



CELEBRATING STUDENTS' SUCCESS

Southwestern Oregon Community College



'I COME FROM HUMBLE ROOTS'

2019 Distinguished Alumnus LaMont Swinson found his way to Southwestern from small-town Alaska playing basketball. On the court, Swinson could change his environment. It was the one place he could beat the odds.

“I have so much love for this college. I spent a lot of time here back in my college days, and honestly probably just as much time now volunteering as a coach, serving on the alumni board and playing basketball.

“Southwestern was just what I needed when I was 19, to help set the path for me to reach success personally and professionally.

“I come from humble roots. The parents I lived with didn't have a drive to improve themselves. Instead, they became substance abusers. As a child, I was labeled a certain way off of the decisions my parents made. That is what drove me to become the person I am today, wanting different, wanting to be better.”

“Southwestern was the first positive change in my life. I am forever grateful for the encouragement this college family provided me.”

LaMont returned to Coos Bay several years after graduating. Now an assistant vice president at First Community Credit Union, he spends time teaching students about credit and managing their money, and meets often with first-generation college students.



‘WE ARE ALL CAPABLE OF EXTRAORDINARY CHANGE’

In her mid-20s, Crystal (Gray) Wink found herself on a 21-mile walk home from a police station. She realized she had hit rock bottom and needed to make a change.

No one believed in her except her mom, who mercifully took her in. Crystal started recovery and eventually began to work and gain confidence. Still, she longed for something more fulfilling in her life.

“When I entered the GED Program in 2014, I had little confidence in my capacity to perform as a student. However, staff members within the program soon helped me to see the potential that I had all along.

“They also encouraged me to further my education, become involved in school and community activities, and explore potential career paths. Their support never wavered.”

Crystal began volunteering. She did an internship in psychology around helping people overcoming mental illness to find jobs. She tutored other GED students. In 2017, Crystal graduated with not one, but three associate’s degrees. Today she’s starting a family and attends Portland State University.

“My hope is that by sharing my journey, I will inspire others and help them understand how we are all capable of extraordinary change no matter what obstacle might stand before us.”



‘EVEN IF YOU THINK YOU CAN’T DO IT – TRY’

It’s not easy for veterans to come back to regular life at home.

When Eric Gleason left the U.S. Navy in 2007, he went to work in a casino. Then he worked as a welder until he hurt his shoulder. Unable to work, he became very depressed. His wife (then girlfriend) told him to go to school.

“I really struggled in high school,” Eric said. “I had the mindset that college wasn’t something I could do.”

Eric sat down with Shana Brazil in Southwestern’s veterans service office. She pushed him to use his college benefit, and since he is a combat veteran, the college awarded him a two-year tuition waiver.

“Eric is one of my vets. I will always hold dear,” Shana said.

That was in 2009. Eric took classes at night and most online. It gave him time to be with his baby daughter.

“I realized I was actually pretty good at school,” Eric said.

Today – Eric has a doctoral degree. He works at Coos Health & Wellness helping individuals with mental illness. Shana saw promise in Eric no one else had seen and Southwestern provided him with the foundation to build a future.



‘PURSUING EDUCATION HAD A RIPPLE EFFECT FOR MY FAMILY’

Maria Arellano had a good year in 2019. She traveled to Turkey through Southwestern’s Study Abroad program. The Alumni Association honored her for her path to success, and she walked beside her stepfather in Southwestern’s commencement ceremony.

Maria’s journey through school started as a 6-year-old learning to speak English. When she was a teenager, she helped raise her younger brothers while her mother traveled to Mexico to complete her U.S. Citizenship work.

She set her mind on being a doctor after seeing her brother battle diabetes. As a first-generation college student, Maria excelled. She was accepted in the honor program. The Southwestern Foundation awarded her scholarships, and the college provided her with an academic excellence tuition waiver.

“Pursuing an education has had a ‘ripple effect’ for my family—my brother was recently accepted into Southwestern’s nursing program and will begin nursing school next fall. And my mother now aspires to possibly attend culinary school.

“I am proud to have begun that journey right here at Southwestern.”

Today, Maria is at Oregon State University, pursuing a bachelor’s degree in BioHealth Sciences, before applying to medical school.



“It is my ultimate goal to work as a traveling nurse all over the United States, and potentially all over the world. I am always looking for opportunities to explore new places, try new things, experience other cultures, learn new languages, and help as many people as I can along the way. I feel that by using my nursing degree to travel to many places and be as helpful as I can be, I can give back not only to my community, but to the world.”

Jaden Justice, Hedian Swanson Nursing Scholarship to Promote Respect for Cultural Diversity in Health Care.



“The best gift that you can bestow on someone is the gift of education. That is what you have given me. As a single dad of three struggling to get through school, I cannot begin to tell you how much I appreciate your generosity. It feels good getting a degree and working towards a promising career.”

Jacob Burch, Southwestern Foundation Scholarship recipient. Jacob graduated in 2018 with a certificate in welding.



“I decided to pursue my career as a registered nurse. The biggest reason of all is to show my two sons that even when life hits you and doesn’t seem to be any worse, you can always make a choice on how you respond. And I choose to do better and to help not only me but them and anyone else I can along the way.”

Stephanie Higgins, Sheryl Rosenbaum Scholarship Recipient. Stephanie also taught Medical Assisting part-time at Southwestern and has been an inspiration to her students.