



# Transforming Lives Awards

*Celebrating Student Achievement*



**Mohamad Imran**  
*Bellevue College*



**Rita Nichols**  
*Cascadia College*



**Ryla Christianson**  
*Columbia Basin College*



**Bessie Gordon-Verrett**  
*Green River College*



**Lulu Yao**  
*Lake Washington Institute of Technology*



**Eva Brown**  
*Whatcom Community College*

Washington's Community and Technical Colleges  
*January 2023*



## A message from College Spark Washington

### Advancing Educational Justice

*Let's dream and create more equitable futures together.*

We are a diverse community of scholars, advocates, administrators, elected officials, and philanthropists committed to moving the needle for educational justice.

After enduring nearly three years of pandemic-impacted learning conditions, our understanding of what it will take for every student to thrive has never felt more urgent. This focus on our collective future – what equitable systems look like and how we support and sustain them – drive our work and encourage us to reimagine what might be possible.

For example, we invested more than \$8.5M in the Guided Pathways Initiative to support system-level changes at ten Washington community and technical colleges. Initial funding from College Spark and demonstrated success from early adopting colleges resulted in a \$32M legislative state appropriation. In the Education Equity Fund – launched to support community-designed and community-driven educational change across Washington – nearly \$2M annually is committed for projects that focus on more equitable placement practices, include anti-racist leadership development for faculty, staff, and students, or the creation of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy.

At a time when society needs radical changes to rectify its inequities, we celebrate the students and institutions who show up everyday and their brilliance that move school systems, students and communities closer to a thriving collective future.

##

College Spark Washington supports the postsecondary dreams of students and their communities through grantmaking focused on dismantling racism in the Washington state education system. We envision an education system that encourages learners to be their authentic selves and is eager and equipped to guide them towards realizing their dreams.

**The Washington Association of College Trustees thanks College Spark Washington for its generous support of 2023's Transforming Lives nominees and all community and technical college students across Washington state.**

# ACT Transforming Lives

Association of College Trustees

Washington Community and Technical College  
Student Awardees January 2023

## Transforming Lives

The Association of College Trustees (ACT) Transforming Lives awards recognize current and former students whose lives were transformed by attending a Washington state community or technical college. Each of the college district's boards of trustees selected an awardee from among its current and former student body.

### Awards criteria

Boards of trustees could select 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 their higher education goals. The awardees' experiences demonstrate how Washington community and technical colleges help transform lives through education and student support.

College trustees found compelling stories of determination and success among each of the 34 awardees. All of their stories are shared in their own words on the following pages. Stories were edited for length.

The 2023 Transforming Lives awardees are:

- **Mohamad Imran**  
Bellevue College
- **Rita Nichols**  
Cascadia College
- **Ryla Christianson**  
Columbia Basin College
- **Bessie Gordon-Verrett**  
Green River College
- **Lulu Yao**  
Lake Washington Institute of Technology
- **Eva Brown**  
Whatcom Community College

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

In these times of economic uncertainty, much attention is focused on the struggles and difficulties students endure. For now, we wish to offer our thanks and gratitude to the many community and technical college stakeholders whose vision and dedication have helped make these stories possible.

## Stacy Coffey

### *Bates Technical College*

I am a 49-year-old, fifth quarter Certified Medical Assistant program student. Earning a degree seemed impossible when I was younger. I was a full-time mom with two very busy sons, ages 6 and 7. I valued my family time and was grateful we created memories and special moments. Because of my limited work history and lack of education, I have worked driving and warehouse jobs. It's unsettling, as I am older now and have spinal degenerative disc disease, which makes it difficult to perform as fast or lift as much as I once could. I began drinking to help with the loneliness and physical pain I was experiencing. My drinking increased, and my life became unmanageable.

I worked at an airplane part manufacturing company, and around February 2020, I began feeling like I had vertigo every morning—like I had to get down on the floor and crawl everywhere. My symptoms worsened and became constant. I took leave to recover, but then I started losing my vision. I had to feel the walls in order to move around the house. I immediately made a doctor's appointment.

My doctor informed me that my symptoms were the result of my drinking too much alcohol. I tried to quit, but it was difficult to do so alone. Supportive and wonderful, she helped me work through this difficult process of recovery. I spent nine days in an inpatient detox facility but was released because I needed additional care. A written test I took indicated signs of dementia. I immediately went to the hospital, where medical staff said that if I delayed treatment any longer, I would have died. I was terrified by the alcohol damage. I was malnourished and dehydrated and coming up with words to communicate was difficult.

After six months, I began to feel normal. But I was laid off. This was a turning point, and I began soul searching. This was my final shot at living life, and I was determined not to derail it. I quit drinking for good, but with back issues and my spine disease, I could not work the jobs I used to. I needed a college education. I had no excuses; now was the time to improve and take care of my family.

My financial situation was precarious, and I needed to return to work. I learned of Bates' phlebotomy course, but the course was full. My Workforce representative suggested the Certified Medical Assistant program. After the first quarter, my confidence grew. Classes helped improve my speech and organize my thoughts. As a new college student, I enjoyed the format and continued my recovery, focused on my second chance at life. I was unsure of how I would fit in as an older student, but as I progressed, I felt more comfortable. With the support of faculty and peers, I found a place where I excelled and was accepted.

My degree is nearly finished, and I am grateful for these opportunities. My instructors supported me and pushed me farther than I ever thought, helping me become successful. These educators care about student success, and because of them, I am excited for my future.

I am a new person. I am proud of myself. My life is on track. I am an Associated Student Government Vice President and a proud PTK member. The more I said yes to opportunities, the greater my experiences were. I am grateful I said yes to earning a degree and creating a better life. The advice I have for anyone considering a degree is to say yes to opportunity and just try. It's never too late. It saved my life.





## Mohamad Imran

*Bellevue College*

My name is Mohamad Imran. I am Rohingya. Eight years ago, at age 13, I left my home and family to escape genocide. For three years, I clung to life—first, in a boat overpacked with people (some who died from the miserable conditions and were thrown overboard), then trekking through Thailand and Malaysia, where I was captured and imprisoned in a detention center. I barely survived starvation and abuse.

By some miracle, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees assisted me in relocating to the United States. I had very little education and could not speak English at the time. I have studied hard since I arrived in the U.S. and learned to speak the language. I graduated in June 2021 from Mercer Island High School, completing the equivalent of 12 years of school in fewer than 5.

I am currently enrolled full-time at Bellevue College, where I will obtain my associate degree. My big goal is to get my master's in Business Administration and find a way to help my people. I continue to learn what the power of education can provide and the importance of making connections. Through education, my dream is to help the Rohingya people finally have a place to call home because they are dying to be seen. They are stateless, with no human rights. Nobody should have to live under these conditions. I also want to make it possible for Rohingya children to get an education too.

Sometimes, school is tough for me because English is my second language. This impacts my classes since I take longer to read and write, but I am still moving forward with my college requirements. Most recently, I utilized my skills to pass the citizenship test and am proud to say I am now a United States citizen.

Bellevue College has been instrumental in assisting me by offering writing and reading labs to help with my English. Whenever my class and work schedule allows, I attend instructor office hours because I am committed to my education. Since I am a first-generation high school and future college graduate, I am part of the TRIO program at Bellevue College. My advisor Barbara guides me on what classes I have to take to graduate and how to become a successful student. I am very close to all the TRIO program staff members and believe they are helping me build a strong foundation to continue my future education. I am incredibly grateful for the program and all the staff members who help me to succeed in school.

In addition to Bellevue College's academic support, I have forged relationships with students, instructors, and administrators both during the pandemic and in person. Many have shown an interest in the injustices the Rohingya people face and have been instrumental in helping me inform government agencies of the atrocities.

Bellevue College has been an outstanding higher education establishment as it continues to support me in achieving my academic and personal goals. This will not only help me advance my career but also provide me essential skills so I can continue to promote justice for the Rohingya people. It is a privilege to attend Bellevue College with the caring support of my teachers and the humanitarian interest of the administration.



---

## **Julián Adame Núñez**

### *Bellingham Technical College*

I was born and raised in Mexico. When I turned 16, my parents decided to move to Washington, and I finished my basic education at Wapato High School. I knew so little about the US education system. Some of my teachers never thought I would do more than to pick apples for a living. My parents were agricultural workers just like my grandparents and great-grandparents who fought the Spanish landowners during the Mexican revolution in order to gain the right to own and cultivate land.

Following a stint in the military, I got a job in the renewable energy industry. I built foundations and installed components for wind turbines. Working up to 75 hours a week earned me a promotion to lead a crew. I used to think of myself as a work horse; destined to break my back pouring concrete and tying rebar. I loved to work hard but pure love for my job didn't keep me from being laid off. So much for being an honest man.

I thought I had no other choice but to make a living breaking the law, just like some of my relatives did. I had a conversation with my younger brother, he convinced me to talk to people in the WIOA and I was finally able to fund my education and enroll at Bellingham Technical College. I chose the Electrician program because I already had background in the field and considering my time working in the renewable energy industry, I was finally able to see a new horizon.

Staying in college has been a collective effort. I received funding assistance from Worker Retraining. My College Navigator, Hilde; my TRIO Coach, Kelly; and college advisors have helped me to adapt to college life. Hilde helped me create a class schedule so that I could be successful as a first-quarter, first-time college student. Hilde guided me to select the appropriate Electrician and general education courses for a total of 21 credits. Also, Kelly shared the TRIO Virtual Tutoring support, which I consistently utilize. Overall, I get help with my classes which supports my commitment.

To become a college student, I had to overcome the obstacles of poverty, the judgement from others, self-doubt, and the language barrier. My family did not have the money. I didn't qualify for scholarships or financial aid since I had recently moved to the US. I used to think there was no place for me on a college campus because several high school teachers made me believe it, I was an illiterate immigrant in their eyes. I could either make a living working in the fields, fighting for the government, or breaking the law, those were always the paths my ancestors had followed.

My goals include earning my Electrician AAS-T degree and advancing my career in the energy industry. My goal is to make history in this field and develop new technologies for agricultural purposes, so my race won't have to work as hard anymore. I plan to receive a law degree, and ultimately to serve as a judge. College education has taught me that I can do it.

At the start of fall quarter, I slept in truck stops and hotel rooms when I could, but that really didn't matter to me because I am a college student now. What a privilege! Life is incredible again. I no longer think of myself as a work horse. Attending college has restored faith in myself and makes me believe that I can be more than what my culture says I must be. There is honor in education.



---

## Colton Reynolds

### *Big Bend Community College*

When looking for colleges to attend, I compared many different factors: the size of the college, the program and degrees offered, and the cost of attendance. These were all aspects I used to decide where to continue my education after high school.

While exploring my options, I learned that community colleges are smaller than universities, some offered the program I was interested in pursuing, and they were much cheaper than attending a university. These elements meant a lot to me as a smaller college felt more like home as I grew up in a small community with a small school. When looking to continue my education in higher education, I wanted to seek a degree in aviation and I quickly learned that there were options available at community college. With pursuing a degree in aviation as a commercial pilot, I knew it wasn't going to be cheap, but I wanted to find a college that could make it somewhat affordable and community colleges were able to make my degree choice attainable and affordable. The program and individual that contributed to my success at the college was the Workforce Education Services and Kim Jackson.



The Workforce Education Services were able to offer the assistance needed to make my higher education opportunities more realistic and provided tuition assistance allowing relief for me as I did not have the additional stress of paying for tuition. Kim Jackson, the Director of Student Programs, contributed to me by providing job opportunities that worked with my class schedule and pushed me to grow in tremendous ways. While working for Kim, I was able to overcome my fear of public speaking, understand the inner workings of a college, and work as a team with the other members of the Associated Student Body. These were life-changing experiences that will benefit my future endeavors.

One of the major barriers that once prevented me from attending community college was figuring out how to afford it. Another obstacle that I had was becoming shy and not outgoing enough to make friends or come out of my comfort zone. I overcame these barriers by finding jobs that worked around my schedule and the Workforce Education Services assisted me in finding a grant that could aid in paying tuition. Kim was able to support me in coming out of my comfort zone to experience and try new possibilities. I never thought that I'd be able to speak publicly, but I was able to overpower this fear by giving speeches to small groups that gradually got bigger. These types of experiences helped me grow out of my comfort zone and boost my confidence.

This last year, I decided to not continue with my degree in aviation as it was not the correct fit for me as a career. I was able to graduate with my private pilot's license and an associate's in arts and science. Now, I am continuing my education to achieve a Bachelor's in Operations Management which I plan to pursue a career in after I have graduated.

If I was able to offer any advice to a future student who is unsure about attending community college, I would encourage them to go out of their comfort zone, do what excites them, don't be afraid of any obstacles, be resilient, and conquer any obstacle that may stand in the way. It is also important to come out into the World, meet new people, and build a network, a network will be the key to success.

## Rita Nichols-Kaskes

### *Cascadia College*

My name is Rita Nichols-Kaskes and life has thrown many curve balls throughout my life. I was born with a rare genetic disorder called Osteogenesis Imperfecta, commonly known as OI. I have lived with OI since birth with multiple broken bones, but what I did not know is that, because of this disorder, it would take my eyesight also. Because of my visual impairment, I am required to use accessible technology: screen readers, voice over, audio description, photo description, and braille, to help me in college, home and in daily activities. Some examples are to read emails, make phone calls, navigational apps, text messages, and interact with websites; most require that I have to sift through multiple types of data to finally get to the information I am searching for, and this type of data is very time consuming.

Starting in 2008, I began to lose eyesight with macular degeneration, which moved on to retina detachment, then cataracts, and then finally glaucoma. This left me in the dark alone and lost. When I found the Orientation and Training Center (OTC) program at the Department of Services for the Blind, it showed me the ways to independence in the dark. After some time, I knew that I needed an education for any type of future, so I went to Cascadia College and met Felicia “Fi” Walters and Bryan Fauth in the Disability Support Services office, in which is now Student Accessibility Services (SAS). Without Bryan and Fi, I know that I would not have made it this far. With their undying support, which most of the time is daily, I would not be here. One of the most inspirational quotes that has helped me through the dark is, “Remember your past without regret, handle your present with confidence, face your future without fear” (Sansbury Smith 2008). Without the light that Bryan and Fi bring to my education, I would not be here today.

The biggest barriers have been new technology and its unwillingness to adapt to screen readers. With our everyday changing world comes with huge barriers for people with disabilities and the users of screen readers. With the confidence and training from both Bryan and Fi, working through the “blue button” to the “interactive Ness” of the Canvas website, managing through a step-by-step way to navigate helped in taking away the barrier.

You may ask, “What is next for me and why did I choose Cascadia?” Primarily, I am working towards a Bachelor’s degree in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for people with multiple disabilities. I want to help people from diverse backgrounds to achieve positive self-worth by empowering them with positive and successful counseling through using self-advocacy. Second, I have always found the brain to be the most fascinating, complex, intriguing, flexible and amazing ability to change within its structure, with or without the whole parts of it. The different types of behavior focusing on the psychological causes of behavior, interactions, outcomes, results of humans and animals in the world intrigues me.

Finally, without SAS I would not have made it this far, and if I had one thing to say it would be, “Remember, today is all we all have.” Thank you for this wonderful experience and ability to see beyond my blindness and see the vast world in which we all live.



---

## Jennifer Massey

### *Centralia College*

My name is Jennifer Massey and I am an Alumni of Centralia College and again currently a student.

When I originally attended Centralia College, I was deciding on my career path. At this time, I was a single mother and looking to create a solid future for myself and my children. I had just moved home and I needed to live close to family. Doing this provided a solid support system so I could attend class. My plan was to attend the Nursing program that Centralia College had just begun to offer. Once on campus I became involved in student life and became a student employee at the Childcare center on campus. I quickly realized I wanted to change my career path and focus on becoming a teacher. I became part of the Future Teacher of America Club on campus and really enjoyed making a difference in my community while building friendships. My second and third year at Centralia College I became involved with Student Government. My graduating year I was the College's Student Body President. My success as a student not only was due to the strong family support system, I had at home but was amplified by the strong support system I had created by being involved on campus.



The education program was a close-knit group of individuals, and we would study together. Many of those students who began at Centralia College with me then were able to enter the Bachelor of Education program that was offered through the college hosting City University classes. As a Cohort we became a small community within the larger Centralia College community. Having this as an option for myself ensured that I could go on and fulfil my goal of becoming an Elementary Education Teacher.

My choice to attend a community college came solely due to the fact that a university was out of the question due to my circumstances. If the community college had not thought outside of the box and thought about hosting a program; I would not have been able to attend an education program for my Bachelors. I needed to stay close to home and work during this time to provide for my family.

Fast forward to today and I am still working on our community first as a teacher, and now as an Education Specialist / Coach for Centralia College ECEAP. I am now helping to teach and shape the next generation of teachers. I am enrolled yet again in Centralia College to complete additional Early Childhood Education credits to obtain my OSPI Early Childhood Education Stackable Certificate. This will be in addition to having already earned my Masters in Education in Arts Integrated Curriculum from Lesley University.

All these accomplishments would not have been possible if a community college such as Centralia College was not available. I now have the privilege of working for Centralia College and supporting our ECEAP teachers on campus and at our school district locations totaling close to 75 teachers and over 300 children. My goal for the immediate future is to continue learning and growing in my current role. My long-term goal is to become a professor for the Early Childhood Education Department at Centralia College.

My one piece of advice for those thinking about attending a community college is to just take the first step. Know you will face obstacles and challenges but in the end the relationships and success you will have will be worth it! This is also the same advice I have given my own children who will be attending Centralia College after their High School Graduation in 2 years.

---

## Leilani Towner

*Clark College*

Coming to Clark College was a bright spot in my life. Having been through a couple of tough years, I got to a place where there was not much to look forward to in life. Feeling stuck, I needed something more. I needed to find purpose in my life, and education was something that I looked forward to. Choosing a community college was an easy decision. It was nearby, accessible, and had a program to help me start again. I dropped out of high school and spent time caring for my mom, who was ill. When I came to Clark, Ellie Phillips in the Transitional Studies office helped me find resources and supported me in my transition to the High School 21+ program. My experience in Transitional Studies and with Ellie made me feel comfortable. It helped me to get used to the college and the resources available. That experience with High School 21+ was the reason why I ended up pursuing a degree rather than stopping at a diploma.



In continuing my education at Clark, the connections and community support made a difference in transforming my life. Initially, I wasn't sure if I was going to pursue college. I knew I would need a high school diploma to do more than gig work. The support and community from the college made me want to do more and helped me learn that I could do more. Before, I didn't think I could. The college helped me find the community I didn't know I could find. Clark gave me the ability to see what I needed in life.

In the time leading up to joining this community, I had to take care of my mom for a few years, and she's better now. It was hard dropping out of high school and experiencing challenges with mental health and money; no matter what, I knew I needed something to move forward. Ellie helped me realize financial aid could help cover the costs of my degree, and I didn't think it was possible.

Right now, it's my first year of digital media arts. It should take me two years to get my degree. I'm using this time to shape what I want to pursue. I have a part-time job with a local craft artist, and I'll be using these next few years to explore what I'm good at and want to do with my degree. I'm deciding whether I want to continue at Washington State University or explore if I'm ready to enter the industry and look for jobs in illustration or animation. I'm still figuring out which I enjoy more and for which I have the most potential.

One piece of advice I would share with anyone considering a community and technical college, use everything. Make as many connections as possible, attend events, and talk to people. Discover the community that is at college. Ask for resources. Can you give me something? Can you show me where I can go? Do everything, take advantage of everything. There are so many resources and communities within the college- there is something for everyone if they can find it. There are lots of free things at events; go to the events. Show up to things, talk to people, have fun, and make the most of everything the college can offer because there is so much.

---

## Edward Barnes

### *Clover Park Technical College*

Hello, my name is Edward Barnes. I am honored to be nominated for the Washington State Transforming Lives award.

I decided to come to Clover Park Technical College after a 16-year career in Law Enforcement. When I decided to make the transition, I spoke with the Admissions Department from several different colleges. During those conversations, the one college that stood out and above the rest was Clover Park Technical College. It is hard to put my finger on the exact reason, but I can tell you that everyone I spoke to in the process was more than willing to help me out and ensure that I would be a successful student. I distinctly remember the new student orientation and the fact that all the presenters began and ended their presentation with an opportunity for questions. I was able to ask a couple questions, and the staff even followed up with me several days later regarding one of my questions.

I do not feel there is any one person at the college who made me a successful student. To me, it has always been a team effort. When I first started, I was unemployed, and I had a conversation with Michelle Barre in the Workforce Development office. She was very instrumental in guiding me through the ins and outs of the Washington State Employment Division. She helped me secure unemployment benefits, which helped immensely. Next in line for those that assisted me were all my instructors, Don Souza, Jay Lanphier, Kelly Hollowell, Catherine “Cat” Morris, and finally, Jody Randall. All my instructors played a pivotal role in ensuring that I was as successful as I could be. Through their many different teachings and time spent assisting me when I was stuck, and lord knows there were many of them, I was able to make the Presidents List every single quarter. If anyone knows me and my past, this is saying a lot about my instructors.

I would say that the only barrier that I had prior to starting my journey through college would be me and my mindset. Specifically, my thinking that I know very little about what I am getting into and my irrational fear that I am going to be a failure. When I first started this journey, I knew little to nothing about computers and how they worked. Through the wonderful teachings of my instructors, I have gained the knowledge and confidence to pursue a new career.

As of today, I am working on campus in the IT Helpdesk under the wonderful helping hands of Pamala Jeter, Richard Hike, and Fu Chang. They are allowing me to gain the critical skills that are needed to become a great employee. My goal is to work in the IT industry helping those that were once in my shoes – having a problem with their computer and not knowing how to make it work properly.

If there is one piece of advice that I could give to anyone who is thinking about attending college, it would be this. The only thing that is stopping you from achieving your goals in life is you. I struggled with it prior to attending Clover Park Technical College, and once I started, I realized all the great things I could accomplish with the help and support of the faculty and staff behind me. I also want to take this time to acknowledge my wonderful wife, Rebekah.

I will leave you with this quote “An investment in knowledge pays the best interest” – Benjamin Franklin



## Ryla Christianson

*Columbia Basin College*


I was compelled to attend Columbia Basin College (CBC) due to not making any other plans in high school to attend a university. I didn't take the practice SAT's in high school, let alone the real SAT, and didn't believe I would have the scores to get into a university. I decided CBC would get my foot in the door toward a college degree. I wouldn't be as successful in my college career as I am now if it weren't for Montessa Califano (Completion Coach), and Kelsey Myers (Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Services). These individuals made a huge difference not only to my success in college, but also in my personal confidence, especially Montessa Califano.

I met Kelsey through a daycare where her son attended. She quickly found out about my struggles in school, how I was failing almost every class, and so discouraged that I started giving up and skipping classes. After Kelsey checked up on me, watched my grades and attendance, she thought it was a good fit to introduce me to Montessa. I was so defeated and believed I would never make it through college, that I didn't even want to have a conversation with Montessa. When I first met Montessa, I was closed off and pushed away her help, but Montessa never gave up on me. She continued to make sure I was attending class even if it meant she walked me to class, checked my grades, walked me to the tutoring center, and most importantly she told me repeatedly that I was capable and I was going to get a degree. In the past, multiple teachers told me I would never graduate college. Montessa helped me work through those insecurities. Montessa not only impacted my success as a student, but also surrounded me with great people by giving me the opportunity to manage the CBC softball team. Because of Montessa's encouraging words and support, not only did I earn an AA degree through CBC, but I was also accepted into Eastern Washington University. I went from hardly showing up to CBC for classes, to being at CBC from dawn to dusk; if I wasn't in class, or outside of Montessa's office doing homework, I was on the softball field. Montessa Califano truly changed my life. She gave me the self-confidence I had been lacking, and belief in myself that I longed for. I am forever thankful for her.



The obstacles that prevented me from attending a community college, let alone applying for a university, were lack of self-confidence that I was capable, and the knowledge of three learning disabilities which discouraged me in thinking I couldn't earn a college degree. I learned my first year at CBC that I had reading, writing, and math impairment, leaving me at an elementary grade level in these subjects. To overcome these obstacles, I attended Sylvan learning center, spent many hours in the tutoring center, and worked with the resource center at CBC to get extra help in the classroom, along with repeating classes as many times as it took me to pass.

I am walking into my second year at EWU as a Junior with a 4.0 GPA, participating in the Social Work Program. My future plans include finishing my bachelors, along with getting a master's in social work. My one piece of advice for other students is - complete college at a pace that is right for you, not the pace that others expect you to, or that is "normal." There is no timeline, but your own.



Transforming  
Lives Keynote  
Speaker



## Jennifer Cunningham

### *Edmonds College*

Overcoming barriers to achieve higher education has become my specialty. When I look back at my childhood and early education years, I realize that in theory, I never stood a chance. The fact I'm a student in a Bachelor of Applied Science program for Child, Youth, and Family Studies is incredible.

My parents were drug addicts and for many years of my childhood we were homeless. When I think back on those years all I find is generational trauma and barriers for growth. I became a product of my environment, started using drugs at a young age, and ended up dropping out of school during seventh grade to run the streets of Las Vegas. My first barrier was parents who didn't care and certainly didn't stop me. I spent the next 25 years in active addiction.

I eventually went back to school when I was thirty to get my GED, which I got through Edmonds College. However, because of my battles with addiction, my education stopped for a time. It wasn't until I decided to get clean in April 2017 that I started to break through the trauma and addiction that held me back from higher education and quality of life.

You see, it was a lack of self-worth that was the real barrier. I suffered from the guilt and shame of dragging my kids with me through my years of addiction. The damage I caused made me feel like I didn't deserve a better way of life. I had become my biggest obstacle. I had let fear hold me back for too long. Finally understanding that helped me see that I am worthy and that I could use my lived experience to help others suffering from the same afflictions. I started to break that cycle by building myself up and letting hope spring through years of chaos.

It took a while. I think I had been about 18 months clean when I decided to go back to school. I had finally gotten my own apartment, worked a round of the 12 steps, and created a foundation that would support me in my recovery. I made the choice to grow through everything that had kept me from being my best self. At first, I just enrolled at Edmonds to get a certificate in Family Support Studies, but once I got a taste of higher education, I wanted more.

After graduation with my certifications, I decided to get an Associate Degree. It was during that journey that I heard of the Child, Youth, and Family Services Bachelor of Applied Science Degree at Edmonds. I knew immediately the program was meant for me. To apply I needed an Associates Transfer-Degree, so that was my next step. I graduated in spring 2022 with two Associates Degrees in Human Services. I've started my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the CYFS BAS program, and I love it! I also started Leadership Snohomish County's Signature Program, where I'm attending a nine-month leadership educational program with other professionals within my community. We're learning about local issues, leadership strategies, and preparing for future civic involvement.

My barriers are now nonexistent. I've achieved more than I ever dreamed of or expected. Through the power of education, my lived experience has become an asset rather than a liability. My next goal is to serve my community of North Everett with integrity, empathy, and understanding.

One piece of advice that I would share with others seeking higher education is to follow your passion. Seek an education and career that will allow you to work with your strengths. Believe in yourself because we are all worthy of greatness.



---

## Jake Avilla

### *Everett Community College*

I decided to go to college to be the change I want to see in the education system. I am a strong believer that if you want to make a change, in the world, you have to be the one that does it. EvCC allowed me to seek out higher education while being close to home. EvCC faculty members Christie Santos, Kaleb Ode, Paula Krock, and Cobi Seslar made me a successful student and individual seeking higher education.

Everett Community College made it possible for me to pursue my dreams without the fear of being alone. With the help of TRiO and EvCC's community, I found like-minded individuals facing the same fears I was. With the help of Christie, my TRiO advisor, I was accepted into Western Washington University. Being accepted into a four-year college was an ideology my family had never encountered before. Being welcomed into a four-year college was an immense experience. Without Christie's help and support, I wouldn't be in the position to transfer or graduate with great distinction with my AA. Christie has been indubitably helpful and knowledgeable about the whole transfer process. EvCC's TRiO program has helped me achieve my dreams and supported me throughout it all. I never felt alone during this process.

Leaving high school as a first-generation student, I felt burdened with peer pressure, my previous academic successes, and the potential finances that come with attending college. I felt compelled to beat the odds and be the first in my family to obtain a college degree. With the help of many EvCC faculty members, they made my dream a reality. I found a second family full of communion, trust, and reassurance. This gave me the confidence to face any challenge head-on and never give up on my ambitions.

My education career plan is to transfer to Western Washington University. At Western Washington University, I will continue my studies at the school of education, pursuing a career in secondary education. After obtaining my bachelor's degree in education, I will continue my education by working towards being a registered E.R Nurse. The main focal point of my career is to be a secondary P.E/Health teacher.

If someone is unsure about attending college, I'd say go for it and shoot for the stars. When entering college, your education and career are in your hands. If you want something, you work and study your way to receive it. Always reach out for help, even though you may not think you need it or want it. It's always great to have someone to be that support, to be that help. I thought I had to do everything by myself, but with help from the EVCC faculty, they have shown me college is possible and believed in me to push forward and conquer any of life's challenges.



---

## **Alondra Diaz Merino**

### *Grays Harbor College*

I am the first in my family to receive a high school and college education. When my parents immigrated from Mexico to the US for a better life, they came here with only a middle school education. Growing up, I was told that a college degree was not going to be an option as my family did not have the financial means to support my dreams of going to college.

During my junior year at Raymond High School, I was introduced to the Running Start Program, and was able to, at no cost to me, work towards an Associates in Arts (AA) degree at Grays Harbor College (GHC). After two years of Running Start, I graduated with honors in 2022 with both my AA and high school diploma. When I thought about my future, I always thought I wanted to go to a four-year university. My senior year made me realize that I wanted to stay close to home. The local community college was going to be my best option as it would provide me with smaller class sizes, affordable tuition, keep me close to home so that I could continue to see my family and support them financially, and I was already familiar with the GHC campus. Throughout my academic journey I have turned to GHC's TRIO Educational Opportunity (EOC) program whenever I needed help.

Since I don't have a car, TRIO EOC has helped me secure a bus pass through the local transit authority so I can commute four days a week, 50 miles a day to the main campus for my classes. Without TRIO EOC, the transition from high school to college would have been a lot harder.

Going to college and continuing my education after high school was important, but not being able to afford it was one of my biggest fears. Because this was always in the back of my head, I started working part-time at McDonalds at the age of 16. I knew it wasn't going to be easy to find a balance between being a full-time student while working a part-time job, but it was necessary for me to save money. College can get expensive, and I didn't want my parents to take full responsibility to pay for it. I was originally going to take a few years off school so that I could save more money for college, but because GHC offered so much financial help and guided me through every step of the process, I was able to enroll in college right after high school. This last summer, through the support of a GHC foundation scholarship, I was able to complete my CNA certificate and begin a second associate degree in Nursing.

My goal in the end is to work as a Pediatric ICU Nurse, serving the Grays Harbor and Pacific County communities. There are a lot of little steps to get to that point, and the majority of my journey is going to be spent in my community at GHC. I will finish my prerequisites this spring and plan on applying for the GHC Nursing Program for fall 2023. After the nursing program I want to attend a university and get my bachelor's degree in Nursing.

One piece of advice that I would give to those who are not sure if they want to attend college is to find someone who has had personal experience with going to college to ask them all the questions you may have.



---

## **Bessie Gordon-Verrett** *Green River College*

The journey to my education goals has not been easy. I was born to loving parents unable to break addictions that led to their long experiences in the justice system while I grew up in foster care. I knew early on that education was going to be the only way I could break the cycles of poverty and instability I inherited. I was determined to do the best I could with what little I had in life. After becoming a single mother, the barriers to my goals only increased. The odds of a single mother from a foster background would tell you that education achievement in higher education is nearly impossible. I needed a village behind me, and I found it at Green River College's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI).

The folks at ODEI were the backbone of stability that I had not experienced. I had to learn through my own stubbornness that I could trust caring adults who were there to help navigate and co-design the solutions I needed. They never gave up and guided me to resources for childcare, tutoring, employment, financial aid, transportation, counseling and civic leadership. They walked with me. They cared for me. They gave me a sense of purpose that was greater than myself. The only excuse for not being successful was on me.

When I became the president of our college's Black Student Union, I was encouraged by ODEI to use my lived experiences to guide others facing similar situations towards education achievement. I held listening sessions with my peers to better understand what their needs were to be successful in college. The stories were similar to my own – most were unaware of resources or intimidated by walking into an administrative office. The need for resource navigation at the earliest part of the education journey was loud and clear. We ran innovative programs to build trust in our community and held learning workshops around available resources.

ODEI gave me the gifts of clarity and vocation in my life. We now live in an era where those who have lived experiences of complex challenges need to lead the way in designing solutions for others facing similar situations. What I am learning through this experience is that people need more than just a toolkit of resources – people need a village that cares and sees you for who you are, where you are, and what more you can be. I've found my calling in life. I want to work in the gaps of education where people are often lost, invisible, and uncared for.

Today, I'm a graduate of Green River, an employee in Workforce Education and a full-time student at Western Governors University. I've helped launch and scale mentoring and alternative justice programs in my community through Glover Empowerment Mentoring (GEM), a non-profit focusing on social emotional learning and relationship development as foundations for a better life. ODEI and GEM have guided me in strengthening my advocacy and rights voice for youth development.

After graduating with my undergraduate degree, I hope to pursue a master's in education counseling and open my own nonprofit targeting folks who are furthest from education achievement. I want to target those with the longest odds and the most complex challenges. It's the gap where education justice lives and where I call home.

For those that are in this gap, I encourage you to be open to self-discovery and trust. There are champions, allies, and accomplices who are working in their vocation and see your success as their own. They are village builders waiting to co-design success with you.



---

## Evgeniya Tulyaeva

### Highline College

Highline College has become one of the most important reasons I was able to attend college!

And here are the reasons why I came to this country with very little and my parents did everything they possibly could to support their three little Russian-speaking daughters from Uzbekistan terrified and afraid of the new country they were about to call home. My father was barely home, working as a truck driver driving long hauls out of state to support us. My mother who was fighting a blood-transmitted illness cleaned huge corporate buildings at night to support her children and try to give them a good life.

Up until high school, I always knew I was going to college; my parents did not work this hard for any of us to not get a proper education. That was all I knew up until I came home from my graduation trip in 2014, I came home to my father who at the time was the sole provider of my family, in a coma and has become a quadriplegic, paralyzed from his neck down living off a ventilator with 0% of a chance of any recovery. My world turned upside down, college flew out the window, and my family needed me and my sisters. My older sister moved back home to start paying the mortgage, my twin sister got a corporate job at an auto body shop, while my mother and I lived at Harborview medical center watching over my paralyzed father fighting for his life. In those six months while he was adjusting to his new way of life, he pushed me to go back to school, he didn't care what I choose as a future career or if we needed to take out a loan or apply for financial aid, he wanted at least one of us there to further our future and become successful. That is all he ever wanted for us and so I started at Highline. Which is only 15 mins from my home, where I could run home and help with dad and go back and resume my classes.

Highline had the most reasonable tuition prices compared to universities and colleges around me. Highline had advisers helping me every step of the way from choosing my nursing career to helping me schedule my classes, which I am proudly able to say I am finishing up this year. My father may not be here with us, but I know he is proud to know that all his daughters are either finished or finishing up with school. All three of us ended up attending Highline at some point in our lives, we are planning to start up a family clinic together in healthcare with me finishing up my nursing degree, my older sister starting her nurse practitioner schooling and my twin sister getting her administration and communication degree.

For anyone hesitant to get started just know that Highline gives you every opportunity possible to further your education. Through their financial aid program, scholarship opportunities, support from mental health advisers, career counselors, and work programs. If it wasn't for Highline College's accessibility to financial aid, career counselors, and mental health advisers, I wouldn't be able to proudly say that I will be a future RN graduate in the upcoming spring of 2023 all thanks to Highline College.



## Lulu Yao

### *Lake Washington Institute of Technology*

Going to college has been a dream for me that took me ten years to complete.

My mom moved to the States in 2005, so I had to live with my alcoholic, abusive dad in China. I remember always being hungry, because my dad would go gambling for days, and leave me with no food or money. I remember searching every inch of my home for food; licking salts and chili oil, because there was nothing I could find to eat. When my mom picked me up from the airport in 2009, she hardly recognized me. I was 5'7, and just a little over 100 pounds. When she asked why I didn't say anything during our phone calls, I answered, "I was terrified to get hit by the belt."

I first dreamed about college in high school. When I asked about it, I was told "We don't have money." That was it. In four words, my college dream was broken. As a child who came from poverty, I knew I wanted to go to college, even if it wasn't something my parents saw for me.

After high school, I saved enough money for college, but my mom was diagnosed with stage-two breast cancer. Savings quickly turned into medical bills that soon turned into debt. My college dream was broken, again.

Seven years later, my mom recovered from cancer, and I had paid off the debt by working as a cashier, a maid, in a bakery, a deli, as a host, a debt collector, a waitress, and a night stocker. I finally had some savings again and then COVID happened, and I was laid off. By that time, it had been ten years since I first dreamed of going to college. This was when I met Lake Washington Institute of Technology.

At 28, I was older than what I thought was the average student age, which made me feel ashamed. That concern was quickly gone during my first advising session. I remember being told by my advisor that the average student age at LWTech is 33 years old. Hearing that settled some of my concerns. Then it came to my last concern: the money. After a ten-year cycle, I felt I was trapped by the same problem again.

I got help from the Worker Retraining program. I was contacted by Jayne Heyde, the Assistant Director of Workforce Development. She told me that I may be eligible for tuition assistance. Shortly after that, I received tuition assistance, and help with money for my books. This time, my college dream had come true.

LWTech is a warm place where students can find their place to shine. The faculty are truly dedicated to students. Because of the trauma from my alcoholic, abusive dad, I sought help from LWTech's mental health counselor Carol Van Buren. She has been a cheerleader in my life, saying, "They cannot hurt you anymore." The scars in my heart have been slowly healed during these counseling sections.

My life has been transformed because of LWTech. I'm about to finish my Associate degree in Human Resource Management, and I will continue at LWTech in the BAS in Human Resource Management program. I have so much passion for diversity, inclusion, and equity, and I want to use my knowledge to make the workplace a better place.

My advice for other students; believe in yourself, and never forget about your dream! It took me ten years to reach my dream, but I never gave up. I can do it; I know you can do it.



---

## Vidal Villagran

### *Lower Columbia College*

Ever since I was a young boy in my home country, I have been passionate about auto mechanics. Due to my financial circumstances, it was impossible to study mechanics there. After emigrating to the United States, I found it necessary to work constantly to provide for my family. There was never enough time or money for college. Instead of pursuing my dreams, I continued to work as a roofer until I had an unfortunate on-the-job accident.

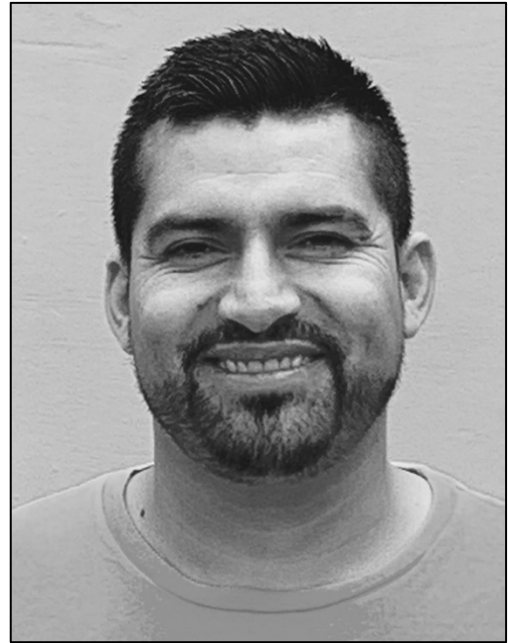
After my injury, Labor and Industries provided me with a list of options to pursue training while I recovered. I chose LCC because of their automotive technology program. Thanks to LCC's I-BEST program, I was able to pursue my passion of mechanics while also studying English, my second language.

Three people were instrumental in helping me find my way: my counselor at Labor and Industries, the bilingual navigator in LCC's Basic Education for Adults program, and the advisor at LCC who helped me choose my classes and educational plan. Without their help, I would not be where I am today. I have also received scholarship support from the Lower Columbia College Foundation.

I believe becoming a mechanic will change my life for the better and provide a much more stable future for my family. It is something I am passionate about. Unlike roofing, automotive repair is not contingent on the weather. Work doesn't stop if the temperature is too hot or too cold. The hours are more predictable, and the work is less physically demanding than roofing. No matter where I go in the world, working on engines is something I can do.

Labor and Industries has provided support for me to receive a certificate in automotive technology and arranged for me to work at a car dealer. My plan, however, is to stay at LCC until June 2023 so I can focus on the electrical side of cars. I plan to receive my associate degree in automotive technology in June 2023. I believe electric cars are the future and hope to eventually start my own electric vehicle repair and service business. Right now, there are not a lot of mechanics that focus exclusively on e-vehicles.

Prior to my injury, an unfortunate incident that turned into something great, a lack of money and time prevented me from pursuing my dreams. My advice to anyone with a dream, including others who emigrated to the U.S., is to never give up. There is so much help available, especially at LCC. My experience has been incredible. There are a lot of people available to help and encourage you. There are challenges, of course, but there are also doors. You have to find it within yourself to continue on and not give up. My advice for those whose native language is Spanish is similar. Although it may seem like a longshot to even go to college because of the language barrier, there is so much help out there. If you have the desire, you will find the path. Ask for help and find the strength within yourself to keep going.



## Richard Wilbur *Olympic College*

I am honored to be nominated for the ACT Transforming Lives Award. I have overcome several barriers including addiction, prison, half-way houses, a suicide attempt, no transportation, no computer, no experience with higher education and several medical issues. Due to severe addiction and the bad behaviors that often accompany the disease, I spent 10 years in prison. This sentence gave me time to contemplate my life and what I wanted to do with it. I realized that not only did I want to turn my life around, but I also wanted to give back to society by helping others overcome addiction. Upon my release, I was determined to gain employment, education, and live life as a clean, honest man. I discovered quickly, however, that it was far more difficult than I anticipated as potential employers do not always look favorably on those with a criminal record.

I realized that my past did not deter educational opportunities, so I enrolled at Olympic College, obtained funding, bought books, and eagerly awaited the start of the quarter. Meanwhile I received what I thought was a generic court appearance request. What I discovered instead was I still had a pending charge from a deferred sentence from years before when I was still in the throes of my addiction. I was put back in jail for another year. Because of that, I was dropped from classes, lost my funding, and ended up owing the college money.

Since jobs were difficult to come by, finding appropriate housing was nearly impossible. One of my sources of income was gathering recyclables for cash that I sold to a local salvage facility. It was here that I discovered that there truly are caring, generous people in the world. The owner of the Shelton Salvage yard, Omar allowed me to live in a trailer on-site as payment for work. Omar's faith and generosity was exactly the boost I needed to get past this recent hurdle and continue toward my goals.

With an incredibly limited income, I managed to pay OC the money I owed, and began working again towards enrollment. Without any computer resources of my own, I spent HOURS, even DAYS in the student center getting assistance to restart the enrollment process. Shelton campus staff member, Daris Devaney was a constant support and helped me through the process. Due to learning disabilities and the new ctcLink system even the act of completing admissions paperwork took an exponential amount of time. Daris' patience and kindness were encouraging.

My living conditions are still not ideal, but my determination continues. My learning style is less reading, more listening and thanks to the assistance of Access Services I can obtain audio books. This is helpful, but I am still very slow and purposely take my time so that I am sure that I am learning the material for the Human Services program that I 'm enrolled in. Specials thanks to my professors Mirelle Cohen and Teresa Brooks for their patience and understanding. During the break between summer and fall quarters I chose to spend every day on campus, from early in the morning until late afternoon studying in advance of fall quarter as I realize that I need all the time I can get.

I am in appreciation of the student job in the computer lab because it allows me time to study while also assisting other students. I am tremendously devoted to my education as not only do I want to improve my life - but I want to help others so that they don't make the same mistakes that I made.





---

## Tim Atkisson

### *Peninsula College*

Attending college seemed like an unrealistic pursuit years ago. The state of mind that I was in certainly was not that of a person with dreams and aspirations. I was lost, angry, and alone. Even worse, I was hopelessly addicted to drugs. I needed help but I was terrified to ask for it. This way of life was all that I knew. It became the only thing that was familiar to me.

After years of constant turmoil, misery, and inevitable homelessness, I hit what is commonly referred to as “rock bottom.” Legal intervention and threats of prison opened my eyes to the harsh reality of my situation. I was nearly 30 years old with no family, no friends, and no hope. When I finally was able to gain the strength to ask for help, not only did I receive it, but my life was never the same. I was awarded the opportunity to make substantial changes and I chose to make the most of it.

Helping people who are still in the seemingly unbreakable grasp of addiction has become a passion of mine. Six years ago, I began working for a local inpatient rehabilitation facility. I didn’t know where this journey would take me, but my motivation was clear - I just wanted to help. Over the next several years, I began advancing within the company and realized that my vision of success would require me to enroll in college. My goal was to get my Substance Use Disorder Professional (SUDP) credentials through the Department of Health. As soon as I enrolled, I knew that I had made the right decision. I met a woman named Stacie Bell who was responsible for the addiction studies program at Peninsula College. Her kindness and willingness to share the knowledge she has with her students is something that I will never forget. Dr. Alan Lapin and Stephanie Diltz were both major influences in helping me find the desire to continue learning.

Fast forward to 2020 and I graduated from PC with a degree in addiction studies. I was able to get my SUDP through the department of health and began running inpatient and eventually outpatient caseloads. Through all the progress with school and discovering my career path, I started a family and am now the proud father of three amazing children, a 5-year-old girl, and almost 2-year-old twin boys. My life is unrecognizable compared to where I was before I found a purpose.

Peninsula College was and continues to be instrumental in helping me achieve my goals and live a life I never thought imaginable. I am currently in the second year of my BAS degree and intend to continue pursuing higher education to make myself indispensable within my field. College may not be for everyone, but it certainly transformed my life and for that, I will be forever grateful.



---

## Ciara Colon

### *Pierce College Fort Steilacoom*

In April 2019, I was hospitalized with a borderline stroke and spent a full week in hospital care. I am now stroke-prone for the rest of my life.

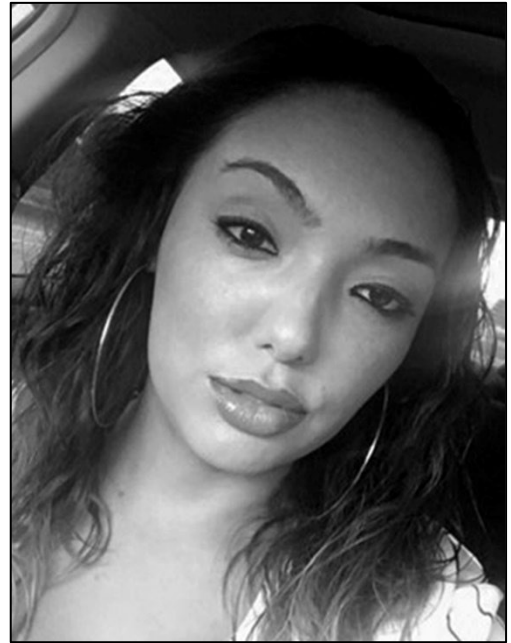
I ended up losing a career-leading job working with at-risk youth and was forced to find a new career. I managed a non-profit until covid hit and once again, I lost my job. During covid, I found employment at a Marijuana dispensary and struggled with pure happiness after being there for 2 years. After about a year of debating if I should attend college or stay at the dispensary, I decided on going back to school.

I knew since it had been a while, I would have to attend a community college. Ten years ago, I attempted the social welfare program and had to drop out due to high-risk pregnancy. This time around I thought I would ask questions and understand the program before registering. After talking to the advisors and researching programs, I changed my mind. I decided to take Criminal Justice so that I can go deeper into helping the at-risk youth population as well as my community. My advisor, Richard Boulware, suggested I take Evidence into Law which was more a mock trial class. That was such fun and a great learning experience that I thought to myself, "I am in the right program."

I also had an instructor, Bobi Foster-Grahler, who gave me verbal support. This support was from day one by reading my journal assignments of how I was working nights at a dispensary and was unhappy. She always told me to take time for myself as a single parent who works full-time and being a full-time student. She also would send me job announcements for jobs on and off campus. It warmed my heart to see an instructor actually try and help a student find a job within the field. Bobi helped me with resources for resume building in which I recently received a job at the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC).

While attending Pierce College I came across a few barriers that had me in tears a few times throughout the program and at times still do. I struggled financially to manage bills for my household and afford college. There were times when I could not pay bills due to catching up on behind bills from Covid. Financial Aid is not an option. However, I do receive student loans that at times did not get approved on time or were not enough to pay for any books. I have borrowed money from my mother to continue in school to help with basic household needs. I have also caught myself paying a bill late to be able to afford a needed book. Starting a new job at CJTC I am starting to get back on my feet again. I am also striving in my current position and was asked to take on extra roles.

As I am wrapping up my last two quarters in Criminal Justice, I want to continue my education and take my LSAT soon after graduation. I plan to attend the University of Washington Law school. My ultimate goal is to own my own business and to be a defense attorney or activist for at-risk youth. My advice to others is to "Take a Chance on Yourself"; it is the best investment you will ever make because you are worth it.



---

## **Brenda Rodriguez**

### *Pierce College Puyallup*

I was compelled to attend Pierce College after taking English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at church. I met a teacher, Hallie Fortt, who was the first person that encouraged me to complete my 5th and 6th ESL. Professor Fortt told me that it was possible to continue studying different programs on both Pierce College campuses. As I was becoming more fluent in speaking English, I was motivated to keep enrolling in different high school and Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes offered at both Fort Steilacoom and Puyallup campuses.

Pierce College scholarships have made a big impact on my educational goals by providing economic support both academically and personally. It allows me to obtain my second AA-DTA degree and helps me pay for my classes and tuition. Without a scholarship or a grant from Pierce College, it would be difficult to be able to keep studying and, as a result, I would not be able to achieve my future academic and professional goals. Without the financial burden of paying for classes, materials, transportation, etc., I am more focused on academic tasks and not worrying as much about providing for my sons. These scholarships secure my chances of achieving my dreams and goals at college and beyond.

I am a single mother who has had to overcome the adversities of being in a toxic marriage filled with domestic violence. Due to my perseverance and determination, I set an example for my children, who are both autistic, by choosing to lead a better life. One of my dreams is to obtain a master's degree in Kinesiology and become a researcher to learn more about topics related to the sports medicine field. By doing this, I want to contribute to society by helping others and teaching them to lead a better life by eating healthy and being more mobile to avoid a sedentary life. That way they wouldn't worry about having problems like arthritis, heart attacks, high blood pressure, diabetes, etc. I would like to see people physically active and aware of what they eat and how they live in terms of well-being. I want to help the community improve their eating habits, exercise, strengthen their immune system and more. I would also like to hone my Kinesiology skills by working, volunteering, and focusing on Kinesiology research, all related to an athletic training and sports medicine career. I am motivated to achieve my academic goals to better provide for my sons financially.

The professors and Kinesiology advisors at Pierce College introduced me in more detail to programs for students like me who aspire to continue studying to achieve an associate's and then bachelor's degree in Kinesiology. By knowing the opportunities, the college offers, such as opportunity grants, foundation scholarships, Pierce College grants, etc., students feel motivated to meet the expectations of their education plans and pursue future higher education.

To conclude, I believe that having skills such as persistence, dedication, responsibility, and beyond will help students who are unsure about their ability to attend a community college to fulfill their academic goals in this institution.

Therefore, it is my utter dedication, passion and persevering spirit that makes me an ideal candidate for this nomination. One of my greatest strengths is fulfilling what I set out to do in life.



---

## Abubacar Kanteh

### *Renton Technical College*

As I approach the conclusion of my automotive training, it has become clear how valuable a technical education is in this world. My education has transformed curiosity and passion into practical and applicable skills that I will use throughout my career. And for many of us, a technical education is the entry point into a field we may have only dreamed about working in.

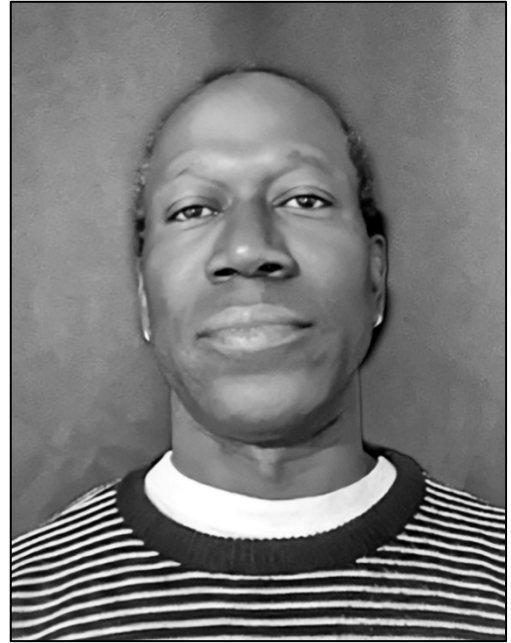
My journey to technical college was not without obstacles. I grew up in the small country of Gambia in West Africa. My mother never sat in a classroom, yet she understood the value of a good education. She instilled in me the drive to be educated. I was separated from my father shortly after high school and was homeless at the age of 20. Although I strongly desired to attend college I could not afford technical college in Gambia. The only option for me was to join the military with the hope that I would receive training to work on vehicles. My military path took me in a different direction, but my dream of working in the automotive field never changed.

After the military, I found my way to the United States. I tried to enroll in school in New York but did not meet the international student financial requirement of having a \$5000 deposit. I had no means of income, so this was not a possibility. After being in New York for a few years, I moved to Washington and began working and saving to attend college, but an employer withheld pay from me and I again experienced homelessness and was left with no money to start my college career.

I chose to study at RTC because of its high retention rates, good reputation in the region, and great job placement outcomes. The staff and faculty at RTC really set me up for success. An advisor helped me choose a path well-tailored to my needs, which helped me maintain a good work-study balance. RTC advisors helped me go through the enrollment process, applying for financial aid without issue and I have been worry-free as a result. My instructors at RTC have taught, inspired, encouraged, and empowered me to be my best which has greatly contributed to my realization of the American Dream. RTC is my community. I owe a great deal of gratitude to the faculty and staff that have helped support me through my journey at RTC. For this reason, I am now prepared to pay forward the support I have received along the way.

Learning about heating and air conditioning in the 4th quarter of my training program inspired me to bring this knowledge to my community in Gambia. I started a community-based garage, sharing HVAC expertise that is helping to alleviate the impacts caused by the unbearable weather conditions faced by Gambian workers every day. I continue to coordinate this knowledge sharing and my RTC training is transforming the lives of people in my hometown.

My advice to prospective students: Use the tools and resources at your disposal to get your best results. Renton Technical College is one of those tools. I am very lucky to be a part of RTC, a state-of-the-art institution recognized as one of the best technical colleges in the country. Because of the RTC instructors' untiring drive for students to succeed in life, you can develop a solid foundation that moves you forward in the world to achieve anything you set your mind to. I am doing so now, and I know you can too.



---

## Zubeir A. Abdi

### *Shoreline Community College*

I arrived in the United States eight and a half years ago and found it very challenging to adapt to a new country, language, and culture. The language barrier made my educational journey very difficult.

Homework was confusing and it would take a long time for me to understand and complete my assignments. While school and education were and are my top priorities, the challenges I was confronted with then made me doubt myself. I wondered whether I could and should continue with my schooling and whether attending college was a viable option for me. I was determined to overcome these obstacles and challenged myself by reading, watching, and listening to everything...in English. My reading, writing, and speaking in English improved exponentially within six months. Yes, college was a viable option for me! With its smaller class sizes and transfer opportunities to four-year colleges and universities, I was compelled to attend a community college and enrolled at Shoreline Community College.

I have long been intrigued with engineering and my fascination with learning how electricity works and mathematics began at a very young age. Due to frequent power outages when I was a first and second grader, my learning oftentimes occurred under a lantern. These continuous power outages during my childhood gave rise to my interest in electricity and its inner workings. As for my fascination with mathematics, I remember my dad having me and my siblings take a book and a pen to him so he could teach us basic mathematics such as addition, subtraction, division, and multiplication.

Two professors at Shoreline Community College made my college experience amazing and truly transformed me from someone who initially questioned whether a college education was within reach, to someone who sees no limits to what I can accomplish. The theme of my college years: failing classes and taking them again, until I passed them. I recall the quarter where I did not pass my first Chemistry class, a class that did not click with me for one reason or another. I then met with Professor Linda Kuehnert and she encouraged me to not give up. I took another class with Professor Kuehnert and received a good grade. After finishing her class, I went from not liking Chemistry to having an interest in the subject—an area of study required to continue with my Electrical Engineering pre-requisite classes. I would also like to give a special mention to my math Professor Przemyslaw Wyzgowski. With Professor Wyzgowski's support and mentorship, I became the president of the Shoreline Community College's Math Club. Apart from being president of the club, participating in math competitions with other colleges further developed my knowledge and skills in math, as well as my leadership skills.

I am currently a junior at the University of Washington Bothell and am on track to earn a bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering in 2025.

The advice that I would give someone who is unsure about their ability to attend a community college is that in education, you will not like every subject that you take, nor will every homework assignment be stimulating. However, the only thing that you are in control of is your determination and perseverance.



## Silvia Herrera Avila

### *Skagit Valley College*

When I was a teenager, we immigrated to the United States. My mom could not get a good-paying job because she did not have an education, so she worked in the fields. We lived in labor camps and followed the crops, harvesting the crops that were in season to help pay for household expenses. I knew that I did not want to work in the fields for the rest of my life. I wanted something better; my dream was to be a teacher. I started taking English classes at Skagit Valley College to learn English. I continued taking classes until recently; I obtained my High School diploma from Skagit Valley College in 2019, and my Associate's in Early Childhood Education in 2022.

I was inspired to continue my schooling thanks to two instructors at SVC, Esteban Vivanco and Daisy Padilla. When I started at Skagit, I was an older student, with three children, without a high school diploma. Esteban and Daisy, both pushed me to keep working hard and encouraged me to take the test to get my High School 21 Diploma and get my Associate's. Without these people at SVC, I would not have kept going.

As a child, I spoke an indigenous language known as Mixtec. When I turned five, my family and I moved to Tijuana, Mexico, where I learned to speak Spanish. My mother was a single parent with eight children; she made handmade bracelets to provide a living for us and we helped her sell them. It was very difficult for her to provide for our family.

My mom would say "I want you to go to school so that you can read and do math and make sure we were being paid enough money for our work". I know my mother wanted to give me every opportunity, but she could not afford for me to not work. She was always worried about being able to pay for food and rent.

I knew that I wanted a better life for myself and my children. After work I would take English classes at SVC. I had a lot of support from my teachers, they listened to me despite my education, and they helped me get my High School 21 and then my Associate's. It took a long time, but my teachers gave me their time and support, and I received scholarships, a big team helped me keep going and dream big.

I look forward to working in a school district or head start center as a preschool teacher in my community. My education will benefit me in a way that I will be able to apply to many teaching careers. I will have up-to-date training on the best practices in education and learn the tools and gain the skills needed to be a great teacher.

Giving back to my community and helping them build a better life is important to me, I want my community to know that your dreams are possible and that if you work hard, you can have a better life for you and your family. My children will have a better life because I worked hard, and my family sacrificed for me to do this. I want to pay it forward.

You can do anything that you want, even if it takes a long time, keep going. In my culture we think that people don't always want to help, but I learned that people at SVC are there to help you. There is a big team of people that want to help you achieve your dreams, you just have to be brave and take the first step.



---

## Patricia Gonzalez

### *South Puget Sound Community College*

South Puget Sound Community College and the Ignite Program allowed me to utilize my life and academic strengths that have played a huge role in my identity. My diverse and non-traditional educational background is one of my biggest strengths. Being raised by a single Latino mother who was a migrant worker, prepared me to deal with societal navigation. I was taught early on that different cultures have various traditions than our own family. As I have gotten older, I reflect on how it gave me a different perspective on life. Many people battle with wanting to belong and being accepted. I remember learning this at a young age. I was even taught that being a Mexican woman had a very different identity than being White, Asian, or Black in this country. Economics also taught me that being of a different socio-economic class affected how you were treated. I witnessed my mother battle this daily. She worked in a male-dominated industry where she would battle with racism and sexism. As a latchkey kid, I learned to become street smart quickly. My mother made me and my sister aware of the dangers in the world by not only having strict rules, but also making us aware of our surroundings. I attended a Catholic school that had students mainly of two-parent households. This made me believe that most White families were rich and better off as the ideal family in many ways.



When I started my own family, I learned to navigate through the healthcare system to get services for my two special needs sons. There were very little resources, if any, at times. Having to navigate through this broken system made me feel alone. Many parents went through similar issues, and it felt somewhat similar especially when it came to lack of insurance coverage. I have seen that the learning experience of children is entrusted in their environment and through their relationships with educators. I want to make the experience of learning meaningful and equal for all. I want to contribute to make learning accessible and enjoyable. By continuing to build relationships and learning about different backgrounds, I will continue to grow. My personal philosophy is focused on evidence that strongly supports my convictions throughout my education and life experiences. I aspire to provide innovative and developmentally relevant opportunities as an early childhood advocate that will forever change the lives of children, their families, and the entire education community.

Becoming part of the education field will allow me to value learning about different backgrounds and continue to build on these relationships. This is not limited to just children, but parents, families, and the overall education community. All of us are important aspects of early childhood development and education. Providing children and their families with equal opportunities and learning about different cultures helps welcome families and myself to grow together. These opportunities, through guidance and support, help guide these experiences to provide more meaningful relationships to various communities.

My advice for students would be to ask a lot of questions and utilize available resources. The Ignite Program gave me confidence, resources, and community that allowed me to have a positive experience to complete my degrees. Ross Artwohl in the counseling center helped provide the tools to start the healing process as a survivor to continue moving forward. The relationship that I built with Amita Chakravarty is one that will never be forgotten. She always made time to support me whenever it was needed. She was able to be a cheerleader who helped build the confidence to continue to pursue my bachelor's degree.

## Shawna Donaldson *Spokane Community College*

At forty-seven-years-old a stroke changed my life completely, rendering me disabled and suddenly dependent on others for survival, a diagnosis of late adult on-set epilepsy to blame. Refusing to surrender to my diagnosis and accept defeat, refusing to succumb to the doubts of others and believe my life had effectively been cut short, I decided to go back to school at forty-nine years old. I chose Spokane Community College because the Colville Center campus made it local and therefore, doable. Epilepsy invaded my life and I nearly let its cancerous presence prevail. Luckily, my stubborn desire to live independently and authentically filled me with the strength I needed to overcome my self-doubt and declare war on anything standing in between me and the medical assisting degree I sought.

Applying for financial aid, navigating the confusing, new world of online learning platforms, textbooks, and classes was tricky and often overwhelming, but the amazing staff at SCC-Colville patiently showed me the way, answered my many questions, advocated with me and for me with various departments I had to communicate with, and supported me through tutoring and other outreach programs. I would not have overcome the many barriers to education that initially stood in my way, nor would I have successfully completed my classes and requirements without the unparalleled support of the SCC-Colville Center staff, my mother Linda Foster, daughter Chelsea Pfliger, Grandchildren Nevaeh, Kellen, Rebecca, Lane, and Cole. In fact, there are so many individuals that were instrumental in supporting me from the beginning right to graduation that I am unable to name them all.

Life is about change. Change is a constant in life, and embracing change has been the single, most important transformation of my life and given me the ability to live interdependently and autonomously; it means accepting responsibility for myself, my actions, and my place in the greater world. Education means discovering and adopting behaviors that encourage learning and help me to develop my emotional intelligence as well as my cognitive intelligence. I have had to learn to listen to my mind and body and to take care of myself and my mental health first. Once, my eight-year-old granddaughter asked me why I was going to school when I was so old? I told her you are never too old to learn!

Education means freedom. It means having the freedom to celebrate myself and my commitment to building my life in a way that accepts the limitations that epilepsy has given me, while illuminating a future that stretches out before me, limitless and wide-open with possibilities. Education means having the freedom to help others, like myself, who face daily barriers to success in their lives but who are committed to moving forward. Education is the reason I have been able to overcome my own barriers and earn myself a spot on the honor roll, something I thought impossible. It has been the many helping hands and open lines of communication that have helped me reach my goals and I hope to pay that help forward by finding meaningful employment that involves helping individuals navigate the complicated and confusing medical industry from their first appointment to their last payment for services.

Education has transformed my life from being debilitated by epilepsy, to becoming able-bodied and excited about my future. Spokane Community College and my drive transformed my life and is the reason I can say epilepsy will not define me. I say to others **DEFINE YOU AND MAKE YOUR OWN MARK ON THIS WORLD!!**





## Cierra Grove

### *Spokane Falls Community College*

As a little girl, I dreamed of becoming a meteorologist. Reading the nuances in radar images and making a prediction enthralled me – it seemed like magic, and I spent hours watching clouds and imagining what might happen next. Unfortunately, my dream died when my parents joined a religious movement that discouraged formal education for women. For the rest of my childhood and adolescence, I was homeschooled with my ten siblings. Instead of learning math and science, I was taught to cook, sew, and care for my younger brothers and sisters. I left home at age 19. It took ten years for me to realize that, despite my educational gaps, college was an option for me.

It felt insurmountable to learn algebra, biology, and chemistry for the first time at a traditional university, so I enrolled at Spokane Falls Community College in 2020.

Thanks to the support of my instructors, I excelled in my classes and developed a love for academics. Dr. Greg Cripe, my math instructor, encouraged me to develop confidence in my problem-solving abilities and advocated for me to apply to academic opportunities like scholarships and tutoring positions, which I hadn't previously considered. My biology instructor Dr. Michelle Pearson not only introduced me to the complex, detailed, and layered world of living things, but also helped me discover a passion for biology, an exciting, ever-changing field. Dr. Pearson also taught me how to study challenging subjects and mentored an independent study course during which I learned lab techniques that I will use throughout my education and career. I will always be grateful that Dr. Pearson saw graduate school in my future even when I couldn't see it myself.

In Spring 2023 I will complete my Biology Direct Transfer Agreement so I can transfer to WSU for the rest of my bachelor's degree in Genetics and Cell Biology. After I graduate, I plan to go to graduate school and work in research. I have a broad range of interests within biology, but what fascinates me the most is the study of human disease and epigenetics. Autoimmune disorders run in my family, and my loved ones have often faced difficulties getting diagnosed and receiving proper treatment. I'm excited to be able to use my knowledge, creativity, and skills to contribute to a recent field, where even a small reduction in the time to diagnosis could dramatically improve the lives of those with autoimmune disorders.

When I started my first term at SFCC, I was older than my classmates, I had large gaps in my education, and I didn't understand the basics of how academics worked. I was truly unsure if I could succeed. However, my confidence grew as I encountered advisors, instructors, and faculty who supported and believed in me, making SFCC the first community where I felt I truly belonged.

If I were to give one piece of advice to future community college students, I would say don't let your past, your age, your experience, or your prior education keep you from taking charge of your own future, and don't be afraid to reach out when you need help. Community college is for everyone.



---

## **Michele Hart**

### *Tacoma Community College*

My life before college was a dead end. I was lost and had no clue how I would escape the world I had created. I had lost everything, including a reason to live. The person I had become was someone I could not recognize. My drug addiction led me to walk away from my loving family and wander the streets aimlessly. I was homeless and turned to a life of crime to feed my addiction. I spent nights in jail praying for something to change. The voice in my head said there was no hope, but my heart kept telling me to just hold on. Deep down I knew my journey would not end there. God finally intervened and I was arrested on Jan. 27, 2018. I was sentenced to 84 months at the Washington Correction Center for Women. A weight was lifted off my shoulders, there was no more running.



I took complete advantage of all that WCCW had to offer and enrolled into TCC's Technical Design Program. The instructor, Ms. Cole, was an angel. She reminded me every day that life was not easy, and I needed to work hard. School gave me something to be proud of and I began reinventing myself. Now that I was thinking clearly, I started to have goals and dreams. I did not know what I wanted to be, but I knew what I did not want to be. After I completed the program, I could not see myself anywhere but in school. I began working as a TA for TCC. I knew then that higher education was going to be my way out.

Released from prison I went straight to the college and began building a support system. With the help of Re-Entry Navigator, Larry Quintana, I was provided with everything I needed to be successful. I enrolled in classes and my professor, Lexie Generous, encouraged me to apply for a work study position at the Advising and Counseling department as a Peer Advocate. I left a full-time position and took a pay cut to be a Peer Advocate but have gained so much professional development. It has helped me to see my true potential. Every day I show up to the school ready to help students navigate the resources that will help change their lives. My supervisor, Janae Ryan, has nurtured me back to believing that I can achieve anything I put my mind to.

Spring of 2022 I had the honor of walking in commencement and receiving my certificate. My family was there to celebrate, and I realized my life had come full circle. I was proud of who I had become through all my trials and tribulations. But this was not where my educational journey would stop. I am currently working on my Associate of Applied Science in Allied Health and will be applying this year to TCC's Bachelor of Applied Science programs. With the help from the Career Coordinator, Natalie Wilkerson, I am starting to realize my aspirations.

My goal in life is to spread the word on how college can change the trajectory of your life. I share my story freely in hopes of reaching those who are suffering. While we might not share the same story, I am confident we share the same feelings. I have always heard it takes a village to raise a child, but it took a community college to raise me. I would like to end with a quote from Mr. K, "Be kind, be courteous, be safe, and always be a rainbow in someone else's cloud."

## Catherine Katelnikoff

### Walla Walla Community College

I was a 32-year-old stay-at-home mom when I found Walla Walla Community College, and it transformed my life.

My father passed away from suicide when I was 15 years old. Suddenly homeless, my boyfriend's family gave me a home. My boyfriend and I were ultimately married and being a proud parent to our two children was all I ever knew. Everything changed when my husband passed away at 25 years old from suicide. I moved back to Alaska with my children where I had support.

At 28-years-old I started a relationship with a man, and we had two children together. It turned into a 4-year relationship full of abuse and trauma. In 2017 he received a job offer in Washington, and we moved for a fresh start. However, the domestic abuse continued. When he drove his truck off a cliff in anger, the State of Washington helped us escape and move to Clarkston for our safety.

I was just a shell of who I once was—I had no confidence. My brain was washed into thinking that I would fail. The YWCA helped me look at options, and the only way I could obtain a job that would support my children was to go to college.

College was a scary jump. Ginny Foote, the first person I met, was very kind and welcoming. I decided to go for a Medical Billing and Coding degree. I soon found that I was surrounded by people that believed in me and were there to help make sure I had all the tools I needed to succeed. That saved me and gave me the boost I needed to try.

Linda Lane and Emma Brice encouraged me to keep going and really believed in me. My confidence grew and I began to see what I was capable of. Eventually I went on to get my bachelor's degree while maintaining a spot on the Presidents List. Tracey Sereda helped me discover my passion for marketing through her teaching style and stories, and I now have an idea of what I want to do when I finish.

In 2021 I became the Vice President of Business for the Student Government Association and gained experience working with the students, advertising, and budgets. In 2022 I was chosen to be the Vice President of Activities and have gained additional experience in event management, marketing, and customer service. My lack of work experience before college is no longer a worry because WWCC has offered ways for me to obtain experience while working on my degree. Our advisor Paul Boyd has been an excellent mentor and taught us skills to function well under stress, manage activities, plan and promote activities and fund raisers, and communicate with other students.

When my children grow up, they will know that no matter what they want to accomplish, they can do it. My goal in the next year is to find a stable career and to purchase a house for my family. WWCC has given me so much more to succeed than just degrees. I have confidence, good references, social skills, and a healthy support system.

The best advice I ever received was from Ginny Foote when I was struggling. She told me, "You are working for progress, not perfection." We are all learning, and everything will not be perfect; however, progress is what will bring us to a brighter future. I will forever be grateful for WWCC for showing me my abilities and giving me hope. I now have a past I am proud of and a future to look forward to.



## Eva Anaya-Luna

### *Wenatchee Valley College*

Growing up, my family worked in agriculture. We constantly moved due to seasonal work. The moving hindered my learning and education, and I was behind. However, I had an amazing teacher at Chelan High School named Mr. Peterson. He believed in me when I didn't. I recall him telling me, "You are going to be the first in your family to graduate!" Having someone believe in me lit a fire inside and I was the first in my family to graduate with my high school diploma. Unfortunately, Mr. Peterson passed away and didn't get to see me graduate.

Fast forward to 2019: I felt the need to further my education. I enrolled at Wenatchee Valley College because it was a one-hour commute, which allowed me to continue my work and take care of my family. After starting classes, I was invited to join TRIO SSS. The TRIO program helped me immensely. First, they offered guidance that, as a first year and first-generation student, was key to my continued success. They went over classes that helped me make progress toward my degree. They also helped me fill out the FASFA application and stay up to date with deadlines. Second, when I was faced with the decision to either purchase a \$200 biology textbook or pay for bills and food, TRIO stepped up to the plate. They purchased the book for me to use, which relieved some of my financial burdens. Third, I was encouraged and guided by a group of individuals who believed in me. They thought I was worthwhile and motivated me to do better every quarter. I went on to make the Dean's list followed by the President's list, obtaining a 4.0 GPA. TRIO believed in me and encouraged me to apply to the Radiology program. They cared about my success and have been there since I began my journey.

Although WVC is cost-efficient, one of the obstacles I have faced is the financial burden that attending college brings to my family. I have four loving children and a supportive husband. I worked full-time during my first and second year because I could not afford not to work. However, when I was accepted into the Radiology Technology program, I had to stop working. TRIO showed me how to apply for scholarships to help with the cost of college. I earned scholarships from The Scottish Rite Foundation, Steve and Ruth Beidler Endowment, and the WA State Opportunity Scholarship. Thanks to the scholarships I have earned, I have been able to complete most of the program. I have already been offered a job as a RAD-tech from both of my clinical sites after I graduate in Spring 2023. I'm so grateful for everyone that has empowered me. I want to prove them right and show them I was worth it. The best advice I can give anyone looking to go to a community college is: I believe anyone can do it. If I was able to with financial limitations, a full-time job, and a young family, anyone can. Believe in yourself, it will take you far!



## Eva Brown

### *Whatcom Community College*

Showing my daughter that women can be successful in STEM fields has been the driver for my education.

I have had to work through a lot of hardship to get to this point in my life. My English teacher has really inspired me and is an amazing, supportive mentor to me. My anatomy teacher helped me raise my standards and develop professionally because she was a very difficult grader who needed even the most obscure of medical terms to be spelled correctly or we'd lose points. My microbiology teacher has so much passion for teaching that it is contagious. She encourages us as women and as minorities in the field of STEM to not be discouraged by societal and cultural norms, but instead, encouraged us to continue to push for equality and diversity in the field.

There have been so many obstacles on this path. Growing up my dad had cancer which put a huge financial strain on our family. Then we finally lost him when I was a teenager. From that moment on, I had little to no family support but was put in the role of being a caretaker. I later had a child, but it was with the wrong person and my daughter and I had to get away from him. He was violent and abusive and didn't want me to go back to school but wanted me to be a stay-at-home mom and told me he didn't think I was smart enough to even become a nurse. While taking classes, I have had to go through a grueling custody battle but now have sole custody. I became a massage therapist, an EMT and now I will become a nurse. Studying, being a single parent and working is a huge obstacle, especially with the competitive nature of the medical field. Sometimes it feels like my desire to be a good parent makes it hard for me to compete in the manner that is necessary to succeed. Right now, the obstacle I am facing is that I am running out of financial aid, and I need to retake some classes for admission into the nursing program. I am applying for all the aid possible and praying for help.

Despite all the obstacles, I am in my last quarter before graduating with an associate in arts and science degree. I have completed the massage therapy program, obtained a license, and now work as a medical massage therapist. I have completed the WCC nursing program prerequisites. I also completed EMT training because I am drawn to the field of emergency medicine.

I wish to continue my education and become an RN. I would love to become a labor and delivery nurse. However, I don't want to stop there. I have a lot of passion for learning and plan to continue to become an ARNP and work in prenatal care.

The advice I have for other students is to believe in yourself. If you fail, you have to get up and try again or you will never succeed. Failure is part of growing. But if you believe in yourself and don't give up you will succeed. Always look for ways to improve, talk with your teachers face to face, ask a lot of questions, work in groups. All these things will help you improve and lead to success, slowly but surely. You first must believe in yourself.



Transforming  
Lives Keynote  
Speaker

---

## Esmeralda Diera

### *Yakima Valley College*

While others were enjoying summer vacations and joining their friends at the swimming pools, I was joining my parents in picking crops. Cherries, blueberries, and apples are a few of the many crops in which I've worked over my high school summer vacations to help my parents who often struggled financially. Working minimum wage agricultural jobs for over twenty years was the only option for my parents who immigrated to the U.S with a minimal education looking to give our family a better life. Coming from a low-income background with the belief that a college education was not an option for me led me to dedicating my time to agricultural work after graduating high school. While many of my high school friends began their new experiences in college, I was gearing up with gloves, boots, and picking up a shovel to work in tough agricultural jobs under the scorching summer sun and frigid winter days. I can recall the heartache in my mother's voice as she said, "you should be picking up a book to study, not a shovel to dig weeds." It was then that I realized I wanted more for myself, so I set out to pursue my dream of going to college.



Feelings of anxiety and reluctance overwhelmed me as I set about to begin my college education. Those feelings vanished quickly when I walked into Grandview's YVC campus for my advising meeting and was joyfully greeted by the first person who helped me get my education back on track, Professor Kenny. Not only did he help me get set up for my first quarter of college courses, but he also put me on the right track for the dental hygiene program when he learned about my desire to pursue a career in the dental field. Throughout my years at YVC, I always had professors who were more than willing to give me the help and feedback I needed to improve myself as a student. I am grateful to Professor Kenny and everyone at YVC who made me feel welcome as I stepped into a new environment.

Becoming a first-generation college student had its obstacles. My parents were not able to financially support my decision to attend college, so I decided to work two jobs. I worked in the hop harvest and as a cashier to save enough money to purchase my first car which would become my transportation to school. With the help of student financial aid, I was able to begin my college education. I became a first-generation college graduate in June of 2022 when I received my Associates of Arts degree. I also finished prerequisite courses for YVC's dental hygiene program while making the deans and presidents list. My next step is to attend the dental hygiene program, followed by beginning my career in the dental field to serve the Yakima Valley with the skills I will acquire as a dental hygienist. I am thrilled to continue being a student at YVC to learn and acquire new skills that will serve me in my future career.

When I began college as a first-generation student, I lacked role models who understood what I was going through. I hope to be an example for others who may be in the same position and feel like they may not have the opportunity to seek a higher education. My advice is to take the chance to follow your dreams even if it means stepping out of your comfort zone. I strongly believe that with determination and dedication, everything is possible.

---

*2022-23*

*Transforming Lives Awards Committee*

Rich Fukutaki, Bellevue College, chair

Juanita Richards, Big Bend Community College

Mike Wilson, Community Colleges of Spokane

Wally Webster II, Edmonds College

Laura Wildfong, Lake Washington Institute of Technology

Harriette Bryant, Olympic College

Sara Cate, Yakima Valley College

*And a special thank-you to SBCTC staff person Stacey Hagreen*

Washington State

**ACT**

Association of College Trustees

Washington State Association of College Trustees  
1300 Quince Street | PO Box 42495 Olympia, WA 98504-2495

[SBCTC.edu/about/college-trustees](https://sbctc.edu/about/college-trustees) | 360-704-4307

---