Victor Valley College hosts adult education graduation ceremony honoring hundreds of students

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Graduate Carmen Cleary celebrates during the 3rd annual Victor Valley Adult Education Regional Consortium Commencement Ceremony held Friday, June 4, 2021, at Victor Valley College in Victorville. Rene Ray De La Cruz/The Daily Press

After dropping out of high school nearly 40 years ago, Carmen Cleary’s dream
came true when she walked across the outdoor stage at Victor Valley College and graduated from Apple Valley Adult School.

“There were times when I was up studying until 4 a.m. just so I could graduate,” said the 58-year-old Cleary, who lives in Hesperia with her husband, Jeff. “Sometimes I’d cry thinking that I couldn’t do this. But I kept at it and never gave up.”

Cleary was one of 270 graduates on Friday who participated in the 3rd annual Victor Valley Adult Education Regional Consortium Commencement Ceremony held on the VVC football field in Victorville.

Since last year’s ceremony was canceled due to COVID-19, this year’s graduation celebrated the achievements of nearly 665 graduates from several of the consortium’s adult schools from multiple classes.

"This is the the only regional celebration in the state," said Consortium Manager Martha Mendez. "It's the only graduation celebration where all school district superintendents come to honor graduates in the region.”

Hesperia Adult School graduate Lucille Carrillo, 47, told the Daily Press she was 16 years old and living in El Paso, Texas when family issues forced her to drop out of high school to begin working.

Decades later, as her daughter was about to graduate from high school, Carrillo “came to the realization” that it was time to go back to school to get her diploma.
“It was one of those things that hit me — I need to graduate,” said Carillo, who lives in Bloomington. “When I took classes, I received a tremendous amount of support from my kids who were shocked that I was back in school.”

Cleary said her education was derailed when she dropped out of school at age 15, ran off to Georgia with a boy, got married and became pregnant.

Soon, Cleary was divorced, back in California and working low-paying jobs.

Over the years, Cleary worked several successful jobs, was an entrepreneur and ran a thriving Mary Kay business for nearly 25 years. Along the way, she said she discovered that success was a by-product of hard work and determination.

But even after all her success, Cleary felt like the missing ingredient was a high school diploma.

“It was a difficult journey to get my diploma,” Cleary said. “I couldn’t have done it without God, my husband and a group of godly women who encouraged me.”
A graduate celebrates during the 3rd annual Victor Valley Adult Education Regional Consortium Commencement Ceremony held Friday, June 4, 2021, at Victor Valley College in Victorville. Rene Ray De La Cruz/The Daily Press

During the ceremony, three class speakers shared emotionally charged messages that touched on the discouragement and challenges they faced over the years.

They also shared their gratitude toward family, friends, teachers, mentors, counselors and others who supported their educational journey.

Apple Valley Adult School graduate and speaker Raymond Munoz, 49, told students how the past year had been a struggle due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“My goal was to be a high school graduate by age 50 — I’ll be turning 51 in July,” said Munoz, who told his classmates that success comes from hard work and believing in themselves.

Lorena Munoz-Martinez, from Hesperia Adult School, said each graduate has experienced a different journey on the way to graduation.

For Munoz-Martinez, her story began in December 2009 when she said the principal at Canyon Ridge High School in Hesperia told her she was being dropped from school due to insufficient credits.
The devastating news came as Munoz-Martinez was hiding her pregnancy from her parents. Soon, she became discouraged and angry for allowing herself to get into the situation.

Munoz-Martinez said after leaving school, she faced years of struggle and disappointment as she cleaned houses with her mother, worked low-paying jobs and was not able to keep steady employment.

But hope came to Munoz-Martinez after she walked into the Hesperia Adult School classroom in 2019 and saw a pamphlet that featured an 82-year-old woman who recently received her high school diploma.

“After all the blood, sweat and tears, I can finally say I’m planning to go to college to further my education,” said Munoz-Martinez, who also addressed her family in Spanish.

Garrison, who attended Victor Valley Adult School, admitted she did not want to attend graduation because of the sorrow she felt after losing loved ones to COVID-19.

“But it’s because of them that I showed up today,” Garrison said. “And it’s because of all of you that I’m here today.”

Garrison said over the years, she has “pushed” her children to do well in school, which resulted in straight-A students and college graduates.
But even as she encouraged her kids to excel in education, she failed to heed her own advice.

“So, I went back to school,” Garrison said. “From the bottom of my heart, I want to say thank you to all of you. But to every student in this audience, don’t stop here. I’ve already registered at VVC.”

VVC Superintendent/President Dr. Dan Walden asked the students if anyone had ever been told they would not meet their educational goals or become successful.

“Well I hope that didn’t happen to you, but for many it has. For too many it has,” Walden said. “But for all of you here graduating today, you can tell them that they didn’t know what they were talking about. In fact, they were just outright liars.”

The audience cheered when Walden said the students deserved honor for graduating.

Dr. Todd Scott, the executive vice president of VVC, told the graduates that when they return to VVC in two years to receive their associate’s degree, they’ll see “a massive, beautiful conference center” and football stadium at the sight of the graduation ceremony.

“In making the decision to complete your high school diploma or equivalency, you’ve opened up doors to a whole world of opportunities and they will continue to open up for you,” Scott said. “As a matter of fact, kick them open.”

Scott asked the students to rise and be recognized if they completed VVC courses to earn their diploma, completed a career or work readiness course or obtained employment as a result of a program completion.
He also recognized graduates who became U.S. citizens through adult education, as well as parents or grandparents who were graduating.

Dr. Henry Young, the academic senate president of VVC, gave the students a list of motivational tips as they further their education.

Young told them to remain optimistic while facing challenges and opportunities, and to accept and embrace the uncertainties they may encounter.
profound message that left many in tears.

A portion of Nelson’s message was a look back at her “origin story,” which includes an experience with domestic violence and divorce before turning 25, losing her father to cancer and supporting her husband of 22 years after he was diagnosed with stage-4 cancer.

Her story also included celebrations, such as being the first on her father’s side to receive a bachelor’s degree, a cancer-free diagnosis for her husband, two wonderful sons and a 30-year career in education.

Nelson said her story will continue to grow and she will frequently look to the past in order to look forward.

“I challenge each of you to also have hope and humanity and be yourself. And treat others with respect and dignity regardless of their circumstance,” Nelson said.

“What you see on the outside is not their origin story.”

Everyone experiences challenges and hardships, but each student has the ability to have a positive mindset and to move forward, Nelson said.

“Live life with laughter, look for silver linings and love deeply,” Nelson said.

“Always provide grace, even when someone may not be deserving as you may actually become part of their origin story.”

The ceremony included students from the consortium’s five adult schools in several school districts, including Apple Valley Unified, Hesperia Unified, Lucerne Valley Unified, Snowline Joint Unified and Victor Valley Union High School District.

The regional consortium was established in spring 2014, bringing together adult education providers in K-12 school districts and VVC to develop a regional comprehensive plan to better serve the educational needs of adults in the region.
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