaim power in life. I make sure to stay true to who I am and where I want to go in life. I make the conscious decision to better myself daily. I also try to view obstacles from numerous vantage points. I know I was meant for more, and this isn’t the end of the road for me.

I am currently the president of the Associated Students of Centralia College and an active member of Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society for two-year college students. I spent the 2017-18 academic year as a Student Ambassador. I take my role as a student and the ASCC president as seriously as I take my role as a mother and provider for my family. I plan on finishing my bachelor’s and master’s degrees before my sons graduate from high school. I will continue my education while working on my Ph.D, and I hope to be finished by the time my daughter graduates high school. I plan on working in higher education, with an emphasis in student relations, and I may teach.

If I could share one piece of advice with other students, it would be, “Never give up.” There are so many people who want to see you succeed, so use your resources. Always remember there are people to turn to for help, and make sure to tell your story and listen to the stories of others. You never know how your story may help others and how others’ life stories can impact you.
Esmeralda “Vita” Blanco
Clark College

Growing up, I never dreamed of going to college. I felt like all the odds were stacked against me. I am the baby of 27 siblings, and no one in my immediate family had graduated from high school and gone on to college. I was raised by an abusive and alcoholic father, and many of my siblings were on drugs and alcohol.

My father kicked me out at age 15. I found myself on the streets and scared. After six months I moved from California to Vancouver, Washington, where I lived with siblings who repeated the same cycle of drugs and addiction. I tried going to school, but had to quit to go to work full-time and get my own apartment at age 16.

At the age of 17, I became pregnant and was not able to finish high school. I worked for 20-plus years and supported my two daughters on my own. But I always felt a calling to do more.

In 2016, after taking a leap of faith to leave my job, I started the High School 21+ program at Clark College. The first time I had to write an essay, it took me 30 hours. But the day after I handed it in, my daughter needed help with her own middle school essay, and for the first time, I was able to help her with her homework. I knew then that I was on the right path.

In June 2016, I was given the honor of representing the college’s high school diploma and GED® graduates at Commencement, where I shared my story with over 6,000 people. By then, I had decided to continue my education and become the first in my family to go to college.

I am currently in the last year of my associate degree in Business Administration. I have recently been blessed with a part-time job on campus as a Student Ambassador, which is a joy because Clark College is where my heart is. I love to share my story with others, welcome them to Clark and encourage them that it’s never too late, and you’re never too old to come to college.

The Clark College community has become my backbone in my educational journey. There were many days filled with doubt, fear, and too little time to get everything done, but the support and motivation from professors and staff have inspired me and made a huge impact on my success. Every class has offered me an opportunity to grow as a person and as a mother, as well as gain knowledge and skills.

My current plan once I graduate is to transfer to WSU Vancouver for my bachelor’s in Public Speaking/Communications. As I’ve been able to reflect and overcome some fears, I believe my calling is to be a public speaker. I want to inspire others to become their best. Beyond the professional side, I want to be an inspiration to my family and give back to my community, especially to other single moms, otherLatinas, and anyone who needs encouragement to find and use their voice.

This journey is not just for me; it is for my daughters and future generations. My hope is to sever my family’s roots of settling for less. I am working hard to accomplish this, to face all the challenges that are in front of me. I realize my story is not completely unique BUT it is mine to finish. Clark has given me the confidence to believe that no matter what life throws at me, my education cannot be taken away.
As far back as I can remember, I've always had a thirst for knowledge. But after dreaming of attending college, my world fell apart when my father passed away from cancer. I was seven years old, and I watched my mother wither away into a deep depression and turn to drugs to cope with his death. I also turned to drugs to cope with the pain, and my life became so unstable that I dropped out in the ninth grade.

At 17, I met who I thought was the love of my life. On Jan. 21, 2011, my beautiful daughter Cheyenne was born, and for the first time I saw hope for the future. But I was caught in a physically and mentally abusive relationship. I started drinking heavily and abusing pain pills. I finally got the courage to leave him but didn’t know how to part with my addiction, and Child Protective Services took my daughter.

Once they took my daughter, my life took an even darker turn. I had struggled with addiction for many years, and I couldn’t seem to find my way out of the darkness. I was homeless and hopeless, praying every day for the pain to be lifted from my heart. When my lawyer suggested drug court, I was broken and tired and willing to try anything.

After six months of treatment, I got my daughter back. I've been clean since her fourth birthday—Jan. 21, 2015—and I only look back to see how far I’ve come. Once I got clean, my love for learning returned and I knew I had to go back to school, no matter how hard or scary it would be.

I earned my GED® and registered for college classes. Choosing Clover Park Technical College (CPTC) was one of the best choices I've ever made. The staff and faculty are so passionate about what they do and supported me every step of the way. I was a work study student and intern in the Foundation for over a year. I truly look up to the women there who continue to mentor me. They never hesitate to help or encourage me. It’s because of them I feel confident I will be successful now that I’ve graduated.

I now work at the same treatment facility where I graduated. I get to be a living example that any addict can recover and find a new way of life. I spend my days helping other addicts realize their full potential and watching them become productive members of society. My goal is to get my master’s degree and open my own private practice in the future.

Going back to school gave my life meaning again. I finally have a purpose; something I’m passionate about doing. I truly love the person I am today and can enjoy everything that being a mother has to offer. I no longer live in the darkness or let my past define me. I’m not ashamed, because it has shaped the person I am today. When anyone asks me about going back to school, especially at CPTC, I tell them to absolutely go for it. The staff and faculty are so encouraging and do anything they can to help students succeed.

My journey in life has been challenging and painful; I've faced many roadblocks along the way. It’s not easy to talk about those times. But today, I’m proud to say that out of those many challenges has grown a 3.9 GPA. I've been clean almost four years. I’m a committed mother. I’m a college graduate with a Human Services degree.
Maria Mayorquin
Columbia Basin College

I remember sitting in my fifth-grade class, completing an assignment of what I wanted to be when I grew up. At the time, I didn’t understand the struggles and sacrifices my parents endured for me and my siblings. When I was just three years old, my parents came to the United States, running away from poverty and violence in Mexico. We were undocumented and feared being deported at any time. I witnessed my parents working hard to make ends meet for our family. Nevertheless, I still knew I had a future in nursing—my calling in life is to do something good for the community and to care for others. I am thankful that my mother was a great motivator to push education to better our future; she believed in the “American Dream.”

Being Hispanic with minimal resources as an undocumented child, obtaining a career became farther away as I grew older. Not having a role model within my community was a challenge; there was no hope. My parents obtained a Visa and the fear was over, until failure was automatically given to me the moment I became pregnant at the age of 17. Deep inside of me, I knew I was not going to allow stereotypes rule my life, so my journey began.

I began working as a nursing assistant once I graduated from high school and began my prerequisites for the nursing program. It was a struggle to balance life, a newborn, work, and school, especially while in an abusive relationship. I managed to get out of the abusive marriage and in that same year I was accepted to the Associate Degree in Nursing program with Columbia Basin College (CBC). After graduating, I knew I wanted to continue my education, but raising my daughter was a higher priority, so I took a break. Then, when I heard CBC was starting an online Bachelor’s of Science nursing program for working nurses, I knew I had to apply. My reasoning behind choosing CBC was not ever questioned. I had a great learning experience the first time around and the staff was always helpful. It was also the most affordable route that could meet my family needs.

Completing the program was not easy, being a single mother—now of a 12 year-old. I maintained two jobs and moved to the night shift so that I would not get in debt with student loans. With the encouragement of my instructors, I applied to the CBC Foundation Scholarship Program and to my surprise, I was a recipient of the Jerry Thornton for Nursing Scholarship. CBC has been more than my school; it has become my family. From the Dean of Nursing to all the instructors, they all have been great role models providing advice of how it’s possible to overcome any barriers. I have struggled to appropriately write English, but my instructors have encouraged me to not let that be the reason to prevent following my dreams.

In the process, I obtained the Orthopaedic Nurse Certification (ONC) as I completed the bachelor’s program in June 2018. I never thought I was going to graduate with Honors! For my future, I plan to find a Nurse Practitioner program with an orthopaedic specialty to obtain my master’s degree. CBC has provided me the tools necessary to continue moving forward. My perseverance, struggles, and hope have transformed me to become the person I am now. For now, I continue to strive to help the community and be a role model for others. My big piece of advice is to not let others define who you are.
Michelle Grunder  
*Edmonds Community College*

What makes us human is our ability to feel. For many years, addiction and a life on the streets took away my ability to feel and quelled the pain of childhood abuse. I got caught up in a downward spiral that led me into a dark, violent situation from which I barely escaped.

I am a survivor of sex trafficking. I’ve had my life and the lives of my six children threatened. I’ve been belittled, had my confidence destroyed, and was told I don’t deserve a family. This is part of my story, but it does not define me.

It’s been a long journey, trying to put my family back together, heal our deep wounds, and move forward in creating a stable life for us. Change and interrupting long-standing patterns was an inevitable part of reclaiming my life and my family, and I knew education would be critical to creating stability and helping us out of poverty.

When I began my studies at Edmonds Community College, I wanted to be a chemical dependency counselor, but I changed paths along the way. I want to reach women and particularly young teens and girls before they need addiction counseling, before the gangs try to traffic and profit off of them. I want to prevent this from happening, not treat it.

My instructors at Edmonds CC showed me my own strengths and taught me how to build on those. Instructor Christina Coiro took the time to sit and listen, knowing it was hard for me to talk about my past. She used her counseling skills to help me discover and identify my passion for prevention. The TRIO program was also vital to my success. They provided resources that I didn’t have, like a computer and printer, and also clarified programs and application processes. Through the guidance and support I received at Edmonds CC, I found the right path and am a proud graduate of Edmonds CC’s Health and Human Services associate’s degree program with a 3.77 GPA.

Now I have the skills and knowledge to reach those most in need.

As an advocate, I use my story and gift for connecting with others to go back to those dark places—where no one wants to go—to help other women find a way out. I was recently hired to work with at-risk teens who have been abused or trafficked at a confidential residential crisis center.

Faith has shown me that as deep as I could go into the darkness is as far as I could go into the light. I have a dark and a light side, and I get to choose. But first, I have to choose to live and show up for my life. I’m choosing to live, to show up, and to continue my education.

Currently, I’m completing required prerequisites to enroll in Edmonds CC’s Child, Youth, and Family Studies applied bachelor’s degree program. I want to learn, because I want to know. Education is empowering. Our weaknesses are fed by what we don’t know, and we’re empowered when we know more. If I could share one piece of advice with potential students, it would be, “You can do anything you put your heart and mind to. Don’t doubt yourself because of your past, and ask for help when you need it – do not be afraid to ask.”
Eight years ago, coming to the United States was my only hope for making my dreams true. The war in Iraq stole many years from me—years I could not study or move forward with my ambition of becoming an accountant. Four years ago, I came to the United States as a refugee with my family. I thought I would be able to start studying the next day, but it was not that easy because I had to work to support my family. When I moved to Washington three years ago, I wanted to start school, but I learned I was not yet eligible for financial aid. I was so disappointed because it was impossible for me to pay the tuition. I had to wait another year before I could start school.

Later, I was not sure where to start or how to apply for financial aid. A co-worker recommended starting at a community college. So, I went to Everett Community College (EvCC) to ask about the process to register for classes. I was nervous because I am not familiar with the education system here. However, it was clear and very simple. I got the “Getting Started” sheet from the EvCC Welcome Center and a helpful lady showed me the steps. She asked me for my major and recommended that I email one of the accounting advisors to get more information regarding available degrees and selecting the right path for me. I met with accounting faculty advisor, Marie Connelly, who asked me about my studying abilities, and then set an academic plan that fit me perfectly.

Studying in English was challenging at first, but I worked hard to improve. I joined TRiO Student Support Services on campus. I cannot imagine my journey without TRiO. They supported me from the first day until my graduation day. They provided academic and transfer advising, tutoring services, personal statement workshops, and many other resources to support me and other students. I used to run to them anytime I needed help, and they were always there, happy to help me or refer me to the right place to get my answers. In addition to my academic success at the college, I gained many leadership experiences that helped me become stronger and more confident. I also met many wonderful people. I went to the college knowing no one and graduated having so many friends.

I graduated with my Associate in Business degree in June 2018. Then I transferred to the University of Washington Bothell to get my Bachelor’s in Business Administration/Accounting, and my CPA. My goal after I earn my Bachelor’s degree is to apply my accounting skills with non-profit organizations that support homeless and poor children around the world. I want my work to serve children who lost their childhood, lost their families and friends, and grew up forgetting how to dream.

My advice to anyone who is not sure where to start or what to do to reach their goals, is to start at a community college. Go talk with their advisors, let them help you find which major fits you the most. Do not worry if you think you might change your mind about your major. At the community college many of the classes can count toward several degrees. Also, get involved on campus. You can make friends by joining clubs and getting involved in student activities outside of class. Most of all, never give up. There is always a chance to be successful, you just need to ask for help and you will get it.
My name is Roina Maafala, and I am a Sophomore at Grays Harbor College in Aberdeen. I am from Honolulu, Hawaii, and was brought here on a volleyball scholarship. During my time at the college I will be working on earning my Associates of Arts degree, looking to major in science. Like many students, being able to earn an AA in the hopes of transferring to a four-year university is an opportunity that only few get a chance to do. In my short time living in Aberdeen, I have been able to find a new home and a huge sense of family at Grays Harbor through the coaches, staff, and even members in the community. Being able to build new relationships every day and step out of the comforts of Hawaii has by far been some of the biggest blessings to come out of moving here.

At first, I was hesitant about making the move to Aberdeen because I had taken a three-year break from school to help support my family. As the oldest of five, ages ranging from eighteen to four years old, everything I do is in the best interest of my parents and siblings. Before coming to Washington, my family and I lived in Alaska for two years facing the worst of circumstances. We were displaced from our home, thereby putting us into a homeless shelter. This forced my parents and I to share the load of working two to three jobs to make ends meet. While getting back on our feet, we decided to move back home to Hawaii in 2017. After arriving there I was presented with an opportunity to play for the women’s volleyball team. As mentioned, I was hesitant and every day I struggle with the idea of being so far from my loved ones. It is an expectation in my culture and family for the oldest to be able to help all the time. I’ve worked since I was fourteen years old to assist my parents in providing for my siblings with food, utilities, and any other areas of need. At one point I attended a university, but I put my academic career on hold to be able to contribute more at home. To the outside it may seem like too big of a sacrifice or responsibility to place on one person, but my family is the sole reason I decided to pursue and continue my education. They encouraged me to come to Grays Harbor and are my everyday reminders of my purpose and future aspirations.

I am in my second year at Grays Harbor and will be furthering my education with volleyball as a platform. I intend to earn my bachelor’s degree (Pharmacy) when I transfer to a four-year institution. My goal is to be able to provide for family without limitations. I have dreams for myself, but the goals I am looking to accomplish come from continuing my education. For those who are unsure about college my best piece of advice would be to try. It is easy to let the worries of college and life deter you from success. We cannot allow our current situations to determine our futures. Even if plans don’t go the way we intended we have the experience to reflect on. I am an extremely hard worker and the small start of success I’ve gained here is a true testament to that. Each accomplishment I make academically or through athletics is confirmation for myself that I belong here in college!
Danielle Kies
Green River College

Due to my inability to interact on a social level, I wanted a degree that kept me outside ... little did I know just how much I would still have to engage with others. I found a family within the Natural Resources (NatRs) Department, one that did not judge, but understood; one that did not hold me back but pushed me forward; and one that shared a mutual love for the environment, which has been the only thing there for me in the past. Dr. Monica Priebe was like a surrogate mother, showing kindness, compassion, and pushing me when she knew I needed it whether I wanted it or not. Her tough love and strength made me aspire to be a better me.

Growing up, I have spent a good chunk of my life homeless with mental disorders that have prevented me from most social interactions. My mother was murdered when I was three, and my foster mom, who I called grandmother, was mentally abusive and made me feel as if I would never amount to anything. I feared people more than anything else. I had developed borderline personality disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, resulting from a series of events that are too much to get into right now. For most of my life I could not cross the street by myself, I had a friend pretend to be me to make medical appointments and I would hide if I was around more than three people. After I found a friend that truly believes in me, I decided to attempt having my own life and figured school was my best option at creating a future, though I never thought I would succeed. In the beginning, I did my best to stay present, remembering that as I walked to school I only had to walk to school, and not stress about what would happen after I got there. Soon, I felt like part of the NatRs family, something I never really had; and though I still struggled, I was able to push myself a little farther each day. I wanted to succeed, and despite constantly questioning if I was smart enough, good enough, or worthy, the NatRs Department (instructors and students) helped me to become somebody that has now given speeches (including one to the city council of Covington), participated in multiple quiz bowls at conventions related to my field of study, and move on towards a master’s degree. I not only succeeded because of Green River’s NatRs Department, I thrived. I am holding back the tears as I write this, but I will never forget that department.

Currently, I am attending Evergreen State College, where I plan to get a master’s in environmental studies. I am utilizing everything that I learned while at Green River College, daily. My thesis will be on invasive vegetation, and I plan to be a seminar speaker, sharing my thesis findings at the Society of America Foresters State Convention as well as someday being a speaker at a Ted Talk. I am hoping to land a job with the FIA (Forest Inventory and Analysis), where I can further utilize my skills learned at Green River College and knowledge learned at Evergreen.

I think the best advice I can give is an old saying I always try to remember, if you do not try then you already know the outcome, but trying gives you a chance to change, and failure is not a representation of being bad at something, but a chance to learn a better way.
Cynthia Wambui  
Highline College

After graduating from high school, I felt like I had no direction. I didn’t know who to reach out to nor where to start. Instead of continuing on with my education, I decided to get a full-time job. My family was struggling financially; thus, I was happy that I had been given a chance to help out with all the bills. On that account, I put off the thought of going to school for three years.

After a while, I started feeling like I was stuck. I reflected on the person that I was when I graduated, and the person that I am after those three years had passed. I had not grown as a person. Despite the fact that I was grateful for the work experience that I had gained, I realized that this wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I spent countless nights staying up late thinking about the direction that my life would take if I continued to stay in the same position that I was in. This is when I started having a firm grasp as to why education is so important.

I began researching about the colleges in Washington. I was hesitant about going to a four-year university because I wasn’t sure about what I wanted to major in, and I was worried about the high costs. I made an appointment with one of the academic advisors at Highline College. The meeting with the academic advisor became life changing. They showed me all the resources that Highline offers to students like myself, and they helped me identify my academic strengths. As a low-income, first-generation college student, I joined the TRiO Program to help me navigate some of the barriers to higher education, like paying for textbooks or access to information. In high school, I was part of the anatomy and physiology team in a club called Science Olympiad. Due to my experience at this club, I chose to major in Biology. I enjoyed learning about the human body, and I wanted to be a part of a rigorous major that would hone my analytical skills. My Cell Biology and Majors Animals courses validated my choice in major since I enjoyed what I was learning in class.

I was eager to apply the knowledge I had learned in class to hands-on learning experiences, so I decided to apply to the UW Neurological Surgery Summer Program. This program introduced me to the research world. I got involved with a project at Seattle Children’s Research Institute (SCRI) on Dravet Syndrome with UW’s Dr. Franck Kalume. This internship broadened my horizons, and I still continue my internship project as a volunteer at SCRI. Through this internship, I learned that there’s more to biology than just biological systems; it can merge with engineering to create real impact in the world.

My projects, research and lived experiences helped me decide to major in bioengineering after I transfer to a four-year university. Reflecting back, if I had not made that decision to seek more out of life, I wouldn’t have come across all these wonderful opportunities. I would still be in the same position where I had no direction. My advice to other students and for those who are unsure would be the secret to getting ahead is getting started (credit to Mark Twain). There are so many opportunities out there that are available to help you and if you don’t reach out, you may never get to know what those opportunities are. You don’t have to feel miserable and stuck in life.
Admittedly, it was luck that got myself, my husband, and my young son, Davit, out of our tiny studio apartment in Stepanakert, Armenia, and a situation where, even as a senior accountant and with a husband in the army, we could barely make ends meet in Armenia’s challenging economy. My brother had entered us into the lottery for a United States Green Card, and we won. That was six years ago. When we arrived here there were two paths we could choose. One was to work wherever possible right away. The second, which was longer and harder, was to go to school and to live our dreams. We chose the harder path.

There is no magic story about why I chose Lake Washington Institute of Technology (LWTech). I chose it because it was the closest college to the apartment where our friends let us live. The magic happened later when I met so many amazing people at LWTech. I started with ESL classes. My adviser, Kaytlyn Hoch, advised me to start the I-BEST accounting certificate program. One day, at the beginning of my I-BEST program, I came to Kaytlyn to drop off some documents and she asked me about the next step of my life. I started to cry suddenly. I told her that the place that our friend gave us to live was under foreclosure and the bank was bringing potential buyers to it every day, and that we were unable to rent an apartment because we didn’t have a credit history. That was one part of my life that I can never forget. Kaytlyn went above and beyond her college responsibilities. She spent a couple of days calling different shelters and housing and all kinds of organizations to find a place for us to live.

At the same time, Kaytlyn also told me about the Opportunity Grant and helped me to apply. My husband, my young son, and I were on the verge of being homeless and we didn’t have much money. With Kaytlyn’s help, we were able to find an apartment, have friends co-sign so that we could rent the apartment, and I received the Opportunity Grant, which helped us not to worry about rent.

My husband is also a student at LWTech. He took ESL classes for three years— from level one all the way to level six. It’s been a challenging time for him with school, family, and work without knowing English. But he, like me, hasn’t given up. He has kept going to school. Now he is in his last quarter of the Computer Security and Network Technology AAS degree program.

LWTech was the place where I received my first degree. Kaytlyn was just one of the people at LWTech who impacted not only my education, but my life. Without them, I wouldn’t be where I am now. Now, I work at LWTech in the Marketing Department, and I am a full-time student studying accounting and business at the University of Washington. I am halfway to my bachelor’s degree; after which, I will finally be able to find a job in the accounting field.

If I could give one piece of advice to other students, it would be that there are no difficulties that a person cannot overcome. If I, without any English, came to a country where I didn’t have any relatives and was able to become a student at one of the best universities in the state and become a nominee for the Transforming Lives Award, then every obstacle is possible to overcome. Believe and never give up.
Gordon Bolar
Lower Columbia College

I watched my single mother go from welfare to being a nurse and being able to provide for her household that included four children. I suspect I was the worst.

I actually came from a rough background, though. I lost my dad to alcoholism at an early age. That was the beginning of a series of bad choices, and they continued into my adult life. While I was able to hold a job as a commercial fisherman for a few years, and do side jobs in off season to survive, I didn’t hold a real job. I suffered a traumatic brain injury and that sent me into an even lower state, and I stayed that way for a long time. Along the way, I met a girl who I ended up having two beautiful little girls with. Shortly after, she disappeared. I took care of my girls as infants by myself for almost a year. Then I was busted for drugs and stolen property, and went to jail and lost my kids to CPS. I was looking at ten years.

In jail, I was offered drug court, got out and went to Oxford House through drug court. I took parenting classes, mental health, anger management, and drug treatment. Through all that I was running out of welfare to support my kids. So, I decided to go to school.

Originally, I chose to be a diesel mechanic. While going to several parenting, homework, treatment, counseling and NA groups each week—and juggling childcare, doctor’s appointments and basic stressors, I managed to not only keep a passing GPA, but did quite well in classes; averaging about 3.2 out of 4.0. Along the way, I was so happy. I had a lot of help from my mom and girlfriend, and all the faculty and staff and everybody at Lower Columbia College (LCC). I learned that I was getting better and decided to get my degree in Welding, as well.

I wanted to give back and help out my peers, too. I would try to take certain students under my wing and help them to the best of my ability. I can remember a time when a student came in high. He was a friend of mine. I took him aside and empathized that I could relate to where he was at that time, and that life didn’t have to be this way. And I took him to some NA meetings and helped him get clean. There was also a time when my lab partner didn’t have money for formula or meds or diapers for his newborn baby, so I lent him several hundred dollars. It began to feel really good to be able to help out and give back. So, I volunteered when I could for United Way, Oxford House, NA and Lower Columbia College.

Long story endless, I completed 4.5 years of schooling at LCC. I acquired an AA in Diesel and Heavy Equipment Technology, an AA in Welding, my GED®, my state issued high school diploma, and a Class-A Commercial Driver’s License (CDL). I now have a career with a federal municipality where I use all of the skills that I acquired at LCC. I’m now able to take good care of my girls. I’m a home owner and a tax-paying citizen. I have been clean for 6.5 years. My future will probably see grandchildren and living through a great retirement.

I recommend that others attend college. Don’t let fear stop you. Get in and find out. Suit up and show up every day. Try as hard as you can.

Thank you LCC.
It is with great pleasure that I share my story for the Transforming Lives Award. In reviewing the description and requirements, I feel this award embodies who I am as a person. My passion to volunteer in the community, my life experiences and my drive to become a true social agent of change has helped me view the world and society from a different lens.

I grew up in a small town in the state of Sao Paulo. My dad left my mom while pregnant with me; she raised me while working as a full-time housekeeper, and selling her own artwork. In 1999, two weeks after the celebration of sixth birthday, my life took a turn. The woman I loved so much passed away from breast cancer. I was fortunate to have my aunt adopt me. I couldn’t imagine where I would be if was not for her. She took good care of me, taught me values, lessons about life—and most importantly—she always talked about my mom. She talked about how brave and kind she was, and how I reminded her of my mother.

My journey begins from a young age, where I was involved in volunteer projects at my school and neighborhood. Creating activities for at-risk youth on the weekends and sharing my story with the community. As I got older, my curiosity about what existed beyond my city limits grew. I wanted to find a better way of life for my family. This inspired me to take a brave step in 2014. I left my hometown in Brazil with one piece of luggage, weighing in at 40 pounds, and a ton of hopes and dreams to live in the United States.

During my transition, I came in contact with some amazing people who talked to me about starting and funding my educational journey at North Seattle College (NSC). In winter 2017, NSC became home for me. Here, I have felt a connection between my academic goals and my role in society. The college afforded me opportunities to get involved and develop my skills while studying, while giving me resources to keep going. Not only have I gotten much closer to getting my diploma, but I also gained a community. I have met people here who have not only helped me navigate through the college experience, but also given me advice and tools to succeed through life. And for that, I will always be thankful. I understand the value of relationship building and working collaboratively within the college and the community.

While at North a few of my proudest moments have been speaking at North’s President’s Day, helping create North’s first food bank, and working at the Gender Equity Center and office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. I will graduate with my AAS-General Business next winter and the support from my community has certainly contributed to my success at North Seattle College.

Everything I have been through in my life has surely contributed to who I am today. My hope is to keep using these experiences, combined with what I have learned academically, to build a sustainable business that will positively influence my community in Brazil. What I will take away from my experience at North is to surround yourself with people who are optimists, even when your goal seems far away. There are people that will help you, empower you and believe in you. Occasionally, moments of fatigue and hopelessness will emerge, but as cliché as it might sound, if you keep going it will be so worth it.
Joseph Barboza  
Olympic College  

Sometimes your darkest days become your guiding light. That’s what happened to me, and Olympic College played a life-changing role.

In 2014, I ended an abusive relationship, during which I suffered not only psychological abuse and financial ruin, but also the ultimate betrayal—my partner lied about his HIV status. When I found out I was HIV positive, I’d never felt so scared or alone. I didn’t know how to cope, so I turned to methamphetamine and alcohol. That began a long battle that took a toll on both my physical and mental health.

I was totally lost and broken. I felt worthless. I landed in jail, then in treatment. But out of the darkness, I found my purpose. My case manager connected me with Olympic College (OC), where I enrolled in the Human Services and Chemical Dependency program. I’m now in recovery and training to become an addiction counselor. I plan to complete my program at OC in summer 2019, and transfer to the University of Washington Tacoma to get my bachelor’s degree in social welfare.

My goal is to work with HIV patients who are struggling with their diagnoses and who also are struggling with substance abuse issues. After I obtain my Chemical Dependency Professional license, I want to become licensed as a Mental Health Professional so that I can help clients with mental health issues, as well as those struggling with addiction. Mirelle Cohen, the Chemical Dependency Program Coordinator, helped me map out a plan to achieve my goals, and scholarships from the Olympic College Foundation have helped me stay in school.

Being successful at OC has been instrumental in my being successful in my recovery. I’m getting good grades. I’ve become a leader as vice president of Shelton for the Student Government of Olympic College. And most importantly, I’ve been given a platform to talk to other addicts about how they can turn their lives around through education.

OC has given me opportunities for success that I’ve never had before. I know I can do anything. I’ve never felt that way before. I used to think that seeking help meant you were a failure. But I’ve realized that not seeking help is failure. Getting help has allowed me to succeed. And going through the Chemical Dependency program has helped me realize how much a person who has been through something can help someone else. Soon, I’m going to be that person.

I have a bright future ahead of me. I’m now HIV-undetectable with a normal life expectancy, thanks to antiretroviral medication. I’m looking forward to continuing my personal growth and to continuing to share my experience, strength and hope with others.

Here’s my advice to prospective students: Don’t let one moment define your life. No matter where you come from, what has happened to you, how much guilt or shame you carry, or how you got to where you are now, college is an option. If you’re at a crossroads in life where big changes are necessary to reestablish yourself as the author of your own story, an education is the key to your success. It is through the amazing work of staff, faculty and organizations like the OC Foundation at community colleges across the state, that we have the opportunity to become the amazing, productive and successful people we were always destined to be.
Leo Gonzales  
*Peninsula College*

At 22, it feels like I’ve already lived a lifetime. Not because of all the joyful moments, but because of the difficult ones. I had grown up in a broken family, had been diagnosed with testicular cancer during my senior year of high school, developed PTSD as a consequence of the two, and found myself homeless with terrible health. I thank God for the adversity he gave me because it forced me to see what was most important in life.

When I first enrolled at Peninsula College I was living couch to couch, doing my best to pick up the pieces of the past and make ends meet. I had to keep moving. Learning, reading and studying have always given me refuge from my surroundings. They allowed me to dream about the things that I could become, do and be while sitting in shambles. I took the steps toward my future, and I walked in the front doors of the college and enrolled.

In my first quarter, my English instructor and someone I now consider family, Ms. Glynda Peterson-Schaad, never failed to remind me what was most important in life. She pushed me to become a better thinker, reader and writer—and also reminded me what values, principles and philosophies are common among successful individuals. Glynda spoke compassionately and sometimes bluntly. I have at times had a hard time heeding her advice because, as one of Carl Jung’s axioms explains, “That which you need most is in the place where you least want to look.”

After stabilizing my life, finding a place to live and having money in my pocket, I was given the chance to be a part of an excellent basketball team at PC. I’d like to thank my Coach, Donald Rollman, for that. He has allowed me to be a part of something greater than just myself. Working towards the goal of becoming NWAC champions with him, the assistant Coach George Hill, and my teammates, have given me a deeper sense of meaning at Peninsula College. It feels like family.

People always ask, what do you want to do in life? I don’t think that’s the right question to ask. I think a better question is, who do you want to be? I want to look back in life and know that what I did was helpful to the world around me. I feel like this is the best way to live your life. When you know that what you’re doing benefits those around you, it is an endless source of satisfaction and motivation.

After graduating from Peninsula College, I plan to join the United States Military. I want to be a part of that team who works tirelessly to end terrorism and maltreatment throughout the world. There is no better cause to contribute to. If allowed, I’d like to be a medic. Someone that other people can count on to be steady, brave and knowledgeable when it will matter the most. Afterwards, I’ll complete medical school to become a doctor. A doctor who takes the approach of solving health problems for the long-term betterment of his patients.

If you don’t know what to do, just put one foot in front of the other. Community and technical colleges have excellent instructors who want you to succeed. This can be a small step toward your aspirations. Education is the most powerful tool you have. Stay grateful, keep dreaming, and at the end of your day, remember that no one can ever take away how you respond to a situation.
It is crazy to think I have been gone almost a year. Seems that I actually took my own advice for once. These last 11 months have been trying to say the least. I was emancipated in 2006 at age 15 and have been providing for myself since. I was diagnosed with cervical cancer when I was 17 years old. Never, did I think I was going to leave Montana. Unlike a lot of people my age, I actually love it there. I look back at how much support I still have from there, but while I was there I was heartbroken and miserable. For the first time I truly understood fear; fear to leave my house or open my windows because of my ex. Towards the end there I was even suicidal. I could not maintain my grades. I had beautiful things—a home and two cars, but the last year before I left, I felt broken, lost and had nowhere I belonged. Stripped of almost everything, I worked three years to rebuild as a single mother.

I never noticed until recently, one day sitting in my new sociology class, that I did not move because there were greater opportunities for Haylo (my son) and I elsewhere. I even ended up having a stress-induced stroke at 27. I realized I left because I was running in fear; fear that I lost all control of everything in my life. I was wrong. When he took away my financial freedom and sense of security, and with people questioning my reputation, I completely lost who I was. I’m described as a strong person by others, and most of the time I have absolutely no clue why. I’ve been abused physically, verbally and sexually, but hands-down the worst is mentally. One thing that was never taken from me was my ability to fight back physically, mentally or verbally. Yes, bad things happened, but I never just took it.

I like it here in Washington, and I am going to continue school and stay. Even though multiple places were offered to me to come home to Montana, I chose to stay in the car and started looking for a place to live. It took a month, minus one day, but I did it. The first 2.5 months had been the absolute worst, hardest, emotional, embarrassing and humbling experience I have ever had. I am still trying to wrap my head around everything that has happened. As I sit here in our home on our new couch this morning, waiting for Haylo to wake up from his first night in his own room, in his own bed, I came across a memory I posted a year ago. It said, “If you are unhappy, change something. Quit your job. Move. Leave your miserable relationship. Stop making excuses. You are in control.”

I finished my first two quarters successfully and have a 3.64 cumulative GPA! It has been an exhausting but amazing experience. I am slowly feeling more secure about life and confident about who I am. I love my job in TRiO here at Pierce. Most days I love my school, but being here has definitely been a cultural shock for me. I do love it here! I have learned so much! I want to help people grow the way the support at Pierce has done for me. My family may now be very small but it is mine. I intend to keep making up little traditions for Haylo and me. He will grow up always knowing culture and education are important. He will never need to go searching for a place to belong. I know it is all worth it.
Randy Simpson
Pierce College Puyallup

I am excited to share a bit of my past in order to add insight as to where I am today, and in what direction I am heading.

I was born and raised in Buffalo, New York. I come from a poverty-stricken city in which crime was normal. Having a drug-addicted mother, I was forced to grow up at a very young age. At the age of 11, I was responsible for making sure my four siblings and I had clean clothes to wear and food to eat. Throughout adolescence, I had to battle with the issues of my unstable parents, which lead me to take drastic measures, including shoplifting and dealing drugs. Nothing was off limits when it came to putting food on the table. As I grew older, I realized the life that I was living was not a typical one.

As a way to seek refuge from the inner city, I decided to join the US Army, as I was motivated to gain money for college. I’m now a 12-year Army veteran who deployed to Iraq three times and came close to death on many occasions. Because of this, I suffer with PTSD displaying as high-level anxiety, lacking the ability to concentrate, and being fearful of failing. Additionally, when leaving the Army, I was afraid that I wouldn’t succeed in life.

All of my fears were erased when I stepped on the campus of Pierce College. The professors created safe spaces for learning. They were transparent, sharing their own struggles and failings. I realized I can make mistakes and still succeed. Pierce College has done more than just change my opportunities, it has changed my life. The hands-on approach at Pierce College was one of a kind. Sure, there were times that I wanted to give up, but I knew that I couldn’t because I had three children looking up to me and professors who were looking out for me. Their encouragement allowed me to push forward, daily. There were two special professors that helped in ways I couldn’t imagine: Dr. Paul Gerhard and Professor Linda Saarela. Their ability to be transparent and open allowed me to push past my limitations. Their personal challenges let me know that there isn’t any challenge too great when it comes to accomplishing your goals.

At Pierce College, students and professors alike showed me that anything is possible, regardless of your past. I come from a place where it is easy to become a statistic to the streets. I’ve lost many friends and family members because they didn’t have a support system to motivate them to look past what they’ve known, in order to see that the unknown is full of possibilities. Because of my Pierce College family, I have been able to exceed the expectations that I placed on myself.

I obtained my associate’s degree in Business Management from Pierce College. I have also received my bachelor’s degree from Central Washington University. I am currently an Account Representative for a State Farm agency. My long-term goal is to become a community college professor. I know what my community college educational experience did for me. I want to pass on to the next generation the gifts I have received. My success is due to Pierce College helping me create a foundation. I am passing down this foundation to my children. I desire to pass it on to others as a college professor. I am the standard and the example of what it is to make the impossible possible. And I owe it all to Pierce College!
Anna White
*Renton Technical College*

Prior to moving to Washington, I was on a very bad path with no real vision for my future. I used the death of my parents as an excuse to throw my life away. They both struggled with their individual addictions, ultimately leading to both of their deaths. At thirteen, my 22 year-old sister became my legal guardian. I started hanging out with the wrong crowd, not attending school, and was turning to prescription pills. As we struggled to even make ends meet, college was the last thing I had on my mind.

Fortunately, through all of this I had someone who always saw more potential in me than I was ever able to see, and never gave up on me. My sister wanted much more for my life than the track I was leading down, and made plans to get me out of our home town for better opportunities in Washington with her in-laws. I was able to see that I needed a fresh start and needed to get my life back on track, so, I spent my senior year cleaning up my act and getting my grades in better shape.

I had huge plans to attend the University of Washington to get that oh-so-famous college experience at a university, but when I initially toured the campus of UW, I was extremely overwhelmed. I was born and raised in a town with a population of around 55,000, so when I walked the UW campus of 46,000 students, you can imagine my state of mind. Not to mention, when I found out tuition prices I was ready to turn around and forget about college. This was when I was introduced to Renton Technical College.

As soon as we pulled up, my reservations started to fade away. The campus was not at all overwhelming and the class sizes where much more of what I was used to coming out of high school. During my time at RTC I have been constantly surprised by the community college experience. What I have grown to love the most is that if you want to be a part of something, it’s there for you. There are clubs to join, councils to stand in and organizations to be a part of. There truly is a place for everybody. My next surprise lies with everyone’s favorite part of college: the financial aid and registration departments. Coming from a low-income household, the financial portion of school was, of course, my greatest set-back. Alongside grants and scholarship opportunities, I have found that RTC has many other options available to assist me in getting through school.

If I am able to share some advice to those with hesitations about going to college—it is to just go. Especially if money is what is holding you back. Drop all of your fears and show up. There are all the resources in the world to make things easier on you; you just have to be willing to put in the work to get them.

Attending college was one of the best decisions I have made in my life. Four years ago, I didn’t care what my future was going to hold and waking up every day felt more like a burden than a blessing. Now I am enrolled in the Computer Networking program and am now ambitious to get my degree and start a career. I now wake up every day thankful to be alive and in a great place.
Growing up in Tacoma, I barely knew there was an ocean down the street, much less anything beyond. As a member of an impoverished refugee immigrant community, my mind was confined to my surroundings. I ultimately succumbed to the harsh realities of my environment, which led to my incarceration at 15.

As a 16 year-old entering the adult prison population, I was scared, confused, intimidated, and angry at how disconnected I was from my family and community. I did not know who to turn to or who to trust. Prison often creates an environment that is prime for that anger and stagnation. It was hard to think about anything beyond the mundane structure that surrounded me.

In the midst of that hopelessness, I turned to education—which became my saving grace. Despite the fact that I thought I was going to die in prison, learning gave me a distraction from the noise that surrounded prison life. It allowed me to think beyond the bleak routine. It allowed me to imagine, to expand my mind and to transform into a new person with new ideas and goals. I was devoted to my studies and took classes through various programs offered within the Department of Corrections. With new perspectives gained from my education, I took on leadership roles within the system, which lead me to become the president of the APICAG (Asian/Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group). Many transformative changes were made during this time. Working in solidarity with the Black Prisoners Caucus, we created the BPC TEACH (Taking Education and Creating History) program to address the educational disparities among prisoners.

In 2016, I was released as an outcome of the Supreme Court case *Miller v. Alabama*, which ruled life-sentences for juveniles as unconstitutional. At my release hearing, officials asked, “How could we be assured that you are not the same person as you were when you took part in this crime as a 15 year-old?” The only thing I could reference was my education. Education has allowed me to see the humanity in myself and allowed others to see the humanity in me. Not only did it liberate me, it changed and saved my life.

Today, because of my education, I live a life of purpose—a life I could never have fathomed. Fighting for social justice is central to my life. I am involved in restorative justice movements as it relates to ending mass incarceration, abolishing ICE and the deportation/separation of families, youth advocacy, and transition/re-entry support. I recently graduated with my associate’s degree from Seattle Central. I currently work on campus as a Retention Specialist, where I counsel students struggling with different aspects of being a student. I am now studying Comparative History of Ideas at the University of Washington and building a career in service to my community.

It is of importance to me that I am an example for those experiencing the same things I have experienced. While I did not plan or could ever predict that I would be released from prison, my life is an example of the ability to create change and make an impact anywhere. I work daily to address racial inequities in our justice and educational system that lead to stories like mine. Navigating college after leaving prison made me realize that access is challenging. It is my work to make the prison-to-school pipeline more accessible.

Unfortunately, my journey through education started in prison. My goal is to expand opportunities for teens to have access to education and resources, and remove barriers before they end up a product of the school-to-prison pipeline.
Four years ago, I never would have imagined attending community college. At the time, I was an Infantry Squad Leader in the US Marine Corps and had just been assigned to the Wounded Warrior Battalion at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. After nearly ten faithful years of service, which included one security deployment to Bahrain and the Port of Dubai, and three combat deployments to Afghanistan, I was diagnosed with a mild brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, and major depressive disorder. I was medically retired from the Marine Corps in 2015, at which time I moved from North Carolina to Washington and made the decision to attend community college. To be completely honest, I had no desire in attending college, but I knew I needed to so I could provide the best life for my son moving forward.

I thought college was going to be an impossible task. The transition from being an Infantry Marine to becoming a full-time student was daunting. I figured the classes would be too difficult, and no one would want to put the time and effort into understanding my situational needs. For the first two quarters, I had zero direction, zero drive, and felt completely out of place. Things started turning around once I met Missy Anderson and Rosemary Whiteside, and decided to pursue a degree in the Fine Arts program. Missy and Rosemary introduced me to the Veterans Resource Center, where I was able to connect with other veterans and begin to develop a sense of community for the first time since leaving the service. They also personally asked me to play a significant role in Got Your 6 (GY6), a campus-wide initiative that supports student veterans as they transition from military to civilian life. I was honored to contribute to the development of curriculum for faculty and staff and share my story with students, faculty, and staff to increase awareness of issues facing student veterans. GY6 transformed my life and helped give me a sense of purpose that I previously didn’t have. Having my perspective valued by so many people showed me how much they cared about my welfare and success. In addition, being a student in the Fine Arts program contributed to my success because it gave me an outlet to express suppressed emotion in a healthy and creative manner.

My mental health conditions were a huge barrier that originally prevented me from believing that community college was in the cards. My symptoms make daily life a struggle, so I was hesitant to pursue my education considering the amount of work that goes into obtaining a degree. I was able to focus my mind and be successful when I found the Fine Arts program. Luckily for me, I have always found refuge in a sketchbook. The Fine Arts program challenged my artistic ability and allowed me to channel and regulate enough emotion to stay on track and graduate.

I am currently working at Shoreline Community College in the Student Accommodations office. I also run two social media platforms and a website for my artwork. For the future, I plan on furthering my education. I would like to ultimately obtain a Master of Fine Arts with hopes of becoming a college-level fine art teacher.

If there was one piece of advice that I would offer, it would be to establish a support system with people you trust before you start. Having the ability to express my emotions to someone daily helped me stay on track and remember why I was attending school.
Rachelle Himmelman
Skagit Valley College

“The past is your lesson. The present is your gift. The future is your motivation.”
~ Zig Ziglar

I had a rough upbringing, and my home life was unbearable. I was undiagnosed ADD, bullied all through school and dropped out my senior year with two credits left to graduate. I became a wife and a mother to four beautiful kids. My relationship was nearly fatal in 2005, and that finally gave me the courage to leave a 13.5-year abusive marriage.

I was an emotional mess and had no sense of self after many years of physical, sexual and mental abuse. I had no direction and always told my kids, “Take a good look at your mom, please do not be like me.” I was an embarrassment and felt like a hell of a woman. I knew I needed a life change but was not quite sure what to do. I always wanted to finish high school and make something of myself, but never thought going back to school was feasible. However, that day came when I decided to go back to school.

I remember being terrified walking through the doors that wintery day at Skagit Valley College. I thought to myself, “I do not belong here. I am 46. Isn’t that too old to be starting school again?” Jean Markert, SVC’s High School Completion Coordinator, inspired me beyond words. She sat me down in her office, and I began to cry. It was overwhelming being back in school after so long, and I felt so dumb. I told her that my adoptive dad was dying from cancer and I did not know if I would make it at the college. She calmly said to me, as I looked at her through my tears, “Rachelle you are an intelligent woman who will do great things. Please do not be so hard on yourself.” Her words inspired me and gave me the determination needed to finally finish high school. I graduated from the High School 21+ program with honors and received my high school diploma in June 2017, and incredibly enough, got to walk across that stage with a cap and gown. This accomplishment has given me the hope to go forward. I am in my second year in SVC’s Human Services program and am proud to be a straight A student. I take great pride in my grades and new-found successes.

My practicum experience at Skagit Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services makes me feel like I’m making a difference. After earning my associate’s degree, I would like to attend Fairhaven at Western Washington University to acquire my bachelor’s degree in Social Services. Going back to school has given me a sense of self confidence that I have never experienced before. I can now look at my kids and say, “Please look at your mom now. If I can do this, so can you.”

Thanks to SVC, Jean Markert, and the MacGregor’s scholarship, I continue to gain confidence to further my college education and finish my degree. I am filled with so much gratitude. These amazing people have given me the courage to believe that someone out there really believes in me and my education. I have become the person my kids can be proud of.

If I have one piece of advice to offer, it would be that it is never too late to change your trajectory. I thought I was too old and could not change, but my life has been truly transformed by the opportunities given me and the doors that continue to open for me.
Hello, my name is Eliab Jasiel Cortes and this is my story. The driving force that led me to community college was failure. I was unable to sustain the grade point average necessary to maintain attendance at my first four-year institution in Southern California, which led me to seek higher education in a community college. I moved to Lacey, Washington, to take care of my grandmother, who was diagnosed with cancer.

I arrived with only a suitcase ready to take on life. Life, however, was not kind at first. I had no job, no friends, and no mode of transportation which made the first year in Washington an unforgettable life lesson. My grandmother always strived to take care of her family so one day she said to me, “School is the only way through which you will be able to see the wonders of the world and have a future. Without it you will only ever know regret and dream about what could have been.” With her words in mind, I worked harder than I ever thought possible. In less than a year, I obtained a vehicle, a steady job, and was able to apply to the local community college, which was South Puget Sound.

The department that changed my life was the Diversity and Equity Center. The space provided community, friends, a mentor and the strength to pursue a better future. The interim director at the time was Charles Ensminger. He reshaped my college experience by taking the time to connect with me on a personal level and helped me obtain the resources I needed to succeed. Charlie helped me through dark emotional times and talked to me with the care and blunt honesty that only a father has. He also helped put food in my stomach when he found out that even with two jobs I could barely afford my housing and the cost of tuition. Charlie realigned my aspirations, passions, and helped me regain my confidence, giving me the strength to challenge the norm and seek out a brighter future. Later in my educational career, I made friends that showed me how to navigate the city, helped me with housing, and created a new sense of belonging for me. South Puget Sound Community College allowed me to meet these individuals who greatly impacted my life. They prevented me from living on the street, took me to the Emergency care when I fell gravely ill, and helped me realize that I needed help.

I am currently working towards associate degrees in biology and in science. After reaching my goal, I will pursue a bachelors in mechanical engineering. Given the opportunity to leave a message for anyone who is interested in returning to higher education, I would tell them that they are making the right choice. I would tell them that failure is a part of the learning process. Through failure one can feel their own weaknesses and understand where improvement must be made. I would warn them, however, that there are going to be days where they will feel like giving up. But if they have the strength and courage to face the day, they will see their lives begin to move in a new direction as they keep pursuing a brighter tomorrow.
Kaylin Clarke  
South Seattle College

I discovered more at South Seattle College than just an education and a support system: I found myself.

I am a graduate of South’s welding program, and what initially attracted me to welding was its ability to fuse together something entirely new from pieces that at one point felt disjointed. As someone who has lived the majority of my life identifying as a man, it echoes my journey.

In high school, I was known for being a star athlete. My sporting days and future military career plans came to a screeching halt, however, when I was diagnosed with Myasthenia Gravis, an autoimmune disease that blocks messages sent from the brain to the muscles. At 17, I could hardly move and resorted to sitting at home.

It wasn’t until later in my twenties that I started to realize I was transgender and wasn’t truly being myself. Being naive to the LGBTQ+ community, I felt ashamed for having questioned my identity. I started self-medicating with alcohol and slowly started destroying my life. It took receiving a DUI to wake me up from my daze, and it’s by the grace of God I am still here today to share this story with you.

In 2016, my mother reached out to me with a news article that talked about the high demand for welding positions and highlighted South’s welding program. I started researching the program and took a leap of faith.

As mid-quarter began, I started to feel my anxiety rising. While I was successful in class, I was still very unhappy. Then I came across a sign announcing a “Trans 101” seminar. All those repressed thoughts came flooding back. November 17, 2016, is a day that I will always remember: I came to the realization that I was transgender.

I soon reached out to the program manager for South’s Center for Equity, Diversity & Inclusion. She was so understanding. She let me tell my story, and when I was done I felt so free having admitted to someone who I really was. Next, I reached out to my welding instructor, Doug Rupik, to let him know of my transition. He responded with overwhelming support and asked how he could help me through my process. Soon after, the most amazing email came through from South, outlining the college’s stance on equality and inclusivity on campus, and coming at a time of political drama concerning which bathrooms trans individuals could use. This was the best piece of news I could have received. It allowed me to be my true self as I began my third quarter.

It has been the college’s acceptance of who I am as an individual, that I matter, and that I have something to offer my community, that has allowed me to persevere through my transition and financial struggles. Now I’m doing something I never thought I would: seeking a bachelor’s degree. In 2017, I was accepted into South’s Bachelor of Applied Science program in Sustainable Building Science Technology, and I continue to work toward my degree. Ultimately, I plan to develop my own consulting firm that performs STAR Energy reporting for local municipalities. Don’t let fear hold you back from your dreams. Whether that is obtaining a college degree for the first time in your life or admitting to yourself and others who you truly are. Dream fearlessly, dream big and seek out the people that are going to support that dream ... then prepare yourself for the best fight of your life. It is all worth it in the end.
Randy McReynolds  
Spokane Community College

Looking at my past, it is a miracle that I am alive today. Not only am I alive, I am focused, determined and driven. I did not have the easiest childhood growing up and had little direction. By the time I reached my teen years, I was participating in illegal activities that progressed to my adulthood. The road I chose was riddled with drugs, violence, homelessness and prison sentences. Loved ones told me I had so much potential to do amazing things but I was stubborn. I felt my chosen path was impossible to change.

During my last prison sentence, I went through complete Hell on Earth. I was nearly forty years old and found myself lying on a cold, dirty cell floor, nearly dead from drug withdrawal. It was the beginning of years being moved from prison to prison, never able to see my family. Always alone, I got to know myself well and reflect on the damage I had done to others and myself. I decided change was long overdue and it had to come from deep within. I made it my goal to change my mindset through a lot of self-reflection and self-discipline. At times it felt impossible, but I knew I had to stay the course.

After prison, I entered a half-way house. That experience presented a new set of obstacles, but I decided nothing would hold me back from becoming the man I was meant to be. It was during that experience I decided to sign up for college courses. I researched and spoke with people in the community and decided to enroll at Spokane Community College. I've always been mechanically inclined and had a love of cars and trucks, but knew I needed education to make it a career. After speaking with my wife, she advised I should do something I love. I knew the Automotive Technology program was where I needed to be.

I am now in my third quarter of the program and am passionate about it. Much of my support has come from the amazing group of classmates. The faculty goes above and beyond for each and every one of us. The instructors are intelligent and amazing with students. With their level of expertise, each of them could easily choose a career where they would make far more money. But they have a passion to help us succeed and make our dream a reality. Each one of them plays a key role in my success. I am beyond grateful to have them on my journey to success.

With their help, I plan to do everything it takes to succeed. I will not stop until my goals are reached for myself and my family. I am now a husband, father, and grandfather that my family can be proud of. I now look at myself in the mirror and am proud of the man I am. Once I have graduated from Spokane Community College, I plan to work in an automotive shop and ultimately own and operate my own shop. With my focus, drive, and determination it will happen, and I will stop at nothing to reach my goal.

If I could offer one piece of advice to others, I would tell them dreams are achievable when they decide in their minds and hearts to set their goals and never stop, no matter the obstacles.
Hello, my name is Eryn Smith. First and foremost, I would like to say what an honor it is to be considered for this award. I can’t express enough gratitude to my Completion Coach, Brooklyn, for choosing me. To say that my experience at SFCC Pullman has been life transforming is an understatement. I have never experienced a friendlier staff that truly goes above and beyond for the students. From the front office to the professors, I have seen them bend over backwards countless times to provide students the help they need for successes. However, for me to truly explain what SFCC has done and continues to do for me, I will have to tell the story of how I came to be a student here.

When I was growing up I had two dreams. One was to go to college and somehow make the world a better place. The other was to one day transition from a male to a female. Now growing up transgender is difficult enough. Add an abusive upbringing with growing up in rural Wyoming, and you get a nightmare. I never let that stop me, though. Every day I was coming up with plans on how I would achieve both of my dreams. After I graduated high school, I joined the Army. I knew that this would make my college dreams possible with the GI Bill and it got me as far away from Wyoming as possible. I was an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician for four years. After losing friends to suicide in the Army I realized I wanted to be a Clinical Psychologist.

After getting out of the military my husband and I decided to get a divorce. It was another very low point in my life. I wouldn’t let that stop me, though. After my divorce was finalized I decided to move out to Pullman to be closer to my sister, who attends WSU. I didn’t want to start at a four-year university, just for the fact that it had been six years since I had been in an academic setting. Also, I wanted a smaller setting for when I transitioned. That is why SFCC Pullman was so appealing. I have to say I couldn’t have picked a better institution. I couldn’t believe it; I had finally realized one of my dreams. Shortly into my first quarter, however, I started to suffer severe mental health issues. I ended up being diagnosed with PTSD from the experiences in my childhood and PTSD from being a survivor of sexual violence, but with the support of the staff I have thrived in my college career.

My second year has only been better. I have realized my second dream. The support I have received from the staff during my transition has left me humbled. I would like to thank Professor Lamoureux, Brooklyn Brown and Professor Spencer for all their help, understanding and support. I want to especially thank Professor Bourbonnais for her overwhelming kindness, and as someone I could confide in.

Community college has ended up being the greatest thing to happen to me. For students, and anyone interested in becoming a future student, I have one piece of advice. No matter what your dreams are, be tenacious. Do everything possible to achieve them. Don’t be afraid to talk to your teachers, ask for help. I can promise you if it wasn’t for SFCC Pullman I wouldn’t be where I am today. This April, I will receive my AA transfer degree. After that I will attend WSU to pursue my degree in Psychology.
Christopher Oliver
Tacoma Community College

I was a Puerto Rican kid from Brooklyn, and a gang member since I was 13 years old. When I got in trouble and got caught, the judge gave me the option of going to prison or joining the military. I opted for the military but was still a Blood while serving in the Army. After I got out, I was seriously thinking about just going back to gangbanging and selling dope again. But, I basically came to Tacoma Community College to use my GI Bill and just collect that paycheck.

I got signed up for a sociology class with Dr. Cho. His class opened my eyes. He was also the first person in my life to tell me that I’m smart. He made me believe in myself. I definitely had the imposter syndrome and felt that I wasn’t college material. But Dr. Cho and Dr. Judy Loveless-Morris helped me change the narrative on that. Through their support and sociology classes, I actually began to view myself as a scholar.

I was my own biggest obstacle and barrier. All I knew since I was 13 years old was banging. I only respected other gang members. I did not think I belonged in higher education at all. In fact, when I told my other gang members that I was going to go to school, they all laughed at me. There was really nobody who supported my decision to attend college, and I didn’t even think I was college material myself. So, that was the biggest barrier … not having a support system or anybody who believed in me.

In addition, when I was in the military I got blown up by an IED in Iraq. I suffered from traumatic brain injury. I had to rehabilitate my knee. I had ulcerative colitis. I got shot three times and still have shrapnel inside me because it’s too close to my spleen. Despite all that, I was even sent back again, but this time to Afghanistan for another tour. Finally, I got discharged with 100 percent disability due to a diagnosis of stomach cancer, which I am currently battling. Also, I still suffer from serious PTSD and have occasional panic attacks.

But I persisted and graduated with my AA from TCC in June of 2017. Then, I got my BA from UWT just a year later, in June of 2018. This fall, I started the master’s program in Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at UWT. I should be finished with my master’s degree in a year and a half.

When I was at TCC, I conducted research under the guidance of Dr. Cho and Dr. Loveless-Morris. I conducted ethnographic interviews of current and former gang members to investigate the social factors that lead them to joining gangs. I completed interviews with gang members of different racial and ethnic groups, as well as different genders. I plan on using this data for my master’s degree and also as I continue with my Ph.D.

I have a son who has been locked up since he was 16 years old. First-degree murder. I didn’t want him to follow my path into a gang, but unfortunately, he did. He is scheduled to be released when he is 46 years old. I also now want to be a good role model for him and show him that it won’t ever be too late to pursue an education.

For all students who are entering college, I say, “Believe in yourself no matter what you think or what others might think. Keep pushing. Keep thriving. Don’t ever feel, ‘I don’t belong’.”
My name is Juan Gaytan, and I graduated from Walla Walla Community College this past June of 2018. I felt so successful! I was finally able to start reaching the goals I’ve had since I was a child.

I believe that when you have a beloved dream of becoming whatever you want to be for the rest of your life, and after some years, you finally get what you were pursuing, that is your success. In my case, I always wanted to attend school in order to become an electrician. That way I can provide for my family and set a good example for my son.

A few years ago, I was working in an onion packing warehouse, lifting 50-pound bags of onions, day in and day out. This was my past, present and future. I realized I wanted, I needed, to be better. I wanted to be a role model for my son and knew I needed to make a change. I’ve always wanted him to be better than I am now.

I started with ESL classes at WWCC, working evenings as a custodian for the College. I earned my GED®. Then I enrolled as a full-time student in the Energy Systems Technology classes. After two years, with family support and sacrifices, I completed the rigorous course work. With my wife and small son at my side, I graduated in June. Success in my journey felt good. I also inspired my two nieces to study science!

But, that is not the end of my story. During my time at WWCC, I broadened my horizons and decided I wanted to study more than electrical work. I am now enrolled at Washington State University Tri-Cities in engineering classes. My next goal is to complete my engineering degree.

Walla Walla Community College has supported my academic dream every step of the way—from basic English classes to second-year, college-level science classes. My life has been changed forever. It’s like an emotion that you cannot explain. I am a first-generation student. My extended family is now planning to come to college with high hopes and expectations. Hopefully, that will be the same way I inspire my son, to be motivated to come to college. Thank you.
Maribel Garibay  
Wenatchee Valley College

I was born to immigrant parents from the rural village of Atecucario, Mexico. In the early 1990s, my family immigrated to the United States in order to escape the poverty-stricken community we lived in. For twenty years, my family migrated from state to state, pursuing agricultural and seasonal work. Since the age of five, I have lived in six states and seven cities. The constant mobility of a seasonal, migrant, farmworker family meant only spending three months at a time in any one school and made catching up with my peers difficult. I thought about college in high school, but once I graduated, I went to work to help support my parents.

In 2014, my life drastically changed. During a routine ultrasound for my only child, my son was diagnosed with spina bifida—a birth defect which affects the vertebrae. This condition affects his lower extremities, bladder, bowel and brain. Most shockingly, he would face many physical challenges, including the inability to walk. He would be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. This information led me to severe depression. I was afraid. I was shattered. In the Latino community, it is taboo to speak about disabilities. I felt alone. For months, I cried. I could not fathom knowing that my son would suffer from this condition for the rest of his life. I worried about how he would be treated by others.

After my son was born, I realized that I needed to improve our lives. I was tired of working minimum-wage jobs in agriculture, so, at the age of 25, I decided to apply to Wenatchee Valley College. The feeling of submitting my application was exhilarating, yet terrifying. As a first-generation, low-income, nontraditional student, I knew that I would face many challenges. I was afraid I would not be able to juggle being a full-time student, working a full-time job, being a mother to a special needs child and a wife to my husband. The first weeks of classes were exhausting and hard. At times, I felt like quitting because I wanted to dedicate all of my time and effort to helping my son learn how to navigate the world. I felt like I was taking time away from my son and his needs.

Joining the TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program transformed my life and educational experience at WVC. They provided me with the support network I needed to succeed academically and personally. I learned how to manage all of my responsibilities by using a planner. I learned how to apply and win scholarships. I learned how to transfer to four-year institutions. My advice to future and continuing community college students would be to seek a support network like TRIO SSS and manage your time wisely. With the help of a TRIO SSS retention specialist, I won The Washington State Opportunity Scholarship and the Roy and Leona Nelson Foundation Scholarship. Without these scholarships, I wouldn’t have been able to stay in school. Additionally, I have been recognized on the President’s and Dean’s List for several quarters and boast a 3.67 cumulative grade point average.

I plan to become a dental hygienist in order to advocate for, and provide the necessary oral care to, low-income, Latino communities in Washington. I want to utilize my bilingual skills to spread awareness on how to prevent tooth decay and dental health problems in order to reduce restorative treatments that can cause long-term oral complications. Most importantly, after having my son, I want to advocate for people with disabilities in order for them to receive the proper oral care they deserve.
Steve Gnyp
*Whatcom Community College*

College was always a dream of mine, especially since high school. However, at that point in time I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do until four years after I graduated. Living life with low-vision, I struggled in high school. The high school I went to graduated me even though I was struggling at a seventh-grade reading level. They didn’t care about my education—they just filled in the boxes and passed me on. I didn’t let that experience stop me. I knew I needed to get further help in order to even make college a possibility for me, and that is what I set out to accomplish.

After receiving a few years of reading and job-related education, I passed the entrance exam at Whatcom Community College and began my journey in the fall of 2015. Access and Disability Services Director Kerri Holferty has been a tremendous support in my college education. When I had doubts, I knew I could always go to her, and I was then reassured that I would do great. If it weren’t for her and all the support with accommodations, I wouldn’t be in my final year at Whatcom Community College.

In the fall of 2017, I took Colleen McGoff’s Communications class and realized that I wanted to get my BA in the field. I plan to study in this area starting fall of 2019, at Portland State University. My long-term goal is to get my MA in Orientation and Mobility; I learned more about this subject in Education 190 at Whatcom. The class gave me the opportunity to help my best friend, who is blind and new to Bellingham. After this experience, I realized I was born to work in this field. I also did community service with the Public Works Department as part of the Education 190 course. Because of my work in the community, there are now eight audible crosswalk signals installed. My work was recognized by Kerri Holferty, and I won an Outstanding Student Service Award for the year of 2018.

There are several reasons that I have been investigating Portland State University’s Orientation and Mobility program. With only nineteen universities in the US with this program, I knew I was limited in my options. I want to be close to home. I also don’t want to do the program online. Portland State University’s program is on-campus rather than online, which is most effective when it comes to this specialized, hands-on field.

One piece of advice I have for future students is that you must communicate your needs to your instructors or they never know because they’re not mind-readers. If you effectively communicate, your experience in college has a higher chance of being a good one.

Getting this scholarship award would deeply mean the world to me. I am off to great things in this world and if I get accepted for the award, I plan on sticking the funds away and putting them toward my education at PSU.
Gabriela Martinez  
Yakima Valley College

My name is Gabriela Martinez. I’m 22 years old, and I’m a Yakima Valley College (YVC) student. I was born in Phoenix, Arizona, and taken to Mexico by my parents when I was one year old. I grew up with my mother and my brothers while my father was working in this country to support my family. I have five brothers and one sister. In Mexico, I studied until seventh grade because of some family problems. As I was growing up, I always thought about my education and kept the desire of studying and to learning something new every day to be helpful to others. When I turned 18 years old, I decided to come to this country with the purpose of study and work. I came to Yakima four years ago pursuing my dreams. I was welcomed by a cousin of mine who was the only family I had. I lived with him one year, and later he went back to Mexico.

During that year, I found out that YVC had an English program for adults who need to learn or want to speak English. In the school I met a student who helped me to find a job in a warehouse. My job was from mornings to evenings, so I had to quit the school. After six months, my economic situation was more stable and I could retake ESL classes. I started in Level 3, and I kept moving for three years, all through ESL and ABE classes. Thanks to these classes, the help, support and encouragement by my teachers, I improved my English and could enter the Nursing Assistant program. Now I am a nurse aide. Ten months after getting my Nursing Assistant Credential, I got my GED®. It was a big, important accomplishment because I could get into college and obtain financial aid for my studies.

During this time my biggest challenge was my math class. Since I was a kid, math was difficult for me, and to be honest, I wasn’t good in many subjects. As a kid that made me insecure, and in some part, that broke my self-esteem, so I was growing up with insecurity and fears. My math class, specifically, helped me to overcome fears because it gave me a lot of confidence, and I learned that if I get wrong answers doing something, it is part of the learning process. My math teacher said, “If you’re having trouble learning something, it is because your brain is working.” Well, at the moment when I heard that, I thought my brain was working and learning a lot. I’m sure I was.

The experience I had as a student with my ESL and ABE teachers attending YVC was wonderful and helpful for my education and to be better as a human-being, because I became more patient and passionate in all I do.

Sometimes when I went to classes in the mornings tired and with negative thinking, what helped to go through those bad days was the smile on my professors’ faces, the passion they show when they are teaching, the patience they have when explaining to their students and the ability they have to find ways to explain when somebody cannot understand.

All the beautiful qualities I found in my teachers, and in the YVC environment full of joy and confidence, built and recovered my self-esteem. Now, I am starting as a full-time college student taking math, English and Chicano Studies. I know with hard work and good teachers, I will accomplish my goal of earning a degree in psychology.
2018-2019
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