



Photos by ERIN STARKEBAUM/The Columbian

Graduates of the Clark College GED/High School Completion program were visited by Oswald, the school's mascot, as they lined up outside the O'Connell Sports Center before the commencement ceremony Saturday.

One giant step on grads' paths

GED and High School Completion students celebrate their progress

By **BOB ALBRECHT**
Columbian staff writer

Whistles, claps and occasional shout-outs — “We love you, man” — greeted the nearly 70 graduates honored at Saturday's Clark College GED/High School Completion ceremony.

The graduates and their families packed inside the O'Connell Sports Center shortly after 11 a.m. for the 90-minute celebration that saw some students on the receiving ends of screams usually reserved for the likes of rock stars.

For many, celebrating the completion of their general education or high school diploma was years in the making. The superstar treatment was earned.

“This is a big accomplishment,” Patricia Howe said of her older sister, Michelle Howe, 27, who received her GED.

A single mother, Michelle Howe overcame drugs and other setbacks along her path to accepting her diploma from

Clark College President Bob Knight, her sister said, adding: “I'm very proud of her.”

The day's theme was one of perseverance, treating the newly earned degree not as an endpoint but a springboard. Dr. Hannah Abraham-Shea, a German immigrant who barely attended primary school and dropped out before ever reaching high school, delivered the keynote address.

Over a span of 17 years, she completed her GED, Ph.D. and everything in between.

“I fell many times in my 17-year journey from GED to Ph.D., but I finished each of my three degrees nonetheless,” Abraham-Shea told the students. “I learned to ask questions, not to feel shame when I did not understand something; I learned that I brought valuable experiences to the table even if they were very different than my



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Dr. Hannah Abraham-Shea
Associate director of basic education at Clark College,
speaking on perseverance Saturday
at the GED/High School Completion commencement ceremony.

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classmates.’”

Abraham-Shea, now Clark College’s associate director of basic education, said later that she hoped her words inspired students, as so many of her mentors inspired her when she first took on the task of completing her GED.

“We don’t make our journeys by ourselves,” she said. “We need good journey-mates.”

Two graduates, one of whom received his GED and one who finished his high school diploma, were invited by President Knight to share their stories.

Allen Darst of Vancouver dropped out of high school at 17 and left home. Over 10 years, he moved from one city to the next, dabbling in drugs along the way.

Eventually, he said, he got tired of being a “nobody.” Now, Darst has already completed two terms at Clark College.



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“I intend to get my associate’s in science, and then transfer to a 4-year university where I will get my degree in environmental science,” he said.

Troy Bisby left his high school to begin working, a choice that, he said, ultimately left him with nothing, not even

a place to live. On Saturday, he triumphantly raised both arms after he crossed the stage with his diploma in hand, clutching it like a trophy.

“When I decided to take the next step, it was my first step — the most difficult but also the most rewarding,” he said. “Now

that I’m focused on what’s really important, working my way up, I can say that the top of the stairs is getting closer, and my future is getting brighter. Here’s to the next step!”

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Graduates of the Clark College GED/High School Completion program, along with their families and friends, packed the O’Connell Sports Center on Saturday for a 90-minute commencement ceremony.