

College mourns loss



Lora Whitfield, *second from left*, celebrates receiving tenure in 2017 with her Early Childhood Education colleagues Debi Jenkins, Michelle Mallory, and Sarah Theberge. Whitfield passed away in July 2019.

Clark College lost a beloved member of their community on July 9, when early childhood education professor Lora Whitfield passed away.

“She was kind, warm, and supportive of those around her,” said Vice President of Instruction Sachi Horback.

Whitfield’s connection to Clark went back to her own days as a student, when she attended the college to earn her associate degree in early childhood education in 2002. Whitfield went on to have a successful career in the field, working for both the Southwest Washington Child Care Consortium and Albina Early Head Start. She earned her master’s degree in human development with a specialization in early childhood education

and bicultural development from Pacific Oaks College in Seattle.



Lora Whitfield, *second from right*, stands with students and colleagues at this year's Commencement. *Photo courtesy of Rashida Willard.*

In 2014, Whitfield returned to Clark College to teach. She received tenure in 2017. At the time, she offered this statement on her teaching philosophy: "As an educator, I am committed to treating each individual with respect. I believe respect is paramount in creating environments that promote students' ideas, passions, and interest in a meaningful and organically wholesome way. I strive to provide settings where everyone can share their ideas without bias and be included in all aspects of learning."



Lora Whitfield, right, celebrates at Commencement with Interim Associate Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Rashida Willard. *Photo courtesy of Rashida Willard.*

Whitfield, who identified as Afro-Caribbean, was the second Black woman to receive tenure at Clark College. She actively worked to create networks of support for colleagues and students of color, participating in both the statewide Cross-Institution Faculty of Color Mentorship Program and Clark's Black Employees United Employee Resource Group. "She was an absolute joy to be around," recalled Interim Associate Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Rashida Willard. "She had a hilarious sense of humor and always made her work family laugh."

In addition to her work fostering inclusion, she was an active leader in her field, participating in the Clark College Early Childhood Advisory Council, the Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Council, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

On his last day as president of Clark College before his retirement, Bob Knight recalled his memories of Whitfield. "Because Lora began as a student at Clark College, she could relate very closely to the student experience," he wrote in a July 15 email to all college employees. "This made her a gifted instructor. She made Clark College a better place."

Services for Professor Whitfield have been scheduled for Saturday, July 20, with a viewing between 9:30 am and 10:00 am. The service will be from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. The location will be at City Harvest Church at 8100 NW 9th Street, Vancouver, WA 98665. Funeral information will be on the Terry Family Funeral Home website.

Education for all



Gov. Jay Inslee visits with children in the Oliva Family Early Learning Center.

Governor Jay Inslee stopped by Clark College on Jan. 24 to tour the Oliva Family Early Learning Center and learn about the college's approach to early learning.

Inslee had a chance to tour the 5,000 square-foot building, which features large windows and many natural elements in a space that comprises a toddler classroom, a preschool classroom, an industrial kitchen, and a spacious family meeting area warmed by a stone fireplace.

It was in that family room that a small group of staff, parents, and students gathered with Inslee to share what makes Clark's Child and Family Services (CFS) program special, including the focus on experiential education for children, the workforce training for students studying Early Childhood Education (ECE), and the unusual level of parental involvement.

Parents whose children are enrolled in the CFS program attend parenting classes each quarter. "The parent credit is very unique," said Michele Volk, Director of Child and Family Services. "Families are the first and best teachers for young people."

Lisa Trisler attended Clark's CFS program as a child and later enrolled her own daughter, Laurel, in the program. "As a part of my daughter's education, I participated in the classroom, I was involved with her teachers, and I gained additional knowledge as a parent," said Trisler. "I was pulled right into her education. We wouldn't have had this experience in a traditional preschool setting."



Gov. Jay Inslee gives a commemorative coin from his last inauguration to Laurel Trisler while Laurel's mother, Lisa, observes, in the building that her family helped fund.

Her family so appreciated their experience that Trisler's parents, Jan and Steve Oliva, donated funding to help make the new Early Learning Center a reality. The state of Washington provided \$1 million for the project on the condition that the college raise matching funds. The Olivas' gift allowed the project to move forward.

"We are proud of our public-private partnership," said Dr. Tim Cook, Vice President of Instruction. The program may need to reach out to more private donors in the future: While the Oliva Center is considered a model child care facility for the region, much of the Child & Family Studies program is still housed in older buildings that will need to be replaced.

Inslee expressed his plans to fund early childhood education through the state budget and emphasized the importance of making an early investment in Washington's youth, noting that there is a legal imperative as well as a social one for investing in education—namely, the recent McCleary Decision on Public Education Funding and Reform, which ordered state lawmakers to fully fund public schools through the state budget and address disparities between districts.

“The McCleary decision doesn't include early childhood, but we think it is vital,” said Inslee who has stated in the past that he considers early learning an important part of closing the opportunity gap. In 2015, Inslee helped pass the Early Start Act, which raised standards for early learning facilities statewide.

Inslee's visit to Clark concluded with a tour of classrooms led by current ECE student Miranda Malagon and a look the Little Penguins Garden outdoor play area. Clark's CFS program places an emphasis on outdoor learning and is one of the few preschool programs with a dedicated outdoor teacher.

Summer Brown, Clark College Counseling & Health Center employee and parent of 2-year-old twins enrolled in CFS, sees the value of CFS in both her own life and the community: “My children are taught by teachers of 30 years. Former graduates go on to be teachers themselves. There is a continuous effort to keep people involved in the community.

“My kids have really benefitted,” said Brown.

To view more photos of the Governor's visit, please visit: https://www.flickr.com/photos/clark_college/albums/72157679608103825

Photos: Clark College/Nick Bremer

Leaving a legacy: a farewell chat with Laurie Cornelius

To say that Laurie Cornelius has had an impact on Clark College's Child and Family Studies program is a bit like saying that Dr. Seuss may have influenced children's literature—you've definitely indulged in understatement. Cornelius, who retired fall quarter after 35 years at Clark, has served in just about every position the program has: first as a teacher of toddlers and preschoolers, then moving on to serve as parent education faculty, early childhood education faculty, lab coordinator, and, for the past 16 years, as director of the program. And while Cornelius is quick to point out that she never considered CFS "her" program, the fact remains that she was instrumental in making it the statewide model that it is today. The program currently serves three main functions: providing affordable, high-quality child care for Clark students and staff, as well as for the larger community; operating as a lab school for students in the college's early childhood education program; and educating parents. (All parents are automatically enrolled in a one-credit elective each quarter, which they pass by completing homework that covers everything from handling tantrums to encouraging scientific inquiry in toddlers.) Clark 24/7 sat down with Cornelius before she left to talk about how the program developed into its current form, including its nationally recognized outdoor play area, the 2011 opening of its beautiful Oliva Family Early Learning Center, and why it's important for kids to get really, really muddy.



Laurie Cornelius speaks at the 2010 groundbreaking of the Oliva Family Early Learning Center.

Tell me about how you first came to this program.

I walked in as a parent, pregnant, 40 years ago. I was a visitor to see what an infant-parent class looked like. Later on down the road, I had my twins, and some of the lactating moms here donated breast milk. I started working here as a teacher in 1980.

When I became director in 1999, I knew it wasn't "my" program. I inherited this program on the foundational efforts of so many outstanding people who preceded me. I tell the staff all the time that we don't own the program, that we're temporary keepers of the program, and how we are with each other in the course of every day, be it with children or with each other, will be the culture of the program that we hand off to others in the future. And that's the heart and soul of a program.

I think it's a myth to think that one person is responsible for innovative and creative work, because if you are going to build vision for a program, it has to be shared with others and others have to own it. It can't be just one person. I believe firmly in that. A lot of my work and some of the success and achievement that I can feel good about, that I would say are my legacy work here, it couldn't have existed without a whole community of people embracing the idea and contributing to it. Whenever you have people contributing to something, it always becomes much richer and thoughtful than it could have been in the beginning with just one person thinking about it.

Keeping that in mind, though, what are the innovations at CFS that you feel most personally attached to, that you would consider your "legacy" work?



Not putting them in order, but ... the first is, when I was teaching, I realized that people thought of childcare as separate from education. In our world, it becomes preschool or childcare. Preschool is valued. We would have students say, "I want to be a preschool *teacher*, not a childcare *worker*." That's the value judgment being placed. When with all of the brain research showing what children need, with 90 percent of their brain development in the first five years, it's really clear that children need programs and environments that are nurturing and investigative at the same time. That means you combine it—in our field, we often call it "educare"—so their needs are being met and attended to.

So we had three separate programs at the time. We had our PRIDE [early intervention] program, we had our Parent Education Department, and we had Childcare Services. They were all separate. Most of the families in Parent Ed, the bulk of

them were stay-at-home moms, and they were mostly highly educated, not very diverse, and seeking out a quality preschool program. It was a parent co-op founded post-World War II and had a high parent involvement and sense of community.

The Childcare side of the house was also the ECE [Early Childhood Education] lab school, and that was for student childcare services and training for students getting their degree in ECE. It had no family involvement, no connection with the family. The parents basically just arrived and dropped off, there were no programs, no gatherings, nothing.

In the Early Intervention program, they had a separate classroom for children with identified delays or disabilities, with individual therapy appointment that weren't in natural environments.

So they were all different. And so at that time, I was frustrated with this separation of childcare and preschool, and started thinking about what it would look like if we integrated all of these programs. So in the year 2000, we started to do the work to integrate. And I used to have lunch meetings—I used to call them my Hot Tomato Meetings, because I wasn't sure if I was going to survive them! [Laughs.] People were angry with the concept of integration. We had parents from Parent Ed who said, "We're not going to watch Childcare children. We're going to get head lice from them." There were biases. It was the tension between at-home and working families—somehow one's better than the other—it was that kind of tension. The reality was that, with us doing lots of talking and sorting it out—and some parents left, but most stayed—we came up with a model that was integrated.

And given the trends and research that has happened since that time, we realize that we were spot-on. You know, that we were really leading and advancing the work forward. The state board did a report recommending that the Parent Ed model in the

state broaden to more diverse populations. That's exactly what we did. So I take pride in that we created a program that put this model forward. In the old model, if a parent in the Parent Ed program got divorced and had to go to work, they had to move their child. So now that doesn't happen. A family's circumstances can change, and the child doesn't have to leave. Our model allows for flexibility and options for families. I think that has been invaluable.

The concept, or the value, was universal access. I used a phrase—in fact, we put it up in the Haag Lounge when we were working on it—"Is everybody safe and warm inside?" My goal was to make sure that was happening. [Planning and Effectiveness Research, Reporting, and Data Professional] Susan Maxwell helped us do an anonymous survey a few years ago, and we were looking demographics like single parent, first generation in college. We looked at race, culture, ethnicity, all of that, with these basic questions about feeling welcome, and there was no distinction in the answers between groups. We were doing real well. The relationships were being made.

I'm not saying we have a perfect world. We're certainly working on it. But I do take pride in the fact that we do see children and families as being special, and recognize the beauty of who they are when they come through our doors.

Whether you're a student parent, a faculty/staff parent, or a community parent—if you've been a parent—you know we have the most important treasure of each and every family up here. And if we are going to have them housed here within the confines of a fence, then we have to make sure that the environment is investigative and nurturing so those kiddos can thrive.

People often will enter the program and be here a little bit, and they're trying to figure it out. They're saying, "This place is different." And they don't know why. They can't quite put their finger on it. We speak of the environment as being a third teacher. And when we speak to that, it is both the

emotional environment and the physical environment. We work really hard at being thoughtful about how we set up our environments.

Another legacy is definitely the outdoors. And that's a passion I have. That's the personal piece of me that was really, really important to me. It wasn't a conscious starting down that road. We had built this building over here and there was no money for a playground. And so we started researching. And the place we started is where everybody starts: toy equipment catalogs. You ask, "How many kids can get on this? What kinds of things can they do?"



Laurie Cornelius at an Arbor Day tree planting at Child & Family Studies.

I grew up in Seattle but I grew up with a really rich outdoor experience with my parents. All seasons, we were out camping. And then in college I had the wonderful opportunity to work up at Mt. Rainier with Ranger naturalists and do campfire programs with families.

So I realized that if children are going to be in childcare for long hours, they needed more than a playground. They needed more than recess. They needed a *rich environment*. So we dumped the playground idea. We kept elements of it, and we said, "Well, what did we like to do? What are our play memories?" They were all outdoors. They were all playing hide-

and-seeK—if you play hide-and-seeK, are there bushes and places to hide? If you played in barns, are there straw bales? If you played at the beach, where's the water? If you camped, where are the woods, where are the rocks, where is the driftwood?

And so that birthed a whole new concept of how we designed outdoor play spaces. This was the early to mid-90s. So that brought on challenges, because we were licensed, and licensors did not want rocks, logs—didn't see that as being a safe environment. The world is very litigious. In fact, I think Head Start had sent out an article on safety saying to saw the branches off of trees so children couldn't climb them.

So I ended up, through my advocacy work and the development of this space, speaking to the State Convention of Licensors on the importance of risk in outdoor play and the need to change the WACs [Washington Administrative Codes]. It was really risky for me, because I was putting up slides of things from our program that kids weren't allowed to do, and saying they needed to do it. So it really was pretty scary for me to do. But I did it, and lo and behold, things started changing. And now you can find rocks and driftwood and trees in many play areas around the state. That's one of the legacies that I feel has been invaluable.

I really hammered on it. I was in City Council, school districts, all over the place, because I believe we need to change how we view our outdoor environments for kids. Right now they're postage-stamp grass lots. And we need the woods. Kids need green spaces, they need flatlands.

It's interesting because there's a whole movement now toward "adventure playgrounds" that favor natural play features instead of the old swing sets and slides.

Right. There is a huge movement to start doing that kind of work. At the time, I think we were doing some very cutting-

edge work with our play space, because not very many had done it. The University of Quebec published an article right around the same time we were opening on three play spaces in the United States that should be used as models for designing school spaces for Canada. We were one of them. I was very proud of that as well. Since that time, we've done tours, fly-ins. We've had national conferences in Portland, and one international conference, and our site has always been chosen to be one of three sites in the Portland-Vancouver area for touring. So we take a lot of pride in the environments and the work that we prepare.

So changing the WACs and creating the play space were huge. What we did was we used plants in the design of the outdoor space to have different focuses of play, so that when kids go outside—if they're going to be in a huge group of kids and do everything in a room, we've got to get them out of that environment where they can be with one or two kids and have places to hide, we've got places to crawl into, we've got places of discovery.

[Recently retired Grounds Manager] Skip Jimerson has been such a partner in crime with me, oh my gosh. Because he loves it; he gets childhood. I'll never forget when I told him, "We want a mud kitchen." He said, "You want a *what?*" And I said, "We want logs and we want dirt, and we want kids to be able to play in the mud, make mud pies, drive trucks through the mud. We'll clean 'em up afterward. We want our kids to get muddy here." And he was totally into it, he just laughed.



Laurie Cornelius, *center*, with Clark College Foundation President/CEO Lisa Gibert and former CFS parent Jan Oliva at the opening of the Oliva Family Early Learning Center.

And the Oliva Family Early Learning Center—I also see that as a legacy. Because in early learning, getting that type of building just is almost impossible, because there's no money. Our field is devalued because of the image of babysitting and childcare. Often you'll hear—and this is a huge challenge—people say, “Don't advise people to go into childcare, because it's low wages.” And yet it's the most important job on earth, given the scope of a developing child. It is just critical because children can't catch up if they're not having opportunity while their brains are developing. And it's been proven. By third grade, we've got kids going in with as much as a 2,000-word discrepancy in vocabulary. You've got children who have been read to and traveled and been to OMSI—and children who have never held a book. It's just horrible.

So I would say those are the areas I'm most proud of. Those, and always—and this is probably the most important one—the attention to relationships within the program. That's that culture of caring. And it's a balance, because we're in a bureaucracy, so we have all the rules and WACs and codes we

have to follow. I always try to make sure that there is some caring to go along with that, so I try to think aloud. I try to explain my thoughts, and if I'm not sure of the answer I'll just say, "Well, I've got to think it through. I'm gonna need a little more time."

You've talked a bit about how CFS has changed over the years. How have you seen Clark as a whole change?

Oh, goodness. It's a huge change, huge. When I started, before Gaiser got remodeled, there was a room maybe a third of the size of what Gaiser Student Center is now, and a small stage, and every single employee could fit on a folding chair in there on Opening Day, and you knew everybody. And maybe there would be three or four new hires, no more than that. Then, as the college grew, they started having to open a sliding wall that opened up into where Student Services offices were. And then pretty soon it got too big for *that*. There were employee directories with photos, so you could always see what a person looked like. Now there are so many employees that you just don't know them. It's just gotten so big. So that's one big change.

I remember when email came in. And the campus was all set up for email except for us. The VP of Administrative Services at the time said, "Well, they're up there with the children; they don't need email." And I complained. And his response to me was, "You can walk down to Foster every day and pick up your email."

Children, young kids in our society—they're pushed to the edges. They're not embraced. On every campus, the childcare program is always on the edge. If we really were elevating and seeing the importance of how we as a community are raising kids, the childcare program should be in the middle of a circle instead of on the edge. Though now that the STEM Building is being built, we won't be as much on the edge here.

I know my son's loved watching the building go up—the Oliva Center's windows look straight out onto it.



Child & Family Studies children perform and display artwork during Clark College's annual Sakura Festival.

Oh yeah, it's been great curriculum. But to go back to what I was saying about how we view kids—I mean, I'm speaking broadly of our society. You can't be loud in a restaurant. You can't cry on planes, evidently, given the news of late. There's just a lot of intolerance of children. And I used to be of the opinion that that was how Clark viewed our children. Not anymore. I think that Clark has clearly demonstrated an exception to the rule. The reason I say that is that we now have so many areas of the campus that think of us and call us and connect with us. It's amazing, the collaborations and richness of what some of the different departments are bringing to this program. We get our clay from the art department. The kids play down in the fountain. They're part of the Sakura Festival every year. We're part of the Seventh Generation powwow every year. Student Services always invites the children to attend different performances. We partner with the Japanese department and they have exchange students who spend time with us. We have collaborated in the past with the library; the kids have had story times down there. One year in the summer, there was a collaboration with PE fitness classes.

They found that when they brought the kids down to play games with the adults, there was more laughter and movement in their class than just simply exercising—it was playful.

So I appreciate that. Fundraisers like our car wash and art show—we get great support from the campus, wonderful feedback. We want to do more of those collaborations and partnerships, both on and off campus.

More than a quarter of our student body at this point has dependent children. In a way, Clark's commitment to this program is part of our commitment to them, and part of our commitment to social equity.

We try to keep a balance—I'd say 70 percent student parents. It fluctuates a bit. In that student population, we see high numbers of what have been identified as risk populations for retention. So one of the things, just before leaving, was Susan Maxwell was instrumental in helping us to create a way to track our student parents' success rates. We're doing that across the state with all childcare programs. We are going to be looking at retention and strategies with these populations. We also believe—and we don't know this yet, it will have to be a research question—but we really want to know what our retention rate is. Because we're so close to the families and we work with retention in supporting their children, and I want to see what the retention rate comparison is.

We have large numbers of students here who are first-generation in college. Our Family Life faculty do an amazing job of supporting student parents in school. And student families have stress. They have life happen to them. And by us having that option to have parent involvement, we can design specific involvement that will support them in whatever stress they are facing.

It happens here all the time. The support that this program can provide students is just amazing. They come in to withdraw

their kids because they're dropping out, and they'll be sobbing. Maybe it's something at home, maybe it's the workload, maybe it's trauma from their past that's creating stress. And we bring them in and sit them down and connect them to resources—and they stay in school. Nobody dropping off or picking up their kid is going to see those stories. But they are here, lots and lots and lots of them.

It's about supporting families—supporting them to be successful in a career path, but you're also supporting them to start a journey of parenting and preparation for the K-12 system. And if we're sending children who are healthy and excited about learning and ready to learn—who are open to inquiry, open to investigation—then we're breaking cycles. We're gaining an opportunity for a future Clarker to be successful here at the college.

We have third-generation families here in the program. We have students who work for us who were children here. We have grandchildren here of people who went to Clark. There's a rich history, and lots of new families who are entering through our door all the time.

What advice do you have for whoever comes in to your position? [Ed note: At the time of this interview, Cornelius's successor had not yet been named. Michele Volk is now the Director of Child & Family Studies.]



Oh, I've got pages and pages and pages of single-spaced writing already! [Laughs.] About the history, about the values. You know, it isn't about staying the same. That goes back to the very beginning comments about how we are with each other. Every

person who comes in the door here, even if they're here for just a short period of time, they're bringing something into

the space and into our world, and we want to value that, we want to value their voice. So when a new person comes in and joins our staff, they're bringing a beautiful dimension of who they are and what they can bring to our community. And we really believe in sharing the strengths and talents and joys between each other and with our children and families. Different teachers bring different passions and interests to the program. We all do that. The outdoors was definitely mine. We have a beautiful performance that we do every year, and that was Sarah Theberge's gift. And Michelle Mallory's bringing in the development of the art studio, the development of the library. You see the passion, you see the gifts, and they bring that into the program and it gets expressed. So the new director will come in and will have interests and passions and things that she or he will bring to the program, and it will thrive, and it will be wonderful.

That's another reason why it's always good to have some change. Also, you don't pay attention to things you don't like to do. That can create gaps. I'm not savvy with technology—I get by, but I don't Facebook. We need somebody who can bring people up to speed. I bought iPad Air2's for every classroom. They're for electronic assessment—that's the future, we need to be looking at the way we do our assessment of children and screening, we absolutely have to do it—and I don't want to have anything to do with it! [Laughs.] That's for the next generation.

So what comes next for you?

I've told everybody I'm taking one year off. I've had many approaches about consulting work, but I need a break from the early learning community for a year to reassess and then I'll decide what I can and can't do.

My oldest grandkid is in kindergarten, and the two youngest are both one—they're four months apart. So I will definitely be spending time with them, and I'll be traveling and

gardening and working out and probably doing a fair amount of cleaning and tossing things out. I'll be—oh! The kitchen! You were asking about legacy earlier. I'm really proud of getting our food program running, so our children can have hot, nutritious lunches made with healthy ingredients. Gosh, how did I forget that?

Well, 35 years—you can do an awful lot in that time, it seems like.

Yeah. [Laughs.] Yeah, I guess so.

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Clark Gets Technical



High school students visit Clark's Automotive Technology program for a quick lesson under the hood during the 2015 Professional Technical Day.

Last Thursday 375 high school students visited Clark during its 24th annual Professional Technical Day, visiting with instructors in 18 different programs and finding out more about how to enter these fields themselves.

"Professional Technical Day is fantastic way to introduce local high school students, career counselors, teachers and administrators to the career technical educational opportunities that are available here at Clark College," says Genevieve Howard,



Students in Clark's Bakery program share their experiences with high school students during the 2015 Professional Technical Day.

Clark College Dean of Workforce, Career & Technical Education. "With the reduction of career technical education programs in the high schools, this is often the first exposure many students have to these career opportunities, and I think Clark faculty and staff do a great job of getting students excited and engaged around these opportunities."

The students came from 15 different high schools from the

Vancouver and Portland area, including Mountain View, Ft. Vancouver, Union, and Grant. Each student could pick two different program presentations during the half-day event. Popular programs included Automotive (and its highly regarded Toyota T-TEN program), Welding, Bakery, Nursing/Dental Hygiene, Early Childhood Education, Business Technology, and Medical Office.



Area high school counselors and educators had a chance to hear about the future of technical careers from industry experts during Clark's 2015 Professional Technical Day.

In addition to the students, 45 counselors, teachers, and principals attended the event. They were given a full tour of the available programs, as well as the opportunity to hear a panel discussion with industry experts about job prospects and educational requirements for today's professional technical careers. Panelists were: Jim Lucey, human resources director of Linear Technology; Matt Houghton, general manager of Schurman Machine; Natalie Pacholl, training program specialist at SEH America; and Craig Baldwin, head of worldwide operations at nLight.

"At Professional Technical Day, high school students get a rare opportunity to interact with Clark College instructors

and professors in hands-on learning environments that demonstrate the academic rigor and technical skill involved in career pathways such as: Welding Technology, Automotive Technology, Mechatronics, and Computer Networking, Science and Engineering,” says Clark College Student Recruitment Specialist Jami Fordyce, who helped organize the event. “We hope that students leave inspired and more confident than ever that college is part of their future, and that Clark College is a wonderful place to start.”

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Exceptional Faculty Award spotlight: The accidental professor



We've all heard the cliché that kids say the darndest things. But people rarely point out its corollary: So do adults. As an Early Childhood Education professor, Sarah Theberge says she is often just as surprised by what her students express in the classroom as she is by what children in the college's Child & Family Studies program say on the playground.

"I'm just surprised over and over again by how many things I hadn't thought of," Theberge says as she stands on that playground surrounded by running children. "The way that students approach the things we talk about reminds me that there's no one right answer to so much of what we're studying. I really do see us as 'co-learners' who are all learning together—and I'm learning right along with them. It's one of my favorite parts of teaching."

It's also one of the things students mentioned repeatedly in nominating Theberge for Clark College's prestigious Exceptional Faculty Award, which Theberge received for the

2013-14 year. The award was announced at Clark's 2014 Commencement ceremony and officially bestowed at the college's Opening Day festivities on September 10.

"She is honest, she is real, she is not only a teacher but an inspiration and a friend to all her students," wrote one nominator. "She brings passion to her work with children and with her students, and ignites the passion in all of us."

Students also mention Theberge's empathy and her strong commitment to serving as an academic advisor to students in the ECE program. When Theberge explains how she became a professor, it becomes clear why she is able to connect so strongly with her students and empathize with the challenges they face: After all, she faced them too.

Theberge never set out to become a professor. "It was the farthest thing from my mind," she says, laughing. Rather, her initial ambition was much more basic: She needed a job.

"I was a single parent without any college background or schooling, and a friend of mine had a childcare center," Theberge says. "I just thought it was a place where I could have my kids there and still work. But from the very first day, I fell in love with it."

A friend encouraged her to enroll in Clark's ECE program. "I said, 'Oh no. We don't do college in my family,'" Theberge recalls. "She literally took me by the hand and dragged me to Clark. And I've never left."

In 1992, Theberge graduated with honors from Clark with an Associate of Applied Science degree in ECE. She went on to complete both a bachelor's and master's program from Pacific Oaks College while working in Clark's CFS program, first as a program aide and then as an adjunct faculty member. Her roles and responsibilities continued to expand over the years, and in 2000 she was granted tenure at Clark. Throughout the years, she has continued to attend conferences and workshops to keep

up-to-date on current teaching practices in her field. She also presents her own research at conferences; currently she has been delving into the complex issues surrounding children's concepts of gender identity. Additionally, she serves on the board of directors for YWCA Clark County and has been instrumental in creating a library at CFS to help promote children's literacy.

It's a long way from the young single mother who just wanted a job. "That's why I love advising," Theberge says. "I hear similar stories to mine from students—people looking for opportunity, looking for help in making their passion a reality. It's just so rewarding to sit with that and to walk alongside them on their journey."

Learn more about the other 2013-14 Exceptional Faculty Award recipients.

Photo: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Under the Caps



Jaime Taylor and Susan Baker

Susan Baker and Jaime Taylor had to arrive at the Sleep Country Amphitheater before 6 p.m. to get their spots near the head of the line of graduates waiting for the Clark College commencement ceremony's 7 p.m. start. But for both women, the wait for this moment was much longer than an hour.

"I started this journey in 1995," said Baker, who works as a teacher in the college's Child & Family Studies department. "And then I had children, and I had to put things on hold for a while, but now here I am!"

Taylor—who, like Baker, was graduating with honors with an Associate of Applied Science degree in Early Childhood Education (ECE)—told a similar story. "It was kind of my time," she explained about her choice to enroll at Clark, where she worked in Baker's classroom as part of her studies. "My kids had gone to school and it was time for me to do something for myself."



Judith Gomez

All along the line, there were tales of dreams deferred. Judith Gomez—also among the ECE contingent at the head of the line—first began taking classes in Clark’s non-credit English as a Second Language program 16 years ago, soon after she moved to Vancouver from her native Mexico. At the time, she spoke no English, but she was determined to go to college. She had to drop out twice when she had children, but eventually she was able to improve her English skills to the point that she could take for-credit classes.

“English isn’t my first language, so for me, doing papers was double the work,” she said, beaming under her blue mortarboard cap, from which dangled the golden tassel and insignia of Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society for two-year colleges. “But I was determined, and my teachers were amazing, so supportive.”

Gomez, who also works in Child & Family Studies as an early-intervention specialist, said she hoped her children—ages 19, 14, and 10—would follow in her footsteps to pursue college educations. “In ECE, we call it ‘modeling,’” she said. “You

model the right behavior, and the children see it and learn. My children are so excited already. They're all talking about going to college."

Kevin Ross was also hoping to being role model. "I am the first one from my whole family to graduate from college," he said as he waited to receive his Associate in Applied Technology in degree in Supervisory Management. "We're talking parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins. It feels good—it feels *great*. It gives my family members something to see. ... I have a little brother. I want to set an example for him, to show him that you can succeed, no matter where you come from or what's happened in your life."



Juliab Dutkel, Carlos Cervantes, Gregory Michael, and Kevin Ross

For Ross, life has not always been peaceful. He first started thinking about attending Clark when he was incarcerated at Larch Corrections Center. He got to know Clark College President Bob Knight, who regularly visits the center to play basketball with inmates. "As I approached my time to come out [of Larch], Bob started asking me, 'What are you going to do next? You should come to Clark,'" Ross recalled. "So I went to Clark. It's offered me an alternate route toward success."

Ross said he plans to transfer to WSU Vancouver to pursue a bachelor's degree in business. He will not be the first former inmate to do so—in fact, Clark College has long run an educational program within Larch, and on the Friday following commencement, a ceremony within the correctional facility's walls would celebrate the 34 inmates who earned their High School Equivalencies during this academic year.

Standing next to Kevin Ross was Carlos Cervantes, whose cap sat atop a long mane of curly gray hair. Cervantes came to Clark when the housing-market crash put an end to his career as a Realtor. He was graduating with a degree in Paralegal, despite having suffered financial hardships after losing his job.

“I was really struggling, but I got scholarships,” Cervantes said. “The Clark College Foundation made my education possible.”



Katie Brilz and Lacey Mac-Rhyann

For other graduates, this commencement wasn't a dream deferred—rather, it was a dream accelerated. Lacey Mac-Rhyann had decorated her cap with the slogan “17 with my AST.” Mac-Rhyann was one of the 235 graduates who participated in Running Start, a Washington State program that allows students

to take college classes while still enrolled in high school. “It was the most phenomenal thing,” she said of the program. “It didn’t just give me college credit—it gave me college experience.”

Ana Lai, who had decorated her cap with pictures of scientific equipment and the logo of University of Washington, also appreciated being part of Running Start. “It gave me a head start,” said the Ft. Vancouver High student, who plans to become a mechanical engineer. “I did the calculus and physics sequences, and I loved it.”



Ana Lai

Aleksander Thompson, who attended Evergreen High School, said he appreciated the serious atmosphere he experienced at Clark through Running Start. “In high school, you don’t pay to get an education,” he said. “In college, people are there because they want to learn.”

Thompson was standing next to his friend Mark Hamilton, also a Running Start student from Evergreen, and who like Thompson plans on transferring to Portland State University’s criminal justice program. Another thing the two young men had in common was that they originally chose Running Start in part because Clark’s schedule offered them the flexibility to work full-

time while attending school.

“You kind of cut out sleeping after a while,” laughed Hamilton.



Timothy Witcher, Alecsander Thompson, Mark Hamilton, and English instructor Kate Scrivener.

As the bagpipes began to sound, the graduates quickly adjusted caps and gowns in preparation for their procession. This was the moment that would make all of it—the sleeplessness, the studying, the doubts and fears—worthwhile. Near the front of the line, Susan Baker got ready to complete the journey she’d begun almost 20 years earlier.

“You know, when you’re a mom, you spend so much time telling your kids that you’re proud of them,” she said. “It’s pretty cool to be hearing my kids tell me they’re proud of me.”

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley. More photos of graduates are available in the college’s Flickr album.