

Washington State

# ACT

Association of College Trustees

## Transforming Lives Awards

Washington Community and Technical Colleges

January 23, 2017

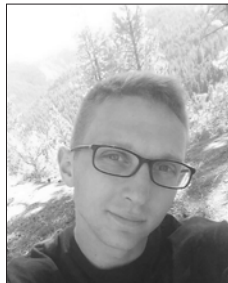
*Celebrating Student Achievement*



**Mohamed Abdullahi**  
Renton  
Technical College



**Marady Duong**  
South Seattle  
College



**Aaron Miller**  
Spokane  
Community College



**Ben Feldbush**  
Tacoma  
Community College



**Monique Bourgeau**  
Wenatchee  
Valley College

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# Transforming Lives

Washington Community and Technical College Student Awardees  
January 2017

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## Transforming Lives

The Association of College Trustees (ACT) Transforming Lives awards recognize current and former students whose lives were transformed by attending a Washington state community or technical college. Each of the 34 college boards of trustees selected an awardee from among its current and former student body. From among the 34 students chosen, the ACT Awards Committee selected five awardees to serve as keynote speakers at the January 23, 2017, 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 2017 Transforming Lives awardees are:

- **Mohamed Abdullahi**  
Renton Technical College
- **Marady Duong**  
South Seattle College
- **Aaron Miller**  
Spokane Community College
- **Ben Feldbush**  
Tacoma Community College
- **Monique Bourgeau**  
Wenatchee 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.

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.

Note: Stories have been edited for clarity and length.

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**Liam Murphy**  
*Bates Technical College*



Before enrolling at Bates Technical College, I was in a dark place. At a young age, I moved around the country a great deal with my mom. When I came to Bonney Lake, I did not know anyone and had no friends. I felt the way to make friends was with drugs. As a high school student, my attentions were focused on all the wrong things. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I was doing drugs, hanging out with my friends, and rebelling against my parents. Because of this lifestyle, I had no vision of a real future, and I would have been living on the streets by age 17. I felt that I had no purpose and could not find any positive ambitions in my life. I had no idea what I was capable of accomplishing until I enrolled at Bates Technical College.

By sophomore year, I knew there was no way I could continue at a traditional high school. I was on the path to earning a GED® at age 16 and settling to work for a program like Job Corps. My mom told me about Bates Technical College's Technical High School program, and it sounded too good to be true! At 16, I transferred from my high school and became a college student.

I chose a program that would become my passion and reshape my life. The Broadcasting/Video Production program captivated and challenged me, and this sparked my love for video production. In my first year at Bates Technical College, I learned so much, not only about video production, but about life and my abilities. Throughout this degree program, instructors Brian Parker and Ken Witkoe not only taught me, but believed in my potential. They became my mentors and guided me on my path to success. Mr. Parker talked with me daily after class for at least 20 minutes and discussed his industry experiences with me as he used to run his own video production company. His mentoring skills kept me inspired.

My first year in the Broadcasting/Video Production program was also Mr. Witkoe's first year at Bates as a faculty member. Even though he had only been at Bates for a month, he saw the potential I had in improving myself — when no one else did. It felt like the instructors at Bates cared about me as a student and as a human being.

At 17, I earned my first associate degree in applied science in Broadcasting/Video Production. That first year-and-a-half in college helped build the foundation for what I wanted to do as a career. I sought future training opportunities in the college's Digital Media program, where I continued to learn from Mr. Parker. During that program, I acquired my first job in the broadcasting industry as a camera operator at Emerald Downs. Less than one month later, I started working part-time in video production at the Museum of Glass.

Today, I am 19 years old, have earned my second associate degree, and own Jumbo Vision Media LLC with two other Bates graduates, Michael Chansavang and Aleksandr Bulkhak. Our company strives to provide promotional videos and digital media products to local non-profits and small businesses in Tacoma.

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**Molli Robertson**  
*Bellevue College*



Thank you for this opportunity to share my story of the transformation that has occurred in my life since becoming a student at Bellevue College. It is because of Bellevue College that my life story will forever be positively shaped. During my youth and young adult years, my dream was to attend and graduate from college.

However, life took hold and decisions were made that seemed to always take me in a direction that moved away from my dream of an education. Having children and working took precedence and, although life was good and full of successes in other areas, the longing for the fulfillment of my childhood dream kept pursuing my everyday thoughts.

My life changed in 2013 when I became a single mother of two teenagers. What was known became unknown, and what was once secure, became less than secure. I remember driving down the road one day and thinking to myself, "I need to pursue the dream." And pursue I did!

I decided to continue on in the career sector in which I had been employed, healthcare management, and started investigating colleges. I looked at various schools, universities and online colleges, but the one I decided on was Bellevue College. I chose Bellevue due to the wonderful recommendations I received when I reached out to those I knew in the healthcare industry. I also really enjoyed the idea of a smaller campus, with online classes, closer to my home. I met with Kimberly Hassell, an advisor for the new Bachelor of Applied Science in Healthcare Management program. She was wonderful and really helped me to see that this degree would be not only attainable for me, but advantageous, too. Kimberly's expertise and knowledge about the program made me feel confident in my decision and gave me the direction I needed to move forward.

Upon taking my first classes at BC, I knew I was on the right path. I worked very hard and was incredibly disciplined and, when I accepted into the Bachelor of Applied Science in Health Management, I was overwhelmed with joy! I felt such a sense of accomplishment and gratitude. I had faced so many barriers which took me away from my dream; however, now I was obtaining that very same dream and I will graduate in June 2017.

Being part of the bachelor's program has been such a wonderful experience, as it has given me a tremendous opportunity to get to know other students who share the same interests. The instructors have been terrific and the knowledge I have gained from the program will serve me in my career and for my lifetime. My children have been such an incredible source of inspiration for me, as I work hard every single day to achieve my dream, so that I can offer them not only a great life, but a chance to see how important an education is. I am the first in my family to graduate from college and my parents are constantly beaming with enthusiasm for me and the journey I have been on. After graduating, I plan to continue working in healthcare management, as well as pursue a master's degree in Healthcare Administration. By sharing my story, I hope others can realize that achieving a college degree is attainable and can be reached with hard work and determination.

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**Booie Borden**  
*Bellingham Technical College*



After graduating from high school I went to the local community college. I didn't have a plan, but college was the societal norm after high school. So I did what I was "supposed" to do. Not only was I a first-generation college student, but I was the first in my family to graduate from high school. I was left to navigate my higher education decisions with no guidance from those closest to me, I had no direction or plan, and lacked the financial means to continue so I left school. Instead of pursuing a college education, I did what I learned growing up was normal for a woman to do: marry and have children.

In 2014, I was laid off from my job and my unemployment benefits were set to expire. I was a single mother so my plan was to find another minimum wage job that would help us. It was at that time I learned that my unemployment benefits could be extended if I decided to further my education through Workforce Funding. I decided to return to school with a purpose when my son, Dirk, was six-months-old. This time, having a goal to prepare for a career I could enjoy and that would pay me enough to provide for my children, I decided to return to college; specifically, Bellingham Technical College (BTC).

I planned to pursue a degree in Dental Assisting. I have had extensive dental reconstructive surgeries and my younger sister was in the program at BTC. I assumed my personal experiences would empower me to be compassionate to patients I worked with. Furthermore, I was excited about the opportunity to have my sister to share and navigate my college journey with. After I completed the prerequisites and started the program, I lasted only 10 days. I suffered severe anxiety being in scrubs and working with dental equipment and could not easily overcome the traumas I had experienced and with tears in my eyes, I went to the Basic Food Employment & Training (BFET) office to talk to Michele Waltz, Director of Workforce Funding. Michele was amazing. She calmly helped me to articulate what I was experiencing and helped me to evaluate other educational options. With her support and guidance, I switched to the Precision Machining program. Although I didn't know what Machining was, I knew I would rather try something new if it meant I could find a career that would make me happy. It was an immediate culture shock. I was the only female in the program, but I wasn't going to allow that to discourage me. I was prepared to go against the grain and challenge societal norms. I had a renewed confidence and felt comfortable being myself. I was so comfortable that I embraced the college and my experience there. My second year at BTC I ran for and was elected Associated Student Body President.

Michele Waltz is absolutely a person who has had a tremendous impact in my college experience. Without her, I know I would not be where I am today or have succeeded in my education. She continues to have a positive impact in my life. I look to her as a mentor and consider her a friend.

I June 2016, I earned my degree in Machining and have been offered a job with Alcoa Intalco Works.

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**Phillip Christian**  
*Big Bend Community College*



I'm a 2015 Moses Lake High School and Big Bend Community College graduate. I grew up in a family with many different struggles. My parents are not college educated and worked minimum wage jobs. We lived paycheck to paycheck; often having to use the local food bank or pawning items to get cash. Not having the funds for things made life a lot more difficult and stressful. I witnessed my parents' relationship struggles which ended in a divorce, my parents remarrying each other, and then living through their second divorce.

That was a difficult time because I was also being bullied by my peers at school. I had suicidal thoughts and felt alone in the world. One day, I came to the realization that my life obstacles could actually teach me life lessons. I learned that although I may face barriers in life there are good people in the world that are available to help me succeed like TRiO Upward Bound staff at Big Bend Community College. I was an active member in this program from the 9th grade until I graduated. I still keep in contact with the program for continued mentorship and guidance.

I became familiar with my local community college after I attended the TRiO Upward Bound summer academy after my freshman year. I lived in the residence halls at Big Bend for six weeks with 55 high school students and gained a college-like experience. Not only did I live on campus but I also ate three meals a day in the dining hall, attended classes and used computer labs and the library. After this experience, I felt more comfortable with the idea of going to college and it seemed less intimidating. From that point on, my goal was to participate in Running Start so I could save money on long-term college expenses and, honestly, to get out of the high school where I feel like I didn't fit in.

I am glad that Big Bend was my first college experience because it was a positive one. There were a lot of mentors and support systems in place so I could succeed. I frequented my TRiO Upward Bound advisor's office at least once a week and was helped with academic advising, personal advice, applying to colleges and for financial aid and scholarships. They truly saw my strengths instead of focusing on my weaknesses and changed my life for the better. Anita DeLeon, Upward Bound director, has inspired me to achieve my educational goals. When college or life would get tough, she was always there to guide me in the right direction. She is a prime example of someone who makes a significant difference at Big Bend. I am glad that she was part of my academic journey because without her, I don't know where I would be today.

I'm on target to graduate with a bachelor's degree from The Evergreen State College in June and am hoping to attend graduate school to earn a master's in social work. I see myself working in higher education as an academic advisor or recruiter or working for a college- readiness program like TRiO. I strive every day to make the world a better place and I want to inspire students who don't have all the resources at hand or don't have the guidance needed for success.



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**Atlas Turner**  
*Cascadia College*



In 2010, three months after I graduated from high school I enrolled at Spokane Falls Community College. I was living rent-free with my grandma as I had done my entire high school education. She was my unofficial guardian; some would refer to this as kinship care. She was there to drop me off at my COMPASS testing even though my anxiety and apprehension for entering an environment we both knew nothing about was almost crippling. My mom lived in California, and had sent me back to Spokane when I was 14 for a more stable upbringing, as we struggled to find a home of our own.

I acclimated to my new-found environment, and did the best I could during that first quarter. However, the increasing pressure to find a job, and my inability to find one led to my grandma forcing me out of the house. I was cut off from my support system, and with it my medical benefits. I found myself staying in a friend's basement of a friend with the promise of \$500 a month rent when I received financial aid.

I entered my first relationship as a way to become financially stable in some capacity, but was still unable to apply myself enough to find a job on top of my full-time education. In the summer of the 2010-2011 school year I found a job working for a popular retailer. I was able to pay rent and continue on. The stress from this experience, compiled with a co-dependent relationship, was too much to handle. Eventually I was put on academic suspension and was told to pay my tuition back in full before I could begin to attend again.

At 18, with no relatives I felt I could turn to, I held in my hand a paper that told me I was a bad student. The 18-year-old brain holds no logic, and despite the numerous chances I was given leading up to that academic suspension, I threw in the towel.

In 2013, my mother who had lived in California the majority of my life told me she was moving back to Washington with her new partner and their children. She offered to take me in as long as I started school again. I told her why I had quit to begin with; that I wasn't able to go back.

We packed my belongings, and with a new determination, I knew I did not want to make the same mistakes I had made at 18. I chose Cascadia because of its commitment to sustainability. In my mind the grass was greener there. History seemed to have repeated itself as I found my grades, and overall drive to succeed, lacking and again I received a letter based on my academic progress.

This time I was equipped to fight back for my education as a student on financial aid. I gained a voice and a attribute that to my English 101 course. Now a Sustainable Practices major in the applied bachelor's program degree I have obtained my AA degree and in two years will earn my first BAS.

My one piece of advice to students who are unsure about their ability to attend a community or technical college: do not fear paperwork and official letters. Instead, find a human being that can explain them to you. Don't stop until someone answers your questions. Nothing is ever final. Keep trying!

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**Janae Wood**  
*Centralia College*



Growing up, I was never told I should go to college. No one encouraged me to submit applications or ask about financial aid. So, by 19, I was married and by 20, had my first child. I was a mother and wife. But, within five years, I was going through divorce with a second child on the way.

I had to do something.

I obtained my real estate license, but as a single mother with no way to pay for daycare and working in a commission-only industry, I soon realized I couldn't make it. I tried to attend college "when I had the time," but I wasn't making any progress. I wasn't making my education a priority.

Then, in 2014, life took a downward turn. Within the span of a few weeks, the house I was renting was in foreclosure and we had to move, my job became unbearable, and a family member committed suicide. I was homeless, jobless, and planning a memorial service. I applied for jobs and received several rejection letters because I had no college degree.

I decided to make major changes in my life. I focused completely on going back to college and getting my degree. I chose Centralia College because it was close to home. It was very difficult and there were daily sacrifices and many sleepless and tearful nights. But, after a year of attending school, I applied for a job with a real estate company and I was hired! Going to college full-time, while working and raising two kids is not easy. Every day, I wonder if I will make it through college, but I am now approaching the finish line; my degree is a very real possibility.

Looking back on all the hard times — the lack of support, being homeless, poor, feeling hopeless — I can't believe I've come this far. Through it all, my driving force has been my children. I wanted them to see me succeed no matter how hard life got and to show them what can be accomplished when they don't give up.

One of the contributing factors to my success was participating in the Centralia College choir. I strongly believe being involved in a music program gave me focus, improved concentration, and helped me succeed in other classes. I have also been enrolled in the TRiO program and my advisor Austin Majors, has been the single most influential person in my success as a student. He's been the greatest source of encouragement for me.

I began this journey out of desperate need for a job and a way to provide for my kids. I now see my college education as a way to further my career and personal growth. I plan to continue learning and applying the education I receive to my career. The greatest reward I have gotten out of this experience is knowing I have set an example of perseverance for my kids.



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**Keeley McConnell**  
*Clark College*



Four years ago, I made the hardest decision I have ever faced. I packed my car with my kids, left my home and my job and went to a safe house for domestic violence victims 80 miles away.

After a stint in the shelter, we were moved to Vancouver into an apartment. Faced with raising three children on my own, I had to make a choice as to where I was headed next to be able to rebuild a stable foundation for my family. I knew that I wanted to go back to school but I lacked confidence in some of my academic skills, mainly mathematics.

Seventeen years before I had scored extremely low on the placement test. I knew I had a long road ahead. However, I was not going to let that — or being a single parent — stand in my way and within three months I registered at Clark College.

I chose Clark for several reasons, but the biggest factor was its reputation for excellence. I had heard from multiple friends of Clark's dedication to student success and the sense of community. This was exactly the type of support and stability I was looking for. However, in order to complete the Associate of Arts in Biology-MRP Transfer, I had to complete nine math classes. When I tested in Compass, I was placed in the lowest math class (which was literally addition, subtraction, and number placements). Even though I did not struggle with elementary math concepts I did fear going to the next level: intermediate algebra.

That is where Math Academy came in. I had been recommended by an instructor to get involved with this year-long program that helped students get ready for college-level math. This program was key to my success in math as it provided me with not only class time lecture and a lab section that followed, but a network of professors in the math department. I was recommended as a math tutor by my instructors and worked in the STEM tutoring center, as well as in the Math Academy lab. I plugged away for over two years and completed my mathematics journey with calculus, having achieved my goal of finishing the required math sequence at Clark.

While at Clark, I took a couple of classes from Dr. Travis Kibota and Dr. Karl Bailey. They were both familiar with my story, my dream of becoming a physician's assistant and were instrumental in getting me to apply for the BUILD EXITO Scholar Program through Portland State University in partnership with Oregon Health Sciences University. The program is funded by a major grant from the National Institute of Health and helps undergraduates, specifically those with diverse backgrounds, become successful in science-based research careers. I was hesitant at first because I had never considered going into research, but I am so glad that I listened to their encouragement. EXITO has given me the ability to move into the next portion of my educational journey.

The dedication of faculty, staff and the student body to my success is something I never expected and I am very blessed. I never dreamed when I walked into Clark, that I would leave with a family and my academic experience would completely transform my life.

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**Kevin Carbonell**  
*Clover Park Technical College*



I started working in the restaurant industry when I was 17 years old. I made great strides in my career, working my way up into a management position at the age of 24. However, I reached a point in my life where I felt I wasn't achieving my full potential. When I considered going back to school, I told myself it was too difficult to go back and start all over. But I knew I wanted to go into a career, not just go to work for the rest of my life. I challenged myself to consider the options for my education to not doubt myself or make excuses as to why I couldn't go back and receive a higher education in a field I truly enjoyed.

What attracted me to a technical college was the fact that I had two kids to support and wanted to be able to learn a technical skill I could use immediately. I didn't have time to go to school for four years at a university. I decided a technical college would be a better fit for what my goals were and I wanted to be able to provide for my two boys while also doing something I truly enjoyed.

I always had a great interest in computer science. After visiting a few different technical colleges, I walked into Clover Park Technical College to see what kind of programs they offered. I was immediately inspired by the Computer Programming and Web Development (CPWD) program.

After attending the CPWD information session, I knew this was the college I wanted to attend. I had found the field and program that would fuel my passion and determination to build a career for the rest of my life.

Two CPWD instructors motivated me and encouraged me to be my best: Joseph Ortiz and Kenneth Meerdink. They had an instrumental role in my success. They always went the extra mile to help me understand what was being covered in their classes. Their knowledge and overall caring personalities helped set the foundation for my success and made me want to be the best I could be in every one of their classes.

I'm excited for what the future has in store for me. The experience and overall knowledge I gained from my time at CPTC has set me up to go after all I've dreamed of when I first entered the program. I was fortunate to earn an internship as soon as I graduated, which was made directly possible by the outstanding reputation that the instructors and the CPWD program had built over recent years. I was just offered a full-time position at Symetra Financial as a business analyst and software developer test engineer. Being able to earn my associate degree at CPTC has opened so many doors and possibilities that I had never foreseen. I'm also continuing my education, working toward earning a bachelor's in computer science at Renton Technical College.

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**Penny McKenzie**  
*Columbia Basin College*



I am 43-years-old and the mother of a beautiful daughter. I have been married to my current husband for 20 years. No female from my very large family, including two brothers and 20 cousins, ever attended college, much less earn a degree. Since starting college at CBC, I've had two much younger cousins start college and they're graduating in the next two years. I am proud to have started a new tradition for our family to continue, thanks to my success.

I should have graduated high school in 1991, but during that time I was in a controlling and abusive relationship. My husband at that time made me drop out of high school to stay at home. After one year, I ended that marriage, although I did not think about going back to school and I did not even know there was an option to get my GED®.

I had a daughter at 22. After she turned two-years-old, I enrolled at CBC to get my GED®. I studied and earned my GED® within three months. At that time I didn't think of continuing in any college program because I had a family to provide for. I spent the next 15 years at minimum wage jobs providing and caring for my daughter.

About the time my daughter started high school, I had a friend who was going through the biology program at CBC. He encouraged me to start college and find a career that I would love. I was working as a technician at Sprint, but due to unforeseen circumstances, I lost my job. While at the unemployment office looking for a job and finding out that I wasn't qualified for much, my caseworker told me I qualified for the Worker Retraining program. I started with basic courses including typing, Word, PowerPoint and Excel, and earned my certificate. After obtaining those, I decided to return to CBC and see what else I could do. I talked to a counselor and started classes in the summer of 2010 with the direction of a Radiology degree. After two quarters, realizing I was not comfortable with the classes I was taking, I went back to my counselor to change my degree plan. I decided to get my AAS in Network Administration. I found I had an aptitude for computers. I have never had a background in computers, so this was all new to me.

Before I graduated in 2013, I won an internship through a Department of Energy-sponsored program called the CCI Internship. I spent the summer at Idaho National Laboratories applying my program knowledge in the work environment. After the internship, my advisor from CBC suggested that I enroll in the cybersecurity bachelor's degree program. I started that program in the fall of 2013. I applied for SULI again for the spring and started work at Pacific Northwest National Laboratories and continued my internship with the lab until my graduation in June 2016 with a BAS in cybersecurity.

After graduation, I was offered employment as a full-time staff member with the Cyber Physical Security group in September 2016.

I had great advisors during my time at CBC. They helped me plan my future success and, if it weren't for their guidance, I might have never succeeded.

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**Yasmin Dunn**  
*Edmonds Community College*



When my parents first told me we were going to leave our home in the U.K. and move to the U.S., I was upset and distraught. As a sophomore in high school, I couldn't imagine why my parents would want to uproot our family at that time. After talking with them, it turned out that I was one of the main reasons they wanted to immigrate to the U.S.

My parents had the foresight to see that the U.S. offers more opportunities in the sciences, and they wanted me to have the best possible chance of achieving my dream of becoming a biochemical researcher. So in 2011, we packed up everything and moved to Washington. Although adjusting to life in a new country presented challenges, I was able to maintain a strong academic background throughout high school.

During my senior year, I made plans to head straight to a four-year university. I thought nothing would stop me after applying and being accepted to the University of Washington, Washington State University, and Seattle Pacific University. However, my parents had used all of their savings to move us to the U.S. and could not afford to send me to a school that would cost \$20,000 or more per year.

It was heartbreaking to be unable to attend a four-year university and my situation weighed heavy on me. But, my desire and dream of becoming a biochemist far outweighed the setbacks. I researched my options, and turned to Edmonds Community College as a more affordable option for pursuing my career goals.

In my time at Edmonds CC, I immersed myself in STEM classes. The coursework was challenging; however, I ended up looking forward to class, because the classroom atmosphere was oriented toward collaborative work and helping each other understand the concepts. I enjoy classes that take advantage of peer-to-peer collaboration. It's a way for all of us to learn simultaneously and it's exciting when you understand a problem or concept and can recreate that feeling for your classmates.

My goal is to become a biochemical researcher and my associate of science degree in chemistry from Edmonds has given me a solid foundation to continue on with my studies at the University of Washington, where I am currently taking classes and pursuing a bachelor's degree in biochemistry. My ultimate goal, however, is to be the best scientist I can be, so I'm definitely not there yet, but that's okay. What really matters to me is that I continue to better myself and the world around me. Growth is the ultimate goal.

I am very fortunate to be where I am today. There are many factors that helped get me here, and one day when I'm where I want to be, I want to do what I can to help others in similar situations.

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**Andrew Wilkins**  
*Everett Community College*



When I first started at Everett Community College I was 16. I had been struggling in public school for years, even before high school. I learned fast and picked up concepts, but failed to apply myself. I had gone through school with teachers who berated me for not doing the homework, but when pressed could not themselves answer the questions I had. Through alternative school, and later high school, I failed classes, skipping school for lack of inspiration and to dodge the uncomfortable atmosphere of condescension.

When you miss enough days of school, the courts become involved to make sure you go to school. It is a real pain and an inspiration killer for sure. At this juncture I had four options as I saw it: drop out of school and get a job somewhere, continue into court and let them make life even harder, join the military, or go to Everett Community College's Youth Re-Engagement (U3) program. I chose U3, as it was clearly the most inviting of the four.

I had many people telling me I was making a mistake and that I couldn't do it and was only setting myself up for more failure. I had a math teacher who would say I didn't deserve to be in his class.

An English teacher who told me, upon hearing that I was leaving high school to go to college that I would never be able to pass a college class. My high school counselor and even my parents were skeptics. Stuck in a culture absent of encouragement, it was probably here that my stubborn streak kept me wanting to prove them wrong.

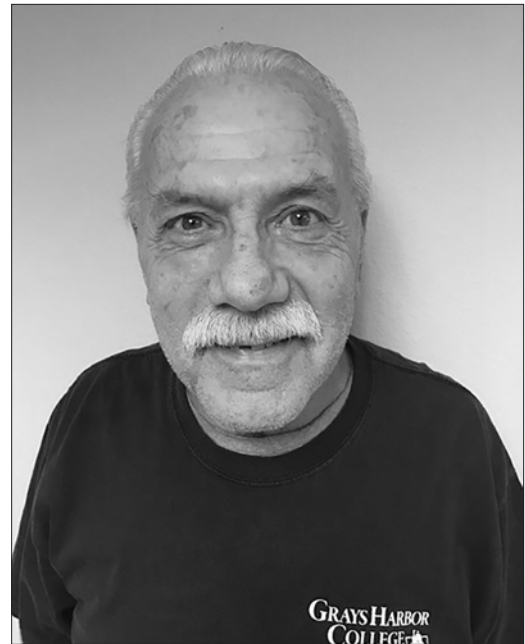
The time for testing to get into the U3 program came up, and I got sick, really sick. I took the tests in a rough state and got the results back later. I needed to be above 8th grade level in math, writing, and reading comprehension. I scored grade 13 on the math and writing, but my reading was barely below grade 8 — I had missed by fractions of a percentage. I was so embarrassed to tell my parents. Later that day I called U3 and asked when the next testing session was and pushed until they accepted to let me retake the exams. I went back in better health and retook the exams and scored grade 15 on every portion.

Every class I took was new and interesting and the quarters flew by. Honestly, it was my love of art, literature and science-fiction that led me to refocus and became a fresh physics major. With the help of exceptional faculty I excelled, passing with excellent grades in math and physics that quarter and many to come. I continued in physics and math for another two years. They taught me to love a subject I had been taught to fear and feel incapable of understanding or knowing in high school. Faculty went above and beyond to help me. I am now an applied physics and astronomy major at the University of Washington in my last year as an undergraduate student. I honestly feel that I would not be the person I am today or so proud of my achievements if weren't for the amazing faculty at EvCC.



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**Phillip Slep**  
*Grays Harbor College*



In the fall of 1957, I began a career as a character in the entertainment division of Disneyland. I completed my high school education, but did not pursue further academics; enjoying full-time employment, as well as the wonderful working environment at the “magic kingdom.” After leaving Disney, I moved my family to Catalina Island, joining and working for the Catalina Island Conservancy. I became an island tour guide as well as running the operations of the Airport-in-the-Sky.

After 25 years of island life, I relocated to Texas. My sister and I started a bed and breakfast that would allow some income and a pleasant retirement lifestyle. Not being totally accepted into the culture I had moved into, I relocated to the Pacific Northwest, moving to Grays Harbor. This was like reacquainting myself with all the wonderful experiences of my childhood. After suffering a severe injury, I began a rehab program that allowed me opportunities for small part-time job opportunities.

I took on a delivery position that brought me and a vase of flowers to Grays Harbor College one day. Not knowing the campus, I was directed to the Student Support/Welcome Center where I was greeted by the one person in my life I will never forget. I asked where the principal’s office was and the reply was, “you must not have been in school for quite some time. Here we have a president.” This wonderful person not only took me to the correct office, but took the time to invite me to see all the opportunities available right here at Grays Harbor College. By the time I was ready to leave, I had a new vision of my future goals. I am not the retiree who sits back in an easy chair waiting for life to pass by. After my visit I knew I was ready to commit to my future and start my journey to higher education after a 50 year break.

On April 1, 2013, I became a freshman. The starting date was so appropriate for my personality and what was to eventually change my life. I have not only completed my AA degree, but am currently attending The Evergreen State College with the prospect of continuing through a master’s program with an emphasis on community connection.

I chose Grays Harbor College for two reasons: convenience being one, but more important, the people associated with the college. Their love, concern, respect, and helpful nature — and willingness to spend as much time as necessary — to make students feel they are in the right place.

Being absent from academics for many years gave me concerns as to whether I had the drive and ability to return to a higher education environment. I was put at ease the very first day of attendance by all the support given by staff and faculty.

I care about helping future students receive the best and most affordable higher education regardless of age. Education can and should be a rewarding, fun and gratifying experience for everyone.

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**Jeremy Grisham**  
*Green River College*



One of my barriers to secondary education was my own poor self-image. As a child, I experienced several measures of abuse and, without realizing it at the time, I dissociated from the world around me. I never expected much of my life and I certainly never believed that I would attend college.

I decided to enlist in the United States Navy where I gained a professional identity as a Corpsman. I was good at what I did and took great pride at caring for others. During deployment, I had numerous traumatic experiences. I sustained a post-traumatic stress injury and was medically retired from the military. I struggled hard to readjust to civilian life. I was working to manage suicidal ideations, was self-mutilating, and was in a very bad place.

Someone suggested I try going to college to gain new professional skills and, perhaps, it would also help me readjust. That's when I learned about the Veterans Conservation Corps (VCC). The VCC was a newly launched program that offered at a very few, select institutions. Green River College was one of those institutions and happened to be the place where I first enrolled. I felt as though my life was beginning to make sense again and I finally had hope for a better future.

The VCC had given me the freedom to think about and eventually realize the meaning of Eco-Therapy. It helped me explore the relationship between habitat restoration and growth from mental illness, and how the two were very similar in nature. I was able to make connections. I was able to make a difference. I was able to connect to the community and advocate for the eco-systems that support us. The VCC and my journey as a student at Green River College saved my life. Many of the lessons I learned there have stayed with me and today inform my professional interactions as an advocate for eco-therapies in both habitats and veterans alike.

I am currently finishing my masters of science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and it is my intention to continuously develop nature-based medicines, environmental stewardship and re-centering in clinical practice and in using habitat restoration as a tool to recover from and manage trauma in one's life.

I would offer any student — but specifically those students who are living with their own traumas — to remember to be kind to yourself. Remember not to beat yourself up if things do not go well academically and to give yourself the freedom to pursue a path that leads to realizing your dreams. Be honest in answering the question, “what do I want to be when I grow up?” and give yourself the space to figure it out as you go along.

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**Kathleen Roberts**  
*Highline College*



Her story started out a sad one. Her parents divorced when she was 5 and she was abused by a family member as a child. The odds were against her and her future looked dim.

As a teenager she turned toward the bottle and anything else that could help her escape the ghosts that haunted her. She barely graduated from high school, then became a single mom and found herself homeless and in numerous abusive relationships.

At 30 years old she found sobriety, but was busy taking care of her children and focusing on working on her mental wellness.

Today, I am 15 years sober and am currently in my second year at Highline College. I am a proud student, and this summer I will graduate with my AAS in Human Services. I am excited as I will walk with my amazing 17-year-old daughter who is a Running Start student at Highline College. I have had some, not-so-proud moments in my life, but those moments have made me who I am today. I have had the support of many friends and family members, and my teachers and advisors have been some of my biggest cheerleaders. I remember being in class, struggling with anxiety and wondering if anyone understood and there have been times when I wanted to quit, thinking I couldn't go on and then someone would say, "You can do this." I saw my friends, and people around me taking classes at Highline and even graduating, and I had faith in them, but I didn't think it could happen for me and now it is happening.

I am on the honor roll, and sometimes I have to pinch myself, because it doesn't seem real. Going back to school has been one of the scariest things I have done in my life, and I have learned that if I walk through those fears the rewards are life changing. Today I am not only a "survivor," but a "Thrivor."

If anyone is reading this and doubts themselves, find a friend, teacher, or supportive staff and ask for help. We were not made to do this alone. This quarter I started my internship at a women's and children's day center where I get to give back, pay it forward for all the help I have received over the years. I am doing what I love, and loving what I do. Highline College has given me "A Beautiful Transformation."

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**Amanda Pelly**  
*Lake Washington Institute of Technology*



My barriers to starting college were many. I grew up in a family where the importance of education wasn't stressed. I was always taught that a strong work ethic would set you apart from your peers. Coming from a very low socioeconomic status, this mentality is no surprise. My parents were doing the best they could. What my parents didn't teach me is while a strong work ethic will keep you employed (usually), in the current economy it will not allow you to move out of poverty. Once I began my journey as an adult, I encountered one massive barrier after another. Before long I was addicted to drugs, basically homeless, possessed no assets, and was living in a very physically abusive environment.

I could not endure the physical pain of my environment any longer and made the choice to leave or die. Once I left my situation, I knew I could not survive for long living on the kindness of individuals from my church, and within the Narcotics Anonymous program. I made the choice that if I was living on the kindness of others, it would be to truly get ahead. My experience showed me that education was something I could earn and no one could ever take from me. I set out to apply for school with no idea of what kind of career I wanted, just the knowledge that I'd never earn a livable wage without an education.

I chose Lake Washington Institute of Technology originally because the school didn't require an application fee. With my criminal record and life situation at the time, I had no idea if I was even allowed to receive Financial Aid and attend classes. I had no funds to start school, and finding a school without an application fee was a blessing. I thought that the school would find out what kind of a person I was and deny me access. It was just the opposite. Once I was accepted, I was invited to attend a New Student Welcome Orientation to begin selecting classes and completing paperwork. It was at this orientation I realized Lake Washington was the school for me. The advisor I talked to was extremely open and friendly; I disclosed to her many of the barriers I was facing including my criminal history. She told me while my history limited me from certain job fields, if I had the willingness to complete a degree, my future would be very bright.

On my journey here at Lake Washington there have been many people who have made a significant impact on my experience. The person having the most consistent impact is the Director of Student Programs, Sheila Walton. I had one major incident my first year in college where I was arrested on an old warrant I didn't know about. I was pulled over leaving school for not wearing my seatbelt, and the next thing I knew I was in jail for multiple days. Coming back to campus was a very humbling experience. I thought, "How would this impact my school life?" Sheila sat with me and listened to my fears. Once I was done explaining the situation to her, she looked at me and asked "How can we at the college support you in this situation?" She went the extra mile to not just encourage me, but used her position of leadership to support me. She continues to have an amazing impact on me.

Last spring I earned my AAS degree in Social and Human Services, and this fall, I started classes in the Bachelor of Technology in Applied Design program. I plan on obtaining my Masters in the Higher Education field. I want to be a part of the system that changed my life.

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**Adelina Delao**  
*Lower Columbia College*



My name is Adelina Delao and I am here to share with you a story about my life to show other students around Washington State that anyone can accomplish their dreams. "Everyone has a story," my grandmother told me when I was fifteen and going through one of many rough times in my life. She opened my eyes and gave me the tools to understand that everyone goes through some sort of hardship. Unfortunately, some may not be conquered and those negative forces take over lives. I knew deep down in my heart that this wasn't going to be my story.

My mother was struggling with multiple types of addiction and would abandon me and my brother constantly throughout our lives. It seemed that two kids were too much to handle in the drug world and often she was conquered by those negative forces. My father took care of us the best that he could, also raising us with his own struggles with society. We went through years of custody battles between my mother and father and throughout these years of losing, gaining and losing my family again, my education fell far behind. I was in many special classes to help with my reading and mathematics all through school.

By the time I was in sixth grade, my mother had relapsed and my stepfather left us in a meth house. This was one of my worst times growing up because my mother would leave us home alone with no food, running water or electricity. I remember begging the clerk at a small convenience store down the road for some food for me and my brother. It was very terrifying because my brother and I got separated and lived with different family members across Washington State. I attended three different middle schools within one year with lots of missed time in between. I was struggling hard with life and education.

I got suspended for four months of my ninth grade year. As soon as I got back to school, I was determined to make it out of this cycle of constant failure in my life. I didn't want to fail myself like my mother had failed me. This was not what I wanted for my life, so I enrolled in the CEO program at Lower Columbia College. I barely was able to join their program due to my grades, but they opened up their big hearts and allowed me to join.

After a few months I graduated with my High School Diploma then continued my education. In two short years I received my AA. This was a huge accomplishment, because I am the first in my family to receive any degree. Today, I attend classes at The Evergreen State College and will graduate in 2018. I know that I am a strong person and will not give up and I have several people to thank for their support and encouragement. Everyone has a story. What is yours going to be?



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**Shannon Turner**  
*Olympic College*



Three and a half years ago my family and I were on the brink of becoming homeless. I was laid off from work with the prospect of finding a job almost impossible. With two young children and a wife to support I had to apply for the Food Stamp Program at the local DSHS office. There I met Darci McGuire from Kitsap Community Resources (KCR) who helped me enroll my daughter, Ashlynne, into the KCR Head Start Program. After telling Darci my background, she informed me that KCR had a veterans' program that would also be able to assist me with rent and other services. The veteran's counselor informed me that there were certain programs that they offered that would help assist me long term. Daniel Crosby was that counselor; he helped me get my life back on track. He offered me the opportunity to attend college in order to better my opportunities for employment. I said "yes" and my life has forever been changed for the better.

In late 2012, after going through the registration process and enrolling in classes, I was finally a "college student." I remember the fear I had attending my first day of class: Was I too old for this? Will I be the only African American in class? Will I understand the material? How will I accomplish the school work not having a computer at home.

With all of this going through my head, I was determined none of it mattered, I was there and I was going to accomplish this goal. I had overcome a heart attack, divorce, and even cancer, to ensure that I made it to my goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree from Olympic College.

My advisor, Mirelle Cohen, has given me the inspiration and desire to achieve my goal by supporting me with great information and data, but most importantly by listening to me and reassuring me that I can do it. With her support and guidance, I now have the confidence to go out and get involved, ask questions, and try to make a change that would help others, as well as myself. I have been president of the African-American and Caribbean Heritage Club and I am currently the Student Body President of Olympic College.

I plan on enrolling in the Organizational Leadership/Resource Management (OLRM) program at Olympic College and in Western Washington University's Human Services program. The opportunities that have been provided to me at Olympic College have been a blessing that has empowered me, informed me, and given me an opportunity to use my voice for the student body and to continue to make Olympic College one of the best community colleges in the nation.

If I could share one piece of advice with other students, I would say, "Go for your dreams and achieve your goals." The best way to do this is to start your educational goals at a community college. The smaller atmosphere and personal engagement will provide you with the best education and college experience.

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**Alicia Beck**  
*Peninsula College*



I've never been as nervous as the day I walked to the stage for my Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) honor society induction. My thoughts drifted to what it took to get to where I am today. To many, it might seem like an ordinary event, but to me, it was an indication of just how much my life has transformed in a year-and-a-half.

I started using drugs in my early teens, which led to heroin use by age 18 when my best friend passed away. I struggled with this for almost six years. Being numb was all that mattered. In fall 2007, I stopped showing up to school and failed every class, including my first year as a Running Start student in 2008-2009. It took me a long time to finally be okay with my friend's death and even longer to finally get fed up with the way I was living.

In February 2015, I met my current boyfriend who helped me recognize the damage I was doing to myself and my family. I wanted more and decided to stop sleepwalking through life and began the process of weaning off opiates and learning to be human again.

In fall 2015, I returned to school to further my education and try to rekindle my passion for learning. I chose Peninsula College, because it has an amazing campus with a supportive and friendly staff; it is also close to home and family. I was extremely nervous about returning to school, keeping mostly to myself the first two quarters. I attended class and went home, having no social life. My English 101 instructor Lynn Hovde reignited my passion for writing with her constant encouragement and teaching style. In Michael Mills' art history class, I realized my potential and gained the confidence to challenge myself academically. My transfer advisor, Mary Moseley, is a huge support and is one of the kindest people I've ever met.

My academic success helped me muster the courage to reach out and meet new people. I challenged myself to stay after class, meet classmates, start speaking out more in class, and to do my homework in the student union, in hopes I would make connections with other students. I often visited the Associated Student Council (ASC) office to talk with ASC members about events and activities.

By the end of spring quarter, I was fully immersed in Peninsula College student life. I started attending college events with my new friends, was inducted into PTK and was elected vice-president of our PTK chapter. I was chosen to be ASC Director of Marketing for 2016-2017 and started working in the PC Fitness Center last summer. Today, I am a tutor in three subjects and maintain a 3.91 cumulative GPA. I have been nominated for two awards and received three scholarships from the Seattle Foundation and PC for my hard work. I am learning leadership skills, how to maintain healthy friendships, and how to manage stress. My involvement at PC has played a significant role in my transformation as I learn to love myself and my life again.

I plan to complete my AA and transfer to a four-year university to study psychology. One of my many goals is to help young people learn to cope with trauma and difficult emotions. I also would like to reform the education system to better help the intellectually-gifted and challenged. My advice to those who doubt their ability to attend college is: Believe in yourself. You can do anything you put your mind to. True success means never giving up.

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**Daniel Murillo**  
*Pierce College Fort Steilacoom*



My name is Daniel Murillo and I came to the United States when I was 21, having been born and raised in Ensenada, Mexico. I would not have imagined finding myself 15 years later, in 2016, graduating with honors and two Associates Degrees from Pierce College, as well as at the top of my class for the Pierce College Emergency Medical Services program.

Coming from a family where my parents did not finish elementary school and my older sister was only able to complete junior high, I did not expect to be able to say that I am the first of many generations in my family to receive a college degree. I would like to tell you first about a life-changing event that impacted me and ultimately led to my decision to attend Pierce College.

In January of 2008, I was diagnosed with Myelodysplastic Syndrome, a blood-borne cancer. I was in need of an immediate stem cell transplant. Fortunately, my sister (my only sibling) was a positive match and I was able to receive an allogeneic stem cell transplant on July 1, 2008.

Cancer has affected my life in every way: physically, mentally and spiritually. I am now eight years post-transplant and suffer from a secondary disease caused by the inability of the new immune system to recognize my body, called Graft-versus-Host Disease (GvHD), which affects my eyes, mouth and skin. This condition made reading, studying and taking an exam extremely challenging and led to another disease called Central Serous Chorioretinopathy which caused vision distortion. However, through these trials I found the motivation to continue moving forward.

This decision led me to Pierce College where, with a lot of effort and the incredible help of my brilliant professors and other wonderful Pierce entities such as TRiO Student Support Services, the Access and Disability Services, Phi Theta Kappa, and the scholarship program, I have succeeded.

My original goal in attending Pierce College was to become a physical therapist assistant, but with each passing day my vision for the future expanded and the continual kind words and encouragement of professors, tutors and personnel inspired me to pursue greater and bigger things until I came to realize that no dream was impossible, no matter how big. I am passionate about helping people and believe that I have a lot to offer those in need of someone who understands what they are going through on a deeper level.

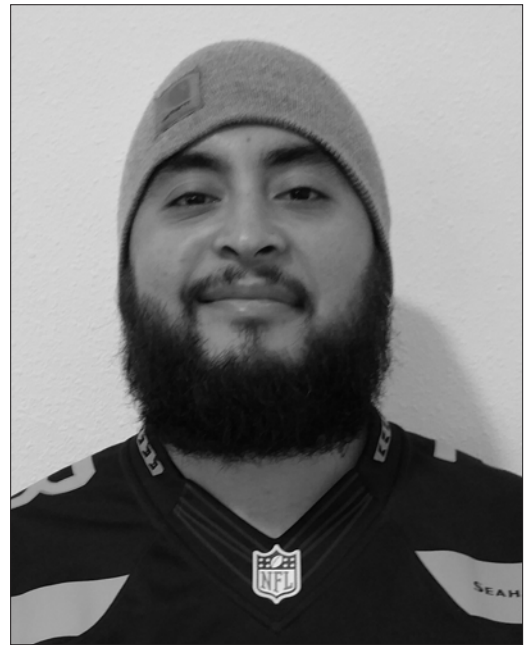
My strong work ethic, passion and personality have been key to my survival and successes. Short-term, I plan to take the EMT National Registry exam, and then work as an EMT or Emergency Room Technician, completing the direct hands-on clinical patient care experience required by the Physician's Assistant MEDEX program.

My long-term goal is to transfer to the University of Washington Tacoma in the fall of 2017 and graduate with a Bachelor's Degree and possibly a Master's degree to follow. There is no doubt in my mind that my Pierce College education is an essential part of achieving these goals.

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## **Augustine Canales**

*Pierce College Puyallup*



Everyone experiences challenges and obstacles in life. But difficulties and barriers can sometimes shape a person for the better. Learning how to overcome problems is something that has helped shape the person that I have become.

Just three years ago, the idea of attending college was completely foreign to me. I had dropped out of school in the 9th grade and decided to get my GED® and that decision wound up being one that eventually would push me to go back to school.

Since I only had a GED®, I decided to get a job that didn't require that much education and I joined the Carpenters Union. Everything seemed to be working out fine until the day I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Immediately after learning I had MS, my life changed drastically. I went from having a good job in the union making great money, to being bedridden and relying on Social Security Disability to pay for everything. Several years after I was diagnosed, I realized that I needed to make a change in my life so I wouldn't have to be dependent on Social Security.

At first I wasn't sure what that change was going to be. I had always talked about wanting to go back to school, but the idea was always so scary, and now that I had an actual disability, the idea of going back to school, let alone to college, was something that seemed impossible.

Some of the biggest hurdles that kept me from going back to school had to do with my MS. Lesions that had developed in my brain greatly affect my cognitive skills. I also have a lot of physical problems due to multiple lesions that had grown in my spinal column.

But another thing that I felt that would prevent me from attending a college was my lack of education. Trying to start over at the age of 34 was a very frightening idea. Even with all those fears and problems I eventually decided to put my anxiety aside. I took my Compass test and signed up for classes at Pierce College. The decision to attend Pierce College was an easy one for me. I chose Pierce College was because I grew up in the Puyallup area and a lot of my friends had attended the college.

At first I wasn't sure about what my experience with college was going to be like because of multiple sclerosis. Thankfully Pierce College has amazing staff like Michael Mesa from Access and Disability Services who helped me, and continue to help me receive accommodations for my disability.

I have also had the pleasure of meeting other staff members and professors like Deborah Falcioni. Ms. Falcioni's Math 50 was the first math class I took at the college. Having her help was so important to me that I decided to take two other math classes from her, and I just recently finished taking her statistics class. Without her patience and help, I do not think I would have done as well as I did in my math classes.

Now that I know how much I can achieve, even with obstacles in my way, my future looks bright. My long-term goal is to attend school until I have my master's degree in psychology. Two years ago this would have seemed too hard to do, but now I'm sure it will happen.





**Mohamed Abdullahi**  
*Renton Technical College*



I have faced many barriers on my path to a college education, but the most difficult were cleared long ago by the incredibly strong woman who gave birth to me. My mother was only 19-years-old when she watched our homeland collapse. As part of Somalia's "last graduating class," she earned a degree just two years earlier, but her own future crumbled as civil war raged. She spoke fluent English, but now her degree was worthless. She was just a refugee with nothing but an infant boy and an absent husband.

My mother provided throughout my childhood, but we were always poor. When I was 16, we started our college journey together at Green River College. I was in Running Start, she studied early childhood development.

Seeing her graduate inspires me to this day. I told my mother I would get my college degree, too. My family will watch me walk across the commencement stage and graduate with honors this summer.

As a young, poor, black man in the U.S., the data shows I am not expected to succeed in college. But the computer science program at Renton Technical College (RTC) has absolutely transformed my life.

I chose the college and the program with little knowledge about either. I was only planning to get a certificate. The first day of class, my professor, Tim Culler, told me that not only would I earn my certificate; I would graduate with an Associate in Applied Science degree. That was almost two years ago.

I think a lot about the Black Lives Matter movement and talk about it with my friends and advisors. I've always understood that, in the grand scheme of things, everyone matters. But my experience at RTC has meant empowerment and affirmation that my individual black life matters.

At RTC, I am empowered and am seen as an individual with abilities and strengths. I have been challenged and repeatedly pushed just outside of my comfort zone, but with every tool necessary to succeed. In my classes and student leadership roles, supportive mentors put power in the hands of leaders who might never have had access to it. I learned that education is a social justice issue. And that community and technical colleges are the most accessible route to education for people of color in America, and by extension, the most accessible route to empowerment for the disenfranchised.

Behind white privilege the trauma of the minority experience. And I am acutely aware my privilege of being a college student today is a direct result of my mother's trauma. This is my paradox.

I plan to learn to develop technology to connect every human on Earth to the Internet, and by extension, to education. I told my mother about my plan to save our people; not just in Somalia, but all refugees. And I will, because now I have power and the skills to succeed.



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**Mark Bennett**  
*Seattle Central College*



Poverty is not always a lack of financial stability. Sometimes, it is a lens from which one views the world. For me, it has many meanings. For instance, when I was struggling with homelessness and addiction, I felt the poverty one experiences when in despair. When I haunted the streets of downtown Seattle, watching the world carry on without me, I experienced the type of poverty when one feels invisible and worthless. I can go on and on, but my point is that sometimes poverty has little to do with money. In my case, it was a soul sickness that almost destroyed my life.

Everything turned around when I sought help from homeless youth shelters. These people saved my life at a time when I was expecting to die. They helped me develop a new way of living, and, in particular, they challenged me to go to school.

To be completely honest, I believed that the time for education had passed in my life. School was not for people like me. I was homeless, a drunk, and a deadbeat dad. But staff at these shelters pushed me to go to school. I loved these people, because they believed in me more than I believed in me. So signing up for courses at Seattle Central College was, to some extent, a matter of convenience. Little did I know that Seattle Central was going to change the way I view the world.

Seattle Central was diverse and felt like a place I could belong. People looked like me and even questioned world events in the same way I did. The school encouraged discourse about issues that were complex and that really mattered. Professors like Susan Chin, Bryan Johns, and Francois Lepeintre cared about and believed in me. It really helped me believe that school can be for people like me.

Even though I was growing as a person, I still felt despair. For instance, in my mind the world and its people were corrupt. I thought there were no such thing as heroes. I was very pessimistic. But all that changed when I took a global health class with professor Jay McLean-Riggs. In this class I learned about real heroes like Paul Farmer. It gave me back a piece of hope that I lost to drugs. The class showed me that there are principles in life that I can lean on and strive to be better at.

During my time at Seattle Central one thing was constant: mathematics. Math classes were, at first, necessary if I wanted a degree. But after taking the precollege math courses I was hooked. Math was validating because  $2+2=4$  no matter what anyone thought of me. When working on math problems I didn't have to think about identity, religion, or any of that. Instead, through math I was able to explore a world that I never knew existed.

And so, that is how I began to develop not just hope, but also passion and curiosity. As a student at Seattle Central I developed a foundation in things like leadership, service, social justice, and a passion for mathematical rigor. I volunteered often and even helped start a MESA chapter at that school. Everyone knew me — I was the math guy. Because of my hard work I was chosen to speak at my graduation. Because of Seattle Central, I am empowered and I am working my way out of poverty.

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**Marlon Do Couto**  
*North Seattle College*



I was born in Goiania, a city in the countryside of Brazil. In 2012, amid economic difficulties in Brazil, I applied for a Department of State exchange program and was one of only 33 Brazilians selected that year.

So I came to the U.S. to study and live for one year. After a couple of months, I knew I wanted to stay here and make this place home. In the U.S., I could get a better life for myself and leave behind economic and social struggles. Since I hadn't finished college back in Brazil, I knew that achieving permanent residency and citizenship status would be very hard. My partner and I decided that, to best increase my chances of staying, I would have to pursue higher education.

One of the barriers I had to face was that as an international student, I would have to pay triple what domestic students pay and I didn't have access to any sort of financial aid from either the U.S. or Brazil. But we set up a budget and I researched potential colleges.

I decided to apply for North Seattle College (NSC). What attracted me the most was that the tuition was lower than other colleges. Also, as a brown-LGBTQ non-traditional student, I felt the campus provided great resources for its students, especially resources directed to international students and the LGBTQ community.

After a very short time, I knew I could have not made a better choice. In my first quarter, I got involved with the Student Leadership Office. I was able to get involved with behind-the-scenes conversations that most students do not usually get contact with. After a while, I became a coordinator and had the great opportunity to be in contact with and welcome other students, understanding their struggles, and helping them any way I could. I also learned valuable organizational and interpersonal skills, which helped me to lead other student leaders effectively.

One of my greatest campus learning opportunities was leading an all-gender bathroom initiative. I got to know the struggles trans-gender and gender-non-conforming individuals face on a daily basis. We created marketing materials, set up information tables, and visited classrooms to educate other students and staff. We founded the brand Toilets4All, with the intent to spread this initiative to help other campuses create more inclusive environments in other communities.

After graduating last June, I transferred to Seattle University to pursue a bachelor's degree in business administration finance. I just accepted a job as client relationship manager at the Business School Entrepreneurship Center, a position that helps small business owners succeed with marketing, finance, and management help. The hiring manager was really impressed with all of the work I had done back at NSC and decided to offer me the job.

As I take on this next big step in my life, I leave this advice for other students: get involved. College can be hard and sometimes you might feel out of place. By getting involved you can build your own community on campus and share with people who have similar experiences as you. Those skills will open new doors and will be of great help for your professional life in the future.

Transforming  
Lives Keynote  
Speaker

**Marady Duong**  
*South Seattle College*



I was born in Cambodia in a small, rural village with no electricity or running water and a poor education system. My father left us, so I grew up in a single-parent family. At age seven, I started selling cookies door-to-door to buy food and school supplies.

Yearning for a better education and life, my family moved to Phnom Penh, so I could complete my high school diploma. When I could, I volunteered at Our Home, a non-profit organization for neglected children, many whose parents suffered from HIV and couldn't afford to care for their children anymore. My heart went out to those children because of my own hardships.

After immigrating to the US in 2011, I put my educational goals on hold because of financial struggles. I worked at two jobs for more than 70 hours a week — packing fish and crab at a seafood processing plant and making sandwiches at McDonald's — to support my family in Seattle and back in Cambodia.

I knew I'd have this kind of career for the rest of my life without an education, so I decided to attend college. I started in English as Second Language (ESL) classes. After a year, with support and encouragement from my family and professors, I took a pre-college class, hoping to be the first in my family go to college. I made monthly payments and took one class at a time, because I couldn't afford tuition.

Everything started to change with the help of South's student resources; especially the Asian American and Pacific Islander Center, writing and tutoring centers, advising services, financial aid office, and TRiO. My TRiO advisor was always there to help me find resources and map my education goals. Without their support, I would be working at minimum wage the rest of my life.

Scholarships from the South Seattle College Foundation allowed me to work only 30 hours a week, rather than 70. Their gift not only allowed me to continue my education, but gave me confidence that someone believed I was worth their investment. With an AANAPISI (Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander) scholarship, I was South's student representative to the Higher Education Summit in Washington, D.C.

I was a founder of the Southeast Asian Association student club for Southeast Asian students to network, share our cultures, leadership skills, volunteer opportunities, and life challenges. I volunteer as an interpreter for co-workers, neighbors and family if they need a translator at medical or caseworker appointments.

In 2015, I earned an associate in business information technology and was awarded the President's Medal at graduation. I expanded my educational goals, earning an associate business transfer degree in 2016. I now major in human resource management and minor in international business at the University of Washington's Foster School of Business. I have learned a lot from challenges I have faced and want to create a non-profit for youths to help them overcome their own challenges.

My advice for others is to give yourself a chance to reach your dream. Believe in yourself and do not give up. Don't be shy about asking for help, because there are a lot of people willing to help you reach your goals.

**Ray Waugh**  
*Shoreline Community College*



If you would have told me I would go back to school at age 42, I would have said, “No way. Not in a million years.” I never thought I would be a college student. In fact, I never made it out of middle school.

When I was 15, I wasn’t a great student, but was passing my classes. My stepfather was dying of diabetes and my mother took care of him full-time. To make extra money, she got paper routes and I helped her throw every day.

It got harder for her to keep up with my stepfather’s needs, so at age 16, I took a job at a grocery store. I decided paying bills and keeping a place to live was more important than school, so I dropped out and worked full-time to help my mother.

I worked for many years, but was laid off in 2014. My college journey started with a question after a WorkSource meeting one night: “Have you ever thought of going back to school?” No, because I couldn’t imagine how to pay my bills and go to school at the same time.

Next quarter, I will complete my final two classes, earn a degree from Shoreline Community College, and interview for jobs.

The Worker Retraining program gave me the opportunity, but I needed to choose a pathway to help me get better-paying jobs in the future and that I felt passionate about. I did some research and found the automotive and manufacturing programs at Shoreline to be among the best in the state. I chose the CNC Machining program, planning to get an I-BEST certificate. My Shoreline BFET advisor helped me get funding for transportation, classes, and books and connected me to the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program for a GED®.

Just two quarters later, while studying for my last GED® test, I began my CNC Machining certificate. So I finished my GED® while already working on my manufacturing degree.

I am grateful for all the teachers that helped me get this far. Every person I met on this journey, administrators and teachers alike, encouraged and supported me. My ABE teachers gave me the confidence that I belong and am capable of anything.

“You get out of this what you put into it,” they said. I decided I wasn’t going to leave with anything less than a GED® and an associate in applied arts and sciences (AAAS) in Manufacturing/Machinist Technology.

I hope to work for an employer with an education reimbursement program, because I want to stay competitive and never stop learning. My English instructor encouraged me to take English 101, so I could continue my education in the future. Now, I can see myself in the future, taking management training classes to advance.

This is one of the hardest things I have ever done. Starting over, taking a leap of faith, and diving in was a scary proposition, but the payoff can even be greater. As I look at myself now, I have almost reached the goals I set and only wish I’d done this a lot sooner. Now, I think it’s time to set some more goals. The future looks bright!



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**Jason Quigley**  
*Skagit Valley College*



My first attempt at going to college was shortly after I turned 18. I was a high school dropout, but I went and took my GED® test as soon as it was allowed. In spite of my struggles with high school, I had it in my mind I wanted to go to college. I signed up for fall quarter after passing the GED® test. The trouble was, I did not follow through. I drove to campus the first day of class, parked my car, but never stepped foot into the parking lot. I just drove away. It was a combination of my relatively extreme social anxiety along with other complex issues going on in my life. For example, I was a few years deep into pretty serious substance abuse issues, the severity of which would only get worse for years to come, taking me further away from dreams I entertained when wanting to go to school that first time. I really did want to be educated, live a more cultured life, and be a writer and travel. I had a romantic vision of my future but lacked the self-discipline to do what I needed to do to get there, not to mention the aforementioned issues. Because of the road I was on and the experiences that resulted, it would take me almost 20 years to get to the point where I would be in a place to fill out that application for Skagit Valley College and enroll in classes.

I was compelled to take another run at community college a little over four years ago, due to a set of circumstances that left me unemployed and my family needing a new place to call home. I was laid off a job I got (and kept) for the first 11 years of my new life in recovery and found myself at a crossroads, married, with three kids and wanting more for my family and myself than I was capable of obtaining.

For me, choosing college was a pure leap of faith. I was a dislocated worker, which caused my wife to be a dislocated worker, as she was working in the home, and we were in this transition point together. She always had the same dream as me, to go to school, and she beat me to it by one quarter. Her leap of faith inspired me for sure. When I went to Skagit Valley College for the first time and met with that counselor from the TRiO program, something happened and an opportunity presented itself to me I never saw before. She would be the first of many individuals at Skagit Valley College who would help me navigate the community college experience and get so much more out of it than I could have ever imagined possible. Words cannot do justice for the transformation I experienced in my life from going back to school and seeing it through to the end.

What is next for me is carrying on with the great job I landed before I even graduated. I was extremely fortunate that I was able to be one of the students in Skagit Valley College's first graduating class (2016) of the Bachelor of Applied Science in Environmental Conservation (BASEC) program. An internship with Skagit County led to me getting a grant-funded position as an Environmental Resources Technician I, and that led me to getting a permanent position as an Environmental Resources Technician II just days after I graduated with my bachelor's degree. Currently, I am considering starting some research based on the work I do and eventually going to graduate school.



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**Melissa Hooper**  
*South Puget Sound Community College*



Before attending college, there was a woman who feared looking stupid, had self-doubt, lack of confidence, was not smart enough and ultimately, was told she had a reading comprehension skills of a seventh grader while in the eleventh grade. It was depressing and hard to hear. These are the things that prevented me from attending college. How do you cope with the sheer fear of being embarrassed of having the reading level of a seventh grader at the age of 17? I was ashamed and it psychologically affected my way of socializing with people.

I've always felt that I wouldn't make it in college financially, there was no drive or motivation, and I mainly didn't believe I was capable of learning.

I come from a background with a family history of hard-working coffee and macadamia nut farmers in Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii. I was raised on the farm that my family has owned and worked on for generations. I'm one of four kids where we spent most of our childhood as responsible hard workers in the manual labor field. Our farm was an additional source of income that helped to put food on our table. My parents also worked at their normal full time jobs and we hardly spent any family quality time together. Growing up in a family where work was priority, we never had conversations about school or dreams of going to college.

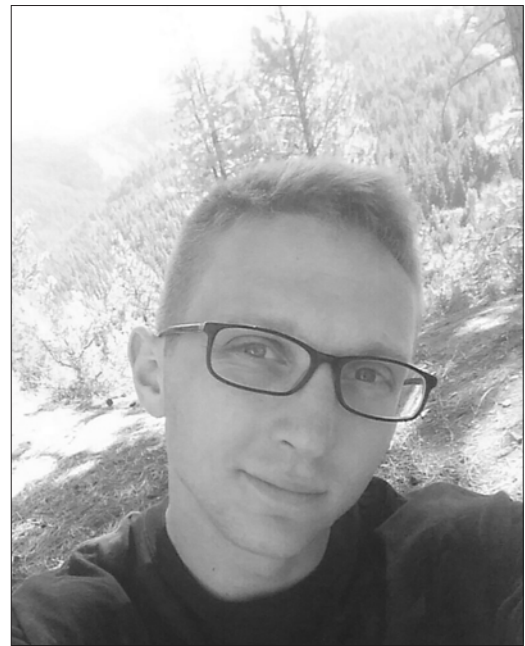
I felt there was more to me than working manual labor. I realized I needed to dig deep and figure out my purpose and how can I flourish in it.

After one year enrolled as a student at South Puget Sound Community College, I worked through all of those insecurities and shame; which in turn, has given me the motivation and determination to proceed with getting my Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN). The advisors and professors were always friendly, encouraging and supportive. That's what made me feel extremely comfortable and important as a 37-year-old woman who's been fearful of attending college. My advisor sat with me and took the time to listen to my story and found a way to help boost my confidence. Since then, that's when I knew I felt valued as a future student of SPSCC.

My math professor, Miss Kayana Hoagland, made a big impact in my life. With her consistent encouragement and positive feedback, it made me realize I needed to give myself more credit. She had no idea the struggles I was battling with. I had to own my passion as a future nurse and my abilities when I knew it was in me somewhere. I just needed to hear it and believe in it. That made a huge impact on my life, which confirmed that I was at the right place doing the right thing for my self-growth.



**Aaron Miller**  
*Spokane Community College*



I am currently a second year student at Spokane Community College pursuing an AA transfer degree. Growing up in a low-income neighborhood, with a single mother who was often away at work, I succumbed to social pressures and began a life of drug abuse, and crime. The life I was leading was not conducive to succeeding in high school, and I eventually dropped out. Several years later when I was 24-years-old I was living a life of complete demoralization. Selling my body and committing crime to support my drug addiction.

I ended up sentenced to five years in prison for robbing a pharmacy. In prison, I earned my GED®. I was then afforded the opportunity to take some welding courses while incarcerated. I attribute my ability to navigate prison, and stay out of trouble, to the education I received there through Walla Walla Community College. This is part of the reason why I decided to continue my education upon release, but it was not the original plan. I had acquired a welding certificate from WWCC, and had planned on using it to gain employment. Once released to the world, I was presented with a choice: either work or go to school.

There were three major contributing factors that aided me in making my decision. The first was that I had already seen the evidence of school keeping me out of trouble in prison. The second was that studies had shown that higher education is the most effective weapon against recidivism, and the last reason was that I saw school as being more conducive to my recovery than working.

I chose SCC because it was both close to home, and I saw a billboard advertising for SCC. Without knowing exactly what I wanted to pursue with my education, I enrolled as an AA transfer student. During the first two quarters, I discovered where I excelled, what I liked, and what questions to ask to guide me in this academic career. My current goal is to get a degree in mechanical engineering. I am taking as many prerequisites as possible while at SCC to transfer to Eastern Washington University for BSME. I would like to use my engineering skills in the renewable energy field. My other interest is in helping others that are either struggling with addiction, or having trouble reintegrating into society after a life of crime. I am currently involved with my community custody officer to help others struggling with such problems by being a guide to enrolling and staying at SCC. I attribute much of my success to enrolling in college, and it is at SCC where I learned to think, question, and communicate in a way that helped me reintegrate into society. It was also at SCC where I was exposed to a much larger world than the one in which I grew up. I was given a work-study position in the Multicultural Student Services and Outreach center and love my job. I have much that I am thankful for, and I can't help but cry from the overwhelming sense of gratitude. The school is a big part of why I feel so blessed. If I could share one piece of advice it would be this: "No matter what fears you may have, there is someone out there that has lived through the same fears, and succeeded."

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**Anne Korp**  
*Spokane Falls Community College*



I am not unique. My story reflects the stories of human beings all over the world whose lives have been affected by domestic and sexual violence. My journey of recovery has been difficult. With my self-esteem stolen from me by my perpetrator, and not yet having the tools I needed to find my self-worth, I self-medicated to stop the flashbacks, the nightmares, and the anxiety I experienced from having complex PTSD.

Time, space, and safety are important requirements for healing. I have found that sharing my experience, strength and hope with others has been incredibly helpful. I have had a great deal of therapy, attend support groups and I have learned to rise above my fears.

I realize how brave I am. I realize how I may influence others through my encouragement. I believe I have a great responsibility to use what I have learned to help others.

I entered Spokane Falls Community College at 42 years of age with aspirations of receiving my AA transfer degree. I choose Spokane Falls Community College Pullman because I am a nontraditional student and wanted smaller class sizes.

After being out of school for over two decades, I needed the attention I would receive at a community college. I could barely operate a computer and was quite intimidated. I began in Dyan Bledsoe's Adult Basic Education classroom, and through her encouragement and guidance, I successfully started college as a full-time student in the fall 2015. I never expected my experience to be as beneficial as it has been. I am learning through my education how to think and write critically. I am learning how to shape an argument that may create change in the lives of others. My academic work has promoted extensive healing in my life.

Utilization of my voice that I had lost for so many years is a triumph for my soul.

I am not only receiving a high-quality education; I have found a community of people who see that my hopes and dreams, my beliefs and values, are worthwhile. I have been encouraged and empowered by all of my professors. When appropriate, I am able to share my experience, strength, and hope through my academic work. I have a platform to stand on. I am able speak out on social justice issues through papers, speeches, and student government events. I am a proud member of Associated Student Government, and am the Vice Chair this year. I will graduate from SFCC in the spring of 2018. I will continue my education at a university. I hope to receive my bachelor and master degrees in social work.



**Ben Feldbush**  
*Tacoma Community College*



As a second-year student at Tacoma Community College (TCC) I am Vice-President of Legislation and Records, have a GPA of 3.7 and am a proud member of Phi Theta Kappa. I have accomplished more at TCC than I ever did in over 30 years of life because I am carving a way to a career and feel accomplishment, stability, and growth. I want to give back through my story so people know they can have the support they need to succeed.

My background in life was infected with negative consequences. My father, an African American veteran, committed suicide when I was two. I lived in poverty almost my whole life as a kid because my mom, a Korean immigrant, could not afford to take care of six boys. I became involved with gangs before the fifth grade. I lost more than 30 friends to violence. I used drugs and was an alcoholic. I have been to jail twice and was always suspended because I could not control my anger. I thought I was not worth the good life and, worst of all, I thought I was just too stupid. Higher education was never an option, until one day my cousin told me his story about community college.

My cousin who was attending TCC would always tell me about his day and what he learned. We would joke about how we failed in school, but he would say how proud he was about doing well in college and how he had support anytime he needed it. He would tell me that I should go to TCC because if he could do it then there was no way I couldn't do it. By this time I had gotten off the streets and had two kids but was complacent in my job. I wanted more for me and my family. So I went back to school at 36.

When I finally stepped foot on campus, it hit me like a ton of bricks. I was scared because I felt stupid and envisioned myself failing. I remember telling myself, "I made a mistake and should have never quit my job." When I sat down in my English 95 class, I looked around and my age kicked in. Everyone looked young. I really wanted to leave, but I knew I had to at least try. I was having issues with memory, grammar, sentence structure, and knowing how to study for quizzes. I started off failing and was thinking of ways to quit, so one day I had a talk with professor Dr. Sandin. I expressed my issues and that I was planning to quit. He would not let me quit. He taught me the most important thing I learned in college: "failure is part of your success." It took a while to understand the barriers I was facing but, when I got it, I tackled time management, used the college's academic resources, and made sure to talk to my professors. My success in academics is partially me, but mostly, those who took the time to help me were the staff and faculty at TCC.

I plan to earn my PhD and teach at community college and eventually become an administrator. I am committed to help those who feel like academic success is out of reach and use my story as proof that it is not. What I know in life is that we all affect each other. I recently lost another friend to drugs. She was a mother of four and never had a chance to change her life like I did. My goal is to get more people to take advantage of the support systems that community colleges offer because we all affect each other. I know the success of others is also the success of my children's future. If I could share one piece of advice to those who are in a similar position to mine, I would say: "Community college is not easy, but just like life, nothing is."



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**Rachel Jones**  
*Walla Walla Community College*



My name is Rachel Jones. I am a single mom and I completed my associate degree from Walla Walla Community College where I graduated with honors in the spring of 2016.

I always had a dream to return to college, I just didn't know when, or how I would make it happen. I first attended college right out of high school, but wasn't really prepared to continue, so I stopped and began working. In my early 20s, I moved to Alaska, got a job working for an oil company and worked my way up into a great position that paid very well, kept me challenged, and even required traveling a couple times year. It was great. Then I met someone. He wanted to get married, buy a house, and start a family, so we decided to move back to my hometown area to be closer to my family.

We followed through with our plan and got married, bought a house, and within two years, had our son. My husband made it clear that I would be a stay-at-home mom and that working was no longer an option for me, so I left my job, giving up the last bit of independence I had. He then began to manipulate and control me in ways that I never thought he would. He got buried into a life of opioids and would tell me that being high was the only way he could face reality. I couldn't understand how having a beautiful home, a loving wife, and a healthy baby boy was such a terrible reality that he needed to be high all the time to cope with it. Finally, when our son was about six months old, he told me he was leaving and he didn't care if we came or not. So, I chose not to go. I was broken and torn down from the manipulation and control and didn't want my son to be raised in an environment like that.

My mom encouraged me to follow my dreams and go back to school. I enrolled at Walla Walla Community College in the fall of 2014. My plan was to "get in and get out," but it didn't go that way. It was better than that. I was surrounded by faculty and staff that were supportive, understanding, and who cared if I succeeded. While a student I held a work-study job which led to a tutoring job. I was able to work with other students and help them succeed as well. I was elected president for the Ambassadors Club and president of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. The Ambassadors Club was involved with new and future student involvement. Honor Society is for students with a 3.5 GPA or higher and ran parallel with the Honor Program, which I was enrolled in as well. The honors program had just begun at the Clarkston campus during my second year attending and there were many requirements needed to graduate with honors. I was able to complete all of the requirements, and was decorated at graduation as an honors graduate. Just before graduation, I was nominated to be the highlight graduate for the class of 2016 and was featured in an article in the local newspaper on graduation morning.

I am a current student at Lewis-Clark State College and am pursuing my bachelors in accounting and plan to sit for the CPA exam to become a Certified Public Accountant. In the time that I was enrolled at WWCC, I was able to regain my independence and find my confidence again. With the support and encouragement of my family and the faculty at WWCC, I was able to balance life as a single mom with being a successful student.



Transforming  
Lives Keynote  
Speaker

**Monique Bourgeau**  
*Wenatchee Valley College*



I am a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes. My ancestors on my mother's side come from the Okanogan Band. I define myself by my relationship with other human beings and my relationship with creation, and on those terms, I am sw'łck, water that never freezes. I have always known the ceremonies and their power, but I became lost on my path at a young age. I took my first drink at age 12 and became addicted to the feeling of numbness and blacking out. As I grew older and became a functioning alcoholic, I was only existing and not living. From 17 to 21, I was also in a serious relationship with a young man.

We both drank, and although we had the time of our lives, one day he left and never came back. In 2006, he died in a drunken driving accident. My drinking then took an even rougher turn as my loneliness and isolation increased.

If I didn't quit drinking, I was going to die. It's not an understatement.

Growing up on my reservation, the trauma that has plagued our people for generations trickled into my home, including alcoholism and domestic abuse. In 2013, having suffered enough and seeking to end the cycle of trauma, I stopped drinking. I started to believe I should learn my native language and the ways of my people.

Livia Millard, Wenatchee Valley College at Omak multicultural coordinator, invited me to a college event that would set me on my new life path. The Mourning Dove Symposium at WVC at Omak brought together scholars, writers and descendants of this remarkable Colville writer and activist.

Not knowing who you are affects confidence and understanding. Through a diet of language, history and culture, I found my higher purpose and who I was.

I have received so much encouragement at WVC at Omak — encouragement to learn and keep pushing myself. I love the one-on-one relationships with faculty and peers. In *The History of the First People of the Plateau Region*, taught by Lynn Holder-Palmanteer, former member of the Colville Tribal Council, I learned that many of my harsh experiences growing up were based on conditioned behaviors passed down through the generational trauma our people have suffered. In *Critical Analysis* with Dr. Peter Donahue, I contributed significantly to class discussions and wrote three essays on the role of native customs. In *Public Speaking* with David Lindeblad, I practiced speaking publicly on the importance of the Columbia River Treaty. In the process, I also learned about the incredible impact the salmon have on the vast Columbia River ecosystem, helping me to realize where I needed to take my life.

From an Okanogan perspective, diversity means living in harmony with the environment (creation). Therefore, once I have finished at WVC at Omak, I plan to pursue a BA and then a law degree so I can help my people protect creation and provide a sustainable future for our children. I also plan to intern this year at the Northwest Justice Project in Omak and eventually take the tribal bar exam.

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**Emanuel Cabrera**  
*Whatcom Community College*



My name is Emanuel Cabrera. I am 24 years old. I was born in Fresno, California. My parents are from Mexico. When I was really little we lived in Tonasket, a small town in Eastern Washington. Both of my parents were migrant farmworkers. Growing up in Tonasket was different for me than most kids. When I didn't take the bus home I would go back to the fields where I would spend my afternoons sitting in my parent's mini-van waiting for them to get off work. When I was 10 years old my parents moved us into a small trailer in Omak. At the time my parents were going through a lot with each other and I didn't want to be around their abusive behavior so I tried to find ways to not be home. I didn't have any support from them to pursue my dreams. When I was little, all I saw were my parents drinking and fighting, and that made it difficult for me to focus on school. I was either looking out for my little sister or stressed out about what was happening at home.

At the end of 7th grade in Omak, my parents decided Whatcom County might be a better fit for us. When I started as a new 8th grader I didn't know anyone. I was trying to find friends who I could relate and talk to, but at the time the school was divided into groups "Mexicans" and "Whites." When I tried to connect with peers it was difficult. I had to choose a side. My new friends were different than your average 8th graders. Most of them were into the "Gangster Lifestyle." This was all new to me, but before I knew it I was acting like them to fit in. The more that happened the more I started seeing them like family.

As time went by, I found myself making bad decisions that affected my life in negative way and this landed me in and out of juvenile hall. At the same time, my parents were still drinking and fighting so much I couldn't take it anymore. I dropped out of high school my sophomore year to help my mother and look out for my little sister after my parents split up.

Just last year I decided to go back to school and find a way to help myself and my family overcome our obstacles. I always knew there were colleges in the area, and always dreamed of attending college one day. I chose Whatcom Community College because I have read great thing about the campus and how supportive they are to anyone. I decided to stop by and ask what kind of resources they had for dropout students. Right away, Tobi Martinez in the Transitional Learning Program guided me to Carla Gelwicks, the program director. Carla had multiple resources for me to choose from. I was shocked when I found out I was eligible for the high school completion program. I signed up right away. I am proud to say that as of June 2016 I graduated with my high school diploma from Whatcom's High School 21+ completion program. I am pleased to share that I have been furthering my education through course work, volunteer opportunities, life experiences, and my current role in the Intercultural Center here at Whatcom. I am choosing to continue my education because I want to help youth in their life struggles to reach their goals. I want to encourage and support them for a life of success. I plan on becoming a youth counselor to reach out to students that need guidance and moral support to overcome the struggles that some people don't understand. I am grateful for the help I received to not only overcome my own obstacles, but to inspire others to do the same.

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**Lori Fischer**  
*Yakima Valley College*



Work hard, believe in yourself, follow your dreams, and make good choices. Isn't that what we're all taught? Not everyone. I don't remember a time in my life when I was told to believe in myself, follow my dreams, or make good choices but it's definitely what I tell my seven children every day.

My name is Lori Fischer and I'm a victim of domestic violence. I was in a relationship for nine years that left me not only physically beaten, bruised and bloody, but mentally beaten, bruised, and bloody.

On April 4, 2001 I woke up and, for whatever reason, I knew that was the last day I was going to put myself or my children through any more violence. I often look back on the night before I left; looking for signs for what it was that finally gave me the courage to leave. I wish I knew what it was. If it did, I might be able to help other women in the same situation. At the time when I left, my self-confidence was almost completely non-existent. I finished high school with my GED® in 1990.

At that point in my life I already had my first son, Anthony. Not long after completing the GED® program, and having baby number two, Alex, I obtained my first job. Now, 24 years later and five more children, I'm still at that first job. I never intended to stay there that long, but it paid the bills and gave me a flexible schedule that gave me the opportunity to take my children to work with me and be home when my kids got home from school. My children are my life and now that they're almost all raised and attending college for themselves or working in their careers, I feel it's my turn to better my life. My bookkeeping job pays the bills, but because I work for a small business, I don't have a penny saved for retirement.

Over 15 years ago, I made the terrifying decision to leave my abuser. Now I've made another terrifying decision, to return to college and become a teacher. By doing this, I will have the opportunity to share my love and patience with children, share my love for learning, and save for retirement. I choose Yakima Valley College because it would give me a quality education without relocating my family.

Nights are a bit hectic around the house, to say the least. I get home from work, make dinner for six, help my children with their homework, get them to bed. Then it's my turn to do my homework. I do homework every night, whether I have work due or not. I have a good routine in place and I believe it's that schedule that has helped me achieve the President's List every quarter.

YVC has taught me self-discipline, dedication, and the reward of hard work. My hope, by returning to college and earning a 4.0 while working and raising a family, is showing my children (and anyone else who may think they can't do it) that working hard, believing in yourself, following your dreams, and making good choices is achievable at any phase of life.

**2016-2017**

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