

2014 All-Washington Academic Team Recognition Ceremony
South Puget Sound Community College #27, Commons
March 27, 2014

Dr. (Timothy) Stokes, we appreciate the hosting of this ceremony on the SPSCC campus. I would also like to acknowledge and commend the work of my old friend Marty Brown, who has served in numerous leadership roles in state government and is now of course executive director of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; I say old not because of age but because Marty has been around state government nearly as long as I have.

Marty's boss now is another longtime friend of mine, Beth Willis, who serves as the board chair. Thank you also to Dr. Dan Altmayer, president of the trustees association and Dr. Jill Wakefield, president of the Washington Association of Community and Technical Colleges for your participation today. I'd also like to acknowledge Key Bank and the Washington State Employees Credit Union for their gracious and generous financial assistance in providing the scholarships for our honorees.

It is a great honor to be in the same room as members of the All-Washington Academic Team, two each from our state's 34 colleges in our state's community and technical college system. This is YOUR day.

I am going to talk a little about a few of these great students and you will see that they are a lot more than just great academic students.

Each and every one of you has worked extremely hard to be here and I am sure that many of you have made incredible sacrifices so that you can better your lives through an advanced education.

As a longtime elected official, I share in the pride of your accomplishments and wish to congratulate you on behalf of our great state of Washington. Many of you worked some very long hours while raising your families and put much of your lives on hold so that you could count yourselves as among the 40 percent of the U.S. residents who are fulfilling the dream of a college education.

But I am not here to give a commencement address. We are all here to honor some of the best and brightest in our community and technical college system. People from all backgrounds are in this room – some of you attend for career training, others to transfer – but you share a

dedication to achieving your dreams through higher education.

The 68 of you who make up the All-Washington Team were chosen because you reflect the diversity of our state, maintain the highest standards of excellence, and contribute positively to your communities.

Your induction into Phi Theta Kappa (national honor society for two-year college students) makes you not only statewide standouts, but counts you as academic stars nationally. It also means you are on the road to great things. Each of you also represents something that grades alone cannot measure – a dedication, a work ethic, an ability to overcome the odds.

A great example of someone who has overcome such odds is Amanda Five Thunders, who attends school right here at SPSCC. Amanda had a very rough upbringing on the Nez Perce (PURSE) reservation in Lapwai (LAP-WAY), Idaho. Now 24, Amanda is earning her degree so that she can become a social worker for Child Protective Services and help children in a situation similar to what she endured. Her next stop toward that goal is to earn her master's degree from the University of Washington. In addition to her classes here Amanda volunteers with the homeless.

Another person we honor today who overcame great odds is Rockford Radke (RAD-KEY), a student at Spokane Falls Community College. Rockford is now 36, but when he was 15 he found himself without a place to call home. Even so he managed to hold a job and go to school. That experience, as he states in your program, gave him “the resilience to never give up.” Radke is using his education at Spokane Falls to pursue his dream of becoming a science writer.

I am thrilled that you all chose to take part in our community and technical college system, which has helped so many in our state to further their education. Your choice to enroll in a community or technical colleges is a smart one.

Some of you know that I do not have a college degree myself, but that, like many of you, I enrolled in specific course work that has given me the skills that I've needed to advance. The first community college class that I ever took was right here at South Puget Sound Community College. It was a long time ago, around 1971. The campus consisted of just one building and a portable and was surrounded by forest. None of the businesses that are across the freeway were here – that area was all forest too.

I had bought a convenience store but did not know how to keep books, so signed up for an accounting class. My instructor was a fireball of a woman named Jan Smith. She taught me everything I needed to know about keeping my store's books in order.

Thanks in no small part to the instruction I received right here at SPSCC I had the confidence to move on and buy several other convenience stores, which helped support my growing family. I took some other classes too from both SPSCC and Olympic College in Shelton that really made a difference.

One of my employees back when I was running the convenience store was a woman named Nancy Thomas. Nancy was a super hard worker and a great lady. Her husband worked over at the corrections center in Shelton that is until he passed away from cancer.

To Nancy's great dismay her husband had no life insurance, which really left her and their three children in a difficult financial situation. I could not pay her a lot, but one thing I did do was to help Nancy with her classes at our local community college. Through the training and skills she developed there, Nancy was able to land an excellent job with The Evergreen State College which allowed her to become financially secure once again.

Of course these kinds of stories are all familiar to you because they are stories of people who have turned their lives around through the community and technical college system. I am a big fan of community and technical colleges, not only because they provide a great education but because they are the best education deal in the world. The community and technical college system is not only a great place to advance one's skills, but the system serves as a ready and affordable safety net to help those who are in need.

A recent article in *Daily Finance* called community college students the smartest in the world and I quote: "What's smarter than saving \$100,000 and managing to get an education that is just as good, and perhaps even better, than you can get at many top universities?" Tuition and fees at the average community college run about a tenth of what one can expect to pay at a private college. The article also pointed to surveys that indicate community college students report higher levels of satisfaction with their programs than those attending four-year colleges.

Our colleges serve a variety of purposes but the key is that they are available and open to anyone who is able to show a little initiative and desire. And some 400,000 Washington state residents, or nearly 6 percent of our total population, are currently taking advantage of our community and

technical college system for a number of reasons. That makes the 68 of you chosen to represent the best of your peers is truly an extraordinary achievement.

(PAUSE)

Before I was the lieutenant governor – and even that was a long time now – I was a state senator who represented timber country. This was a time when protection of the spotted owl meant a sudden decrease in the amount of harvestable timber lands, putting a lot of loggers and millworkers out of work.

I introduced legislation that would help the workers through retraining programs. During the legislative process the bill was amended to allow the spouses of displaced timber workers to be trained for a new career in lieu of the logger or mill worker. I thought the amendment was a great idea, figuring the mostly male timber workers themselves would not take a class in the, then, female-dominated fields like nursing but that their wives just might. In fact I made a speech on the floor of the senate expressing vigorously that our burly macho loggers just weren't going to go into nursing.

The bill passed and sometime later I happened to attend a graduation event at a college where some of that retraining had taken place. You can imagine my surprise when I saw a room full of loggers and millworkers who had just completed their “nursing degrees”! This represented both a changing attitude in society, and also told me that people were willing then – as they are now – to do whatever is necessary to support their families.

Using the community college system to set a new direction in one's life is a common theme. One of the all-Academic team members we honor today, Kristina Lawley at Centralia Community College, who turned a personal tragedy into a chance for her to make a difference for others.

After losing her daughter just five days after childbirth, Kristina developed a strong appreciation for the nurses who work in neonatal intensive care and decided to become a neonatal nurse herself. Kristina now works as a primary care provider at an Olympia care center. A former soldier, Kristina is a wife and mother yet still finds time to be active in Phi Theta Kappa. She also served as a writing center tutor. Clearly Kristina is a very deserving member of this team. While her own life changed with the loss of her daughter, she is working to improve the lives of others.

We all are always adjusting to change because the world is in a constant state of change. Our community colleges are where we are preparing our workforce for this change. The *Vancouver Columbian* just ran an article about how jobs in lumber mills, which used to go to students just out of high school, now require a college degree because the mills have gone high-tech so require advanced computer and electronics skills to operate the machinery.

I happen to chair a legislative study committee that looks at economic development issues. We have had committee meetings at several community colleges over the years, so I have seen first-hand how community and technical colleges are a driving force behind the economy. Many of the great paying (and more interesting) jobs in our state did not even exist 10 years ago, such as jobs in video game production, Android phone app developer, data scientist and, even a Zumba instructor. You can get started on all of these and many more at our community colleges.

We know that the manufacturing industry is increasingly adopting new materials such as the carbon fiber composites used by Boeing for the 787 Dreamliner and other aerospace applications. In fact the area of composites is growing so quickly that it has been identified as a new economic sector by our state's Department of Commerce. Washington is home to more than 100 companies engaged in composites and advanced materials research and development, fabrication, production and tooling, creating an industry that generates more than 3.3 billion in annual revenue.

Not just airplanes but automobiles, boats and even guitars are being built from advanced composites. These guitars, made by a Washington company called RainSong, are especially popular among scientists and researchers stationed in Antarctica and also sought after in other cold climates because composite materials do not change with conditions like wood so hold their tone well. Steve Miller of the Steve Miller Band owns 18 of them, and Steven Tyler of Aerosmith toured with one a couple of years ago.

There are huge opportunities in so-called green jobs, or jobs that are in fields that help reduce our carbon footprint or encourage environmental sustainability. Of course our governor, Jay Inslee, ran for office on a platform of green jobs, clean energy and climate change. A few years ago most of us had never heard the term green jobs. Now our community colleges are bedrocks for training people and there are thousands of opportunities in just about every field, from agriculture to alternative energy. And the people whom are learning these new skills come from every walk of life, from every age, from every income level and from every ethnicity.

One of today's honorees, Yunjie (YUN-GEE) Li, has a special passion for the environment. Perhaps that is what attracted Li to attend Cascadia Community College, our state's newest college, which has a campus that overlooks a 58-acre wetlands restoration project and offers three degrees related to the environment.

Li was born in northeast China, and came to the United States in her second year of high school. While in China, she volunteered in the disabled community, taught English at a small rural school, and became an activist for environmental reform in her hometown. Li is graduating with an Associate in Business Administration in Management, and plans to gain a master's in business administration as well.

I have shared a few of the student stories today and in fact I could tell 60 plus more with equal fervor and enthusiasm, for they are all remarkable and each of you are highly deserving of public recognition. So, what about all of these stories of lives touched by our tremendous community college system? The fact that you chose to come means so much more than adding to the numbers of attendees and graduates it produces. It represents the inspiration of visions fulfilled, goals attained and lives enriched.

While you and thousands of others will be better off from what you have earned, so will the communities, state and nation that you live in. Needless to say your families will be better for it and I can tell you first hand that even though you likely do not see it, you are mentoring and inspiring others through example, one of the greatest gifts you can give to another.

Let me close by just saying that whatever path brought you here, and wherever your destination may be, your life will be immeasurably enriched by learning. I applaud you, we all applaud and thank you for making a difference in your world and ours by taking this important step in your lifelong learning adventure. Have a great future!!