

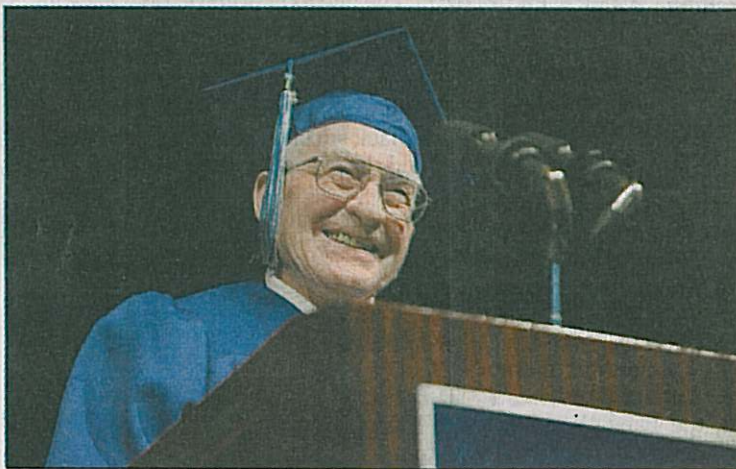
PENGUINS TURN THE PAGE



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Nate Gisby, center, graduated from Clark College on Thursday. The 35-year-old was among several medical radiography students who are making a career change.

Degrees to open new chapters for graduates



Wilbert Kalmbach, 82, savors a moment 40 years in the making. The World War II veteran had missed out on graduation at high school, U.S. Army Air Corps pilot training and at Clark College — for the Class of 1969.

By HOWARD BUCK
Columbian staff writer

Shari's Restaurant near the Westfield Vancouver mall has lost a late-night regular.

Nate Gisby, 35-year-old Orchards resident, husband and father of two, has dropped his routine.

Normally, he'll slide into a booth alone, from 10 p.m. to midnight or maybe 1 o'clock. He'll nurse decaf and water, maybe some french fries, as he pores over his textbook or homework. This, after he's pulled a regular shift of his own, serving tables at the Red Lobster just across Thurston Way.

But, no more: Nate has earned his Associate in Applied Sciences degree, with honors, from Clark College.

On Thursday, he was one of about 350 departing students honored at Clark's 2009 graduation, held at the Amphitheater at Clark County.

"I'm really excited," Nate said as the big date approached. "You can finally see the light, that light flickering at the end of the tunnel."

Nate is one of 14 graduates to emerge from Clark's highly competitive Medical Radiography

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program this summer (the group whose mortarboards featured a skull-and-crossbones sticker). He has already logged 32-hour weeks taking X-rays at the Southwest Washington Medical Center, while still waiting tables.

In truth, he represents many of the 1,276 Clark graduates, total, saluted on Thursday: They juggle class work, a job or two, and, maybe, family pressures. They persevere — the fortunate ones able to land a new job or career by graduation day.

Like Nate, many are the first in their family to earn a degree.

That sort of drive was praised by Vail Horton, a Portland entrepreneur born with disfigured limbs who created a multimillion-dollar medical supply firm and a scholarship foundation.

In surely the first Clark commencement address given while seated on a skateboard, Horton told students, "I promise you: There isn't anything you can't do. Get out there and do it!" Minutes later, Nate's short stroll across the amphitheater stage capped a journey of grit and self-determination tougher than most.

It began in March 2002, when his father, Bill, was critically injured in a highway wreck. As Bill lay for weeks in intensive care, Nate questioned his own path.

Starting as a route driver, then an assistant, he'd worked his way up to distribution manager for an Airgas outlet in north Portland. He didn't mind covering at times for missing drivers, delivering tanks of oxygen, helium, nitrous oxide and other medical or industrial-use gases.

But the late-night phone calls from clients, office politics and his stagnating pay had made Nate's work "miserable," he said. He considered his father's own ambivalent, 20-year high-tech career, cut short by a job layoff.

Would he fare any better?

Bill died, unexpectedly. About then, a Clark College catalog arrived in Nate's mail. He thumbed through it, and some other college schedules. A radiography program caught his eye.

"It was working with people and helping people. It just seemed like a fun, exciting career," he said. "It also offered a good living."

Nate was raised in Clark County with two older brothers, a younger sister. There were stops in Orchards, downtown Vancouver, in the former Rosemere neighborhood.

"I grew up in a poor family.



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Nate Gisby, center, and his medical radiography classmates made sure they stood out at the Clark College graduation on Thursday.

We didn't have a lot," he said. "I was determined to do something different, be something."

He had earned a GED degree, attending Vancouver's more intimate Pan Terra alternate high school (now Lewis and Clark High). By age 16, he hooked onto the Red Lobster. He envisioned rising to management level there, but soon would realize "it wasn't my calling," he said.

He was a hard worker, though. A friend recruited him to Airgas. And, for a while, he thrived.

His father's death had triggered a career change. Stoking his vision were Shelley, his wife of 13 years, their daughter Kaylee, now age 10, and son

Nicholas, now 6, and a home mortgage.

He had job-shadowed an X-ray technician, and liked what he saw. "That was the neatest thing. ... You're taking a picture, and then there's someone's bone," he said.

Resuming waitering shifts to pay for school, Nate knocked off prerequisite courses online, and at Portland Community College: the Sylvania, Cascade, Rock Creek and Southeast Portland campuses, all over town.

Problem was, PCC's radiography program was wildly popular. Dozens of applicants clawed for very few slots each quarter. Nate's weakness in math cost him the flawless grades he

would need. Meantime, Clark had no such program, yet.

Refusing to yield, Nate scoured options nationwide before he found a New Mexico community college that would work. He lined up comparable work for Shelley, an ophthalmology tech, and job transfers with both Airgas and Red Lobster.

Shelley and the kids moved south in autumn 2006, with Nate to follow. Barely two weeks after he arrived, came a Vancouver letter: He'd been accepted into Clark's brand-new radiography program, part of the second batch of 16 students to begin in June 2007.

"I didn't know what to do," Nate recalls. "We'd moved 1,400

miles, had money down on a home" near Albuquerque, he said. But extended family in Vancouver offered more support, the couple determined.

It's been a good move: Nate's passion has paid off at Clark.

"It's so much more than just pushing a button. You need to know about kilowatts and mass, bone and tissue density, fluid levels in lungs," he explained, his slate-blue eyes widening. "I worked pretty hard. (Learning) the anatomy's a killer."

Most important, the essential compassion for patients comes easy to him, he said.

Nate's clinical work at SWMC has been invigorating. He's soaked up time in surgical units, the ICU and ER. Since June 1, he's earned good starting pay.

"A lot of people went to bat to get me hired at Southwest," Nate said. He credits Kathleen Lesley, Clark radiography director and lead instructor, for "being the rock" of the two-year program.

His radiography classmates are a near-even mix of men and women. Many also are changing careers, he said.

While Nate downplayed the pomp, the impact of Thursday's ceremony isn't lost on him.

"You're kind of getting a foot in the door. This will get me to the point where I can really start making money," he said.

He relishes more family time. But, looking ahead, he might pursue a bachelor's degree to enhance his standing, he said.

That seat at Shari's just might be occupied, once again.

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CLARK COLLEGE HONOREES

PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARSHIP AWARD

Dora Hernandez, 30, Associate of Arts in Human Development. President of student Latino Club, mentor for several community groups, wins full tuition-and-fee scholarship to complete bachelor's program at WSU Vancouver.

EXCEPTIONAL FACULTY AWARDS

■ **Priscila Martins-Read**, non-native English language instructor. She helps international students bridge cultures and languages. "I love to be with students. It is great to watch them take their wings and fly," she said.

■ **Katherine Sadler**, professor of history. She has taught world and U.S. women's history, African history and the history of genocide the last four years. "... To know and hear not only that (my teaching) is getting through, but that it is life-changing — that's like winning the Nobel Prize," she said.

■ **Lisa Staley**, part-time art instructor. Pursuing a doctorate degree in art history at the University of Salzburg, Austria, she brings her European passion to students. "I use the teaching of art to help students realize ... that we have things in common with the people of other countries, times and cultures."

EXCEPTIONAL CLASSIFIED STAFF

■ **Cindy Heck**, administrative assistant for Planning and Advancement. Primary support staff person during three-year preparation for Clark's recent academic accreditation.

■ **Miranda Saari**, program manager for Clark's Assessment Center. She has helped direct Clark's GED testing, implemented off-site early assessment placement testing and created a College is Possible program for fifth-graders.