

Finding her way



Vita Blanco at Clark College's 2019 Multicultural Graduation Ceremony.

This year's recipient of the Community College Presidents' Award in Honor of Val Ogden was Esmeralda "Vita" Blanco, who graduated with an Associate of Applied Science in Business Administration.

"At Clark College, [Vita] has truly found her voice," said Clark College President Robert K. Knight in announcing the scholarship during the college's 2019 Commencement ceremony. "Wherever she goes, people are touched by her enthusiasm and determination."

Blanco did not have an easy path to college. The youngest of 27 siblings, she spent part of her youth homeless and dropped out of high school after the birth of her first daughter in order to work and support them both. In 2016, now a single mother of two teen-aged daughters, Blanco decided to risk leaving her job in order to enroll in the High School 21-Plus program at Clark

College, which is designed for adults earning their high school diplomas. Six months later, she received a standing ovation at Clark College's 2016 commencement ceremony when she shared her story as a student speaker.

During that speech, Blanco recounted what going back to school as an adult was like for her. "The first time I had to write an essay, it took me 30 hours—true story!" she said. "But the day after I handed it in, my daughter needed help with her own middle school essay, and for the first time, I was able to help her with her homework. I knew then that I was on the right path."

Blanco stayed on that path, transferring into college-level coursework. She said that her experience in High School 21-Plus "lit a fire" within her to continue her education. She excelled in her college-level classes, making the Vice President's List for her high GPA. She joined both the Entrepreneur Club and Phi Theta Kappa (the international honor society for two-year colleges) and became a Student Ambassador. Additionally, in January 2019 she was named a Transforming Lives Scholar by the Washington State Association of College Trustees.



Vita Blanco learns that she has been named the Community College Presidents' Scholarship recipient at Clark College's 2019 Commencement.

"My mantra is, 'It's never too late and you're never too old for college,'" said Blanco. She plans to continue her education at WSUV by completing a bachelor's degree in communications and public speaking.

The Community College President's Award in honor of Val Ogden is given each year to a student who has completed their studies at Clark College and is transferring to Washington State University Vancouver. They receive full tuition and fees for two years while they finish their bachelor's degree at WSU Vancouver.

Photos: Nick Bremer /Clark College