

# Disability no obstacle for grad

## Many helped Jennifer Purinton's journey through Clark College

By **HOWARD BUCK**  
*Columbian staff writer*

When she rolls her wheelchair across the stage to receive her Clark College diploma tonight, Jennifer Purinton will take another leap toward independence.

And she did it with the help of so many people.

Clark schoolmates willing to take carbon-copy notes for her.

C-Tran drivers who slow to see if she's late steaming down a dark sidewalk to her bus stop, and pause to let her catch up.

Clark students and staff who open balky doors or punch buttons just out of reach. The full-time, state-funded caregivers who assist her and two disabled roommates in a comfortable Five Corners-area apartment.

But it was Jennifer, 24, who typed her own homework and class papers, using only her left hand on the keyboard. Who finished her own exams, even if took an extra hour to write answers with her dominant right hand.

Which makes her business administration associate degree, earned six years after she graduated

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### BY THE NUMBERS

■ During 2007-08, 1,129 Clark students earned more than 1,252 associate degrees and certificates.

■ About 345 students will take part in tonight's ceremony.

■ 697 students earned Associate in Arts degrees.

■ 319 students earned Associate in Applied Science degrees.

■ 28 students earned Associate in Science degrees.

■ 13 students earned Associate in Applied Technology degrees.

■ 191 students earned Proficiency and Achievement certificates.

■ 86 graduates were Running Start students, more than half earning honors.



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

**It took six years of C-Tran bus trips, help from friends and strangers, but mostly personal grit for Jennifer Purinton to earn an associate degree at Clark College.**

### If you go

■ **What:** Clark College 2008 Commencement.

■ **When:** 7 p.m. today.

■ **Where:** The Amphitheater at Clark County.

■ **Keynote speaker:** Novelist, poet and screenwriter Sherman Alexie.





ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

**Jennifer Purinton will join about 344 other students for tonight's graduation ceremony.**

## Graduate:

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from Mountain View High School, a triumph of perseverance.

"I thought it was going to take forever. It's exciting that it's come," she said. Even a few bus drivers have taken a rooting interest, she said.

Still, her achievement is a highly personal one.

"Mainly, I kinda did it on my own," she said in a no-nonsense voice. "It's a better way for me to learn it, than have someone else do it."

Diagnosed in early childhood with spinal muscular atrophy, Jennifer has slowly lost mobility in her body, her limbs, her arms and fingers. Yet, her mind is sharp. She continues to grow, and branch out. The former B+ student at Mountain View has grinded out her Clark courses — even business calculus — and will advance.

"I'm excited, about another step in my life being done and moving on," she said. She earns disabled benefits and state vocational rehabilitation assistance, but she wants more out of life. She takes inspiration from her roommate, Alice, a longtime Vancouver city employee.

"If she can do it, I can do it," she said. "I knew I wanted to go to school, just to be able to provide for myself. I knew I would need to have an education."

Next up, after a few months of rest, are business studies at Washington State University Vancouver. Someday, she'll work in government or a business office, she hopes.

Jennifer will enjoy a graduation party this week. She'll visit a Muscular Dystrophy

Association summer camp near Mount Hood, where she's made dear friends over the years. It offers a full slate of swimming, football, field hockey, dances, talent shows: "Our being disabled, or our limitations, is not judged. You can be 'normal,'" she said.

Let the record show, Jennifer is fully in touch with her times.

There's a modest piercing, a few bright streaks in her dark hair. She's a hip-hop fan and frequently orders Netflix movies. A "Transformers" character lent her a nickname, "Bumble Bee." That's her handle on a MySpace account that features photos of a recent whale-watching trip (more large ocean swells and queasy stomachs than whales, alas) and the 411 on her tattoos.

If she's not instant messaging friends, she's playing "The Sims 2," orchestrating a virtual village. Or out enjoying her top hobby: shopping for "anything, really."

Jennifer has already left a mark on the real world.

She contributed to Clark's disabled access panel, which recommended improvements at the main campus and an east Vancouver satellite, now being built. She's written city officials about ill-placed curbs that can keep wheelchair riders from reaching crosswalk buttons.

Through her time at Clark, she appreciated the kindness of countless strangers, yet also admired how instructors refused to coddle. "I don't feel like I was treated differently than anyone else. They don't cut you any slack," she said.

Not even her business calculus teacher. She's still waiting on that final grade, she said.

Meantime, Jennifer doesn't gauge progress by her friends, whether or not they've taken on college. She'll keep marching to her own beat: after tonight, marching like a Penguin alum from Clark College.

"I'm kind of my own person," she said. "I know it's what I want to do."

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