

"I'm so touched to be here with you, to celebrate all your reinventions."

Sherman Alexie, keynote speaker at Clark College commencement



Photos by **ZACHARY KAUFMAN**/The Columbian

Bradley Hacker sits with fellow Clark College graduates during Thursday's commencement ceremony at The Amphitheater at Clark County. Nearly 350 students were honored for their efforts to excel and to reinvent themselves.

Transformed by a tassel

Author feels emotional bond with new Clark College graduates

By **HOWARD BUCK**
Columbian staff writer

From the opening remarks to the keynote speech, transformation was the stirring theme of the 72nd Clark College commencement Thursday evening.

"I needed to reinvent myself," said Sherman Alexie, a prize-winning poet, writer and novelist who overcame physical and cultural barriers on an Eastern Washington Indian reservation.

The stand-up comic used self-deprecating humor that had nearly 350 new graduates and proud family and friends in stitches in the Amphitheater at Clark County. But his message was in dead earnest.

"I got all emotional," Alexie explained after his introduction, which included a scene from his film, "Smoke Signals." "I'm the

son of a woman who got her A.A. degree at age 46. My father got his GED at 32. When I look out at you, I see my Mom and Dad, sort of.

"I'm so touched to be here with you, to celebrate all your reinventions," he said.

Alexie gave shout-outs to three particular subsets of the cap-and-gown crowd:

■ To single parents, after years of corralling children and cramming in studies: "Madness, madness! And now you're here! Congratulations."

■ To first-in-the-family gradu-



Sherman Alexie

Did you know?

■ Thursday's keynote speaker, Sherman Alexie, is an award-winning novelist, poet, screenwriter, composer and performer. His autobiographical book and film "Smoke Signals" won acclaim. A Spokane-Coeur d'Alene Indian, he grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit and overcame several health issues during childhood.

■ Alexie is a big fan of the Seattle SuperSonics. Enough so that he's written a "Sonics Death Watch" weekly column this year for a Seattle alternative newspaper, The Stranger, and was called to testify in this week's trial on behalf of the city's lawsuit to keep the troubled NBA franchise.

Graduation:

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ates: "You are revolutionaries! And you've changed your families, forever."

■ To those who've stumbled or overcome chronic cluelessness: "I'm sure your parents and brothers or sisters are sitting there, thinking, 'Can you believe we're here?' I honor your reinvention."

At the rear of the line of beaming graduates eager to take a bow and receive their new associate degrees or professional certifications, were living examples.

"You want the full story?" asked Steve Shelmet, 38, of Salmon Creek, who got past addiction and a brief prison stint, only to lose an electronics-sector job in 2004.

Boosted by job-retraining funds, he earned an applied science degree in welding technology. He's already landed a well-paying job with Vancouver's Thompson Metal Fab, a firm that helped build Portland's aerial tram.

"It was a very rough transition" at Clark initially, Shelmet said. "I was out of school at seventh grade, I never really did good at school." But that was then; now, he could look for his wife, Adrienne, and two children cheering him on. "It's a complete success," he said.

Success is all the Clark dental hy-

giene program knows. For 38 straight years, all graduating classes from Clark have aced their state exit exam, believed a national record.

On Thursday, Caitlin Richardson, 21, of Camas, had a white tooth stenciled atop her royal-blue cap. That would be a mandibular molar, tooth No. 31, she'd have you know. She's already got six or seven job offers to pick from, she said.

Part of an '08 hygiene class that went 25-for-25 in testing, Richardson also has knocked down four of five state license exams necessary to start work. All that's left is a clinical final on Monday at the Oregon Health Sciences University: She'll have 2½ hours to clean one-fourth of the mouth of a low-income patient — one who's gone at least eight years without any dental care.

"I've been sharpening my instruments all week," she said, shining her own bright smile.

Jill Swindler, 31, commuted to and from Longview to get her paralegal associate's degree. Formerly with an insurance firm, she's already at work for a workman's compensation law firm. She enjoyed her new status with a pair of understanding classmates.

"From one hated career to another," she quipped. "And then, you add my last name..."

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CLARK COLLEGE AWARDS

President's Award

■ **Kenneth Nyholm**, 25, of Vancouver was named winner of the Community College President's Award, a two-year, full-tuition-and-fees scholarship to complete bachelor's degree studies at Washington State University Vancouver.

A business administration major, Nyholm graduated Clark with highest honors and was a Phi Theta Kappa honor society member. He served as a Clark student ambassador, co-founded Clark's Veteran Awareness Organization, is an assistant Scout Master with the Boy Scouts and volunteers with the Lions Club.

Exceptional Faculty Award winners for 2007-08

■ **Larry Blakely**, English composition and creative writing instructor: Joined Clark in 2003, after a mid-life career change to teaching; published a collection of short fiction: "Dust & Dreams: Stories of Life, Love & Baseball;" contributes to several literary magazines.

■ **William (Willy) Cushwa**, biology professor: Joined Clark in 1995; has taught human and general biology, animal science and genetics, and holds doctorate in molecular genetics; also won Exceptional Faculty Award in 2000.

■ **Nancy Johnson**, business technology professor: Began teaching career at Clark in 1977, and has held department head and acting associate dean positions; also won Exceptional Faculty Award in 1995.