



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

A record 1,700-plus students received degrees and certificates from Clark College this year. About 670 of them turned out for commencement on Thursday.

PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF

Clark College graduates its largest class yet, many of whom also held jobs

By JACQUES VON LUNEN
Columbian staff writer

Thursday's Clark College graduation ceremony carried the themes of perseverance, generosity and hope. Those themes became apparent not just in speeches, but in actions.

At the start of the college's 76th commencement, college President Bob Knight asked the sea of blue caps and gowns how many of them had worked at least one job while going to school. Almost every one of the students raised a hand.

Then he asked how many of them raised families while working on their degrees. Nearly half of the students showed they had.

That theme — of turning belief into action — marked many of the evening's announcements.

And it reached a crowd larger than any other Clark College graduation before it. Nearly 670 graduates packed the Sleep Country Amphitheater in Ridgefield.

They were a portion of the largest class in college history. More than 1,700 students earned degrees and certificates at Clark College in the 2011-12 school year. About 1,500 graduated last year, which in turn was up from about 1,300 in 2010.

Those in attendance witnessed several special moments.

It started with the awards for exceptional faculty. Awards went to Mark Bolke, professor

of biology; Sunnie Elhart-Johnson, an instructor in business technology; Carson Legree, professor of art; and Felipe Montoya, an instructor in Spanish. Mike Silva, who works in the college's information technology services department, and Wei Zhuang, a graphic designer for its marketing department, received awards for exceptional classified staff.

Another announcement named one lucky and deserving graduate who won't have to worry about paying tuition for the next two years.

Tami Eldridge received this year's Community College President's Award. The scholarship each year is given to a Clark graduate who is headed to Washington State University Vancouver, had stellar grades at Clark, volunteered in the community and showed leadership potential. The scholarship pays for full-time tuition and can be renewed for a total of four semesters.

Eldridge was a member of the 2012 All-Washington Academic Team, graduated with highest honors and earned an Associate in Arts degree in elementary education. While at Clark, Eldridge was an active member of Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society for two-year colleges. She worked on projects with Medical Teams International, Relay for Life, Vancouver Children's Center and others. She also took on a leading role in her local parent-teacher association and was a classroom volunteer.



Hannah Nye, 17, from Vancouver, is a Running Start student. She got her high school diploma and her Clark College associate's degree this month.



Keynote speaker J.R. Martinez talks to Rhona Sen Hoss, outgoing chair of the Clark College Board of Trustees. College President Bob Knight stands behind them on the left.

In announcing the award, Knight said that Eldridge was raised by a single mother. The family was so poor that they lived in a Clark County home-

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less shelter at one point, Knight said.

Seated behind Knight on the amphitheater stage, Eldridge wiped tears off her face while he spoke.

Knight then told the graduates that the college had just received the third-largest single donation in its history. The Firstenberg Foundation donated \$1.5 million to the college's dental hygiene program. The money will buy more patient chairs for the training clinic, renovate existing spaces for a digital radiography suite and lab, and equip the program with special charting software.

The gift allows Clark to add six patient chairs to its teaching clinic, which means it can increase enrollment. Typically, the dental hygiene program has a waiting list for its 24 slots each year. Having 30 chairs should shorten that list.

Bill Firstenberg, heir to the family that built the foundation, told the students and their families that



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Tami Eldridge is announced as the Community College Presidential Scholarship winner at the 2012 Clark College graduation ceremony Thursday.

donors support Clark College because they believe in the students.

"We hope you will pay it forward by supporting future students," Firstenberg said.

Rounding out the evening, Knight introduced J.R. Martinez, a U.S. Army veteran, actor, champion of "Dancing with the Stars" and motivational speaker.

Martinez spent 34 months recuperating from severe injuries he sustained while serving with the U.S. Army in Iraq. More than 40 percent of his body was burnt when his vehicle hit a roadside bomb. After a lengthy recovery, Martinez went on to become an actor on the show "All My Children" and later won the popular dance contest.

He told the students

about lying in a hospital bed in Texas, unable to operate the TV remote or go to the bathroom by himself. Eight years later, he was learning to ballroom dance.

Although the support of family and faculty is important, "it's up to you to actually go to class, actually study and turn in the paper," Martinez told the graduates.

And even though it is hard to go to college when you have to work, have to support a family, "education does not have to wait," Martinez said. "Education should always be a priority."

No matter what obstacles the graduates encounter in the future, "they'll never be able to take this away from you," Martinez told the graduates as they lined up to receive their certificates.