

Couple's plunge into Clark College bears fruit

Illness prompted career change,
pursuit of studies

By **HOWARD BUCK**
Columbian staff writer

Ted Dejony didn't realize that winter day in early 2006 just how much his life would change.

He was suddenly struck with double vision, bad enough to make the drive home from his Vancouver shipping-boxing job a dicey one.

Soon, he was diagnosed with the onset of

multiple sclerosis: A scarring of the central nervous system, worsened by stress and physical exertion, that would put an end to his days of physical, blue-collar work.

"I was pretty shaken up by it," said Dejony, 36, an Orchards resident.

But the condition did push him to a major life decision he had been weighing: Chasing a college education.

It's a big deal on Thursday when Dejony joins Clark College commencement ceremonies at the Sleep Country Amphitheater. He'll be among nearly 400 new graduates recognized, out of 1,305 students to earn diplomas during the 2009-10 school year. Many will

mark a profound step forward, just as he is.

Dejony will receive his Associate of Applied Technology degree in Web Design and Development, cheered by his wife, Christine, 39, and sons Joe, 17, and Justin, 15; his mother, Janet Dejony, 67, who traveled from Anchorage, Alaska; and friends from his Portland church.



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Emboldened by a health issue that forced a career change, Ted Dejony earned a degree in Web design and development from Clark College and is already working from his Orchards home. He will join nearly 400 other graduates at commencement ceremonies Thursday. He will graduate with honors, becoming the first in his family to earn a college degree.

Grad:

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"It's the biggest achievement of my life. Really, it's like getting to the top of Mount Everest," said Dejony, a 10th grade high school dropout. "There were times I didn't think I was going to make it. But I've been able to push through."

He did better than that, even as he scaled back to part-time classes to preserve his health. Dejony will wear the maroon tassels of an honor student over his blue Clark gown after pulling a 3.7 grade point average. He's also the first Dejony family member to earn a college degree.

His aptitude for Web design has already won him several contract jobs after he completed his coursework in March.

Clients include Millar's Organic Coffee and Autotamp.com, Original Espresso and Sick Industries (custom auto detailing). They pay Dejony good money for the "back-end" Web page work: Setting up or rebuilding the shopping carts, blogs and other features that drive a successful website in 2010.

"You look at something that looks pretty simple, but there's 200 hours involved making it work," he said.

Actually, Dejony has always had the computer gene, a knack, a bug: "You were, like, a natural," said Christine, chuckling.

What he lacked was any savvy in the whole college thing. That's what held him back, even after he earned a GED high school diploma in the 1990s while he moved through solid jobs in Alaska, then Vancouver.

And so, Christine joined him to take the plunge. They enrolled in Clark together, with her entering paralegal training.

"We kind of took an assessment of where we were in life, and what we were going to do," Dejony said.

Side by side, they tackled the paperwork. They sought out counseling to navigate the maze of financial aid,

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Ted Dejony
Clark College graduate

juggled his disability assistance and shifting medications. They completed an early College Success course to learn the Clark campus, and quickly embraced all it offered.

There were free movie nights, special family events and other activities that put them at ease and provided affordable fun. All the while, Ted and Christine helped push one another.

"The experience is so amazing," she said. "That's the only way we made it, all the resources out there to help."

Christine has one year left to earn her own A.A. degree; she plans to move on to bachelor's degree studies. Ted has seen his vision through, meanwhile.

"I never dreamed somebody who didn't finish high school could go into college," he said.

What's more, their Clark adventure has kindled interest in college or other studies for Joe and Justin, fresh out of the 11th and ninth grades at Heritage High School.

Dejony said they now see new options: "Our college career has set a good example for them."

Joe has thrived in Heritage High's biodiesel program, enough so to collar \$5,000 in personal prize money from a recent team science competition held at the Washington State University Pullman campus.

He made good his promise to buy his father a new iPad for a graduation gift, which already has become a treasured toy.

But that's all icing on the cake, after Dejony earned his Web design stripes and launched his new career.

Thursday's graduation puts a stamp on it, he said.

"I'm pumped. It's been a battle, it's been a hard road," he said. "But I did it."