



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

A Clark College graduate offers up a message to family Thursday during the 74th Clark College Commencement Ceremony at the Sleep Country Amphitheater.

GRADUATION STORIES

Clark College's largest-ever class of grads each has a unique tale

By HOWARD BUCK
Columbian staff writer

Inspiring words of dreams and effort and accomplishment flowed Thursday evening, from the college president, the faculty leader, the featured commencement speaker.

But these fresh Clark College graduates — the record 400-plus who filed into the Sleep Country Amphitheater, taking nearly 15 minutes, or five full songs by the Fort Vancouver Pipe Band — already had pretty much figured out the important stuff, whether those who led the long procession, or those who brought up the rear.

Here was Jerry Hatcher, 58, father of four and grandfather of one, who arrived an hour early to secure his place right up front.

Funny how dealing with surging Clark enrollment, well past 13,000 students now as the economy still reels, teaches one not to dawdle — or quite likely lose that precious class seat or parking place.

"We've watched more and more people coming in. You have to be one of the first people in class, or it's gone," Hatcher said, a laid-off worker speaking for all the displaced employees who swelled the Class of 2010.

Hatcher is glad to have already landed a computer-specialist job with a nonprofit computer recycling firm,



Jerry Hatcher prepares to receive his diploma Thursday. He has already landed a job as a computer specialist with a nonprofit computer recycling firm.

Empower Up, which he and other Clark students had discovered in a work study program.

His classmate Cathi Aakervik, 50, logs temporary shifts with a data transfer company, works vacation relief for staff at Vancouver's Open House Ministries shelter and volunteers at Empower Up, teaching a class or two there.

"I've been a busy girl," said Aakervik, a former Fred Meyer cashier in

Seattle who moved south to care for her elderly mother. She's getting by until she lands a network administrator gig.

In other words, she copes.

Just like Natalia Riley, 25, proud 2003 Prairie High graduate who completed her medical office specialist training. She also is busy at work: Two jobs, about 25 hours each.

In her chosen field, maybe? "Somewhat. ... You start where

you can, and just keep going," she said.

Which could be the credo for all hopeful Clark students these days.

Why did Riley end up at back of the lengthy, blue-gowned line of new grads?

"You need a late family, extra time doing hair in the bathroom, and you have to check the score of the Laker game," she said, laughing, her blonde tresses suitably sharp for the occasion.

Standing nearby, Anne Bressendorf Meadows, 32, asked for some direction. She took her last test Wednesday, a geology final, and missed the graduation rehearsal.

"I'll just follow, and do what everyone else does," she said.

But Meadows is no slouch. She's commuted each day from St. Helens, Ore., to earn her transfer degree, with hopes of landing a scholarship to pursue a bachelor's program for emergency room nursing.

"It's a long way, but it's a really important investment," she said.

Speaking of distance: Bressendorf, a native of Denmark, traded airport stories with Hadeel Hadi, 26, raised in London and starting a paralegal career, thanks to her Clark training and her teacher's job tip.

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And back up front, alongside Hatcher and Aakervik, stood Florin Vrabie, 39, five years removed from Romania, who had assembled Freightliner trucks until the layoffs and now also chases a computer job.

The Class of 2010 was like that — 1,300-plus earned degrees or certificates since last autumn — both young and old, and from far and near.

“It’s amazing, from the (teenagers) in Running Start, to grandparents like me,” Hatcher said.

The words of Portland-raised author Heidi Durrow, who rose from poverty to an Ivy League education and became a best-selling author after 12 years’ effort, did ring true as the ceremony drew to a close.

If her life indicators followed to form, “I would be a statistic,” Durrow said. “Instead, I chose to become a story.”

On this night, amid all the large numbers, there were nothing but stories to be found.

Special tributes

■ Clark President Bob Knight named the Presidential Schol-

arship Winner for 2010: **Sheila Henrikson**, a talented ceramic artist and school and community service leader who will receive full paid tuition at Washington State University Vancouver.

Clark College also honored three faculty members with its 2009-10 Exceptional Faculty awards:

■ **Nadine Fattaleh**, professor of organic and general chemistry

who has served as department chairwoman and on the leadership team of the Pacific Northwest Green Chemistry Education Network.

■ **Anita Fisher**, history professor who teaches world civilizations and women in world history courses, has led Clark’s Model United Nations program and continues to coordinate a women’s history month celebra-

tion on campus.

■ **Karen Swallow**, Adult Basic Education instructor with English as a Second Language expertise who has helped many students with literacy skills.

Clark also paid tribute to **May Jolly** of the school bookstore and **Jim Meeks** of information technology services, who received Exceptional Classified Staff awards.