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PERSONAL ENRICHMENT

A second chance

South OC Community Colleges foster success.

BY ERIN MARSHALL

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet," Helen Keller once said. Saddleback College student Kathryn Lee feels this embodies her philosophy of life. At the age of 18, Kathryn's parents were murdered. This was just the first of many traumas to challenge her on the path to success, including drug and alcohol addiction and divorce.



Kathryn Lee has taught her children the importance of a good education.

Now 45 years old, Kathryn embraces life to the fullest and has found her purpose. But just over a year ago, she had hit rock bottom. A close friend who helped her pick up the pieces of her life suggested she go back to school, to Saddleback College in particular. Kathryn looked into the college's programs and agreed.

Leaving her life in Denver behind, Kathryn moved to Orange County and enrolled in the drug and alcohol counseling certificate program. During this time, she discovered the criminal justice program. She hopes to continue in college, obtaining her bachelor's degree and more. Her experiences at Saddleback College have helped foster that hope. "Every person I have encountered here is genuinely invested in my success – in the quality of my life, not just my education."

Kathryn feels destined to share her story, possibly helping others as a victim's advocate or as a teacher. She wants people, especially young women, to see life with hope. "Don't see things as problems," she says. "See them as

situations to be responded to, not reacted to. It's all about attitude and perspective, and the name of the game is gratitude."

The mother of "two amazing kids," Kathryn has instilled this into her son and daughter, encouraging them to finish college and pursue their dreams. She believes education is one of the keys to success. "Today isn't just about surviving, it's about thriving," she states. "I am now participating in life, not just protecting myself from pain."

Another student returning to school is 30 something Jennifer Clark. After graduating from high school, she attended several universities exploring different majors. Unable to settle on one, she left college. After years in the workforce, Jennifer said, "I was making good money, but I wasn't happy."

Intimidated by returning to school, Jennifer was encouraged by the memory of her grandfather's words: "Education is the most important thing that a person can have in life."

Today, she is an Irvine Valley College student on the Dean's list and a member of the Honor Society. "What I know now is that you have to take a chance, risk, do something different if you're not happy in your job. It's never too late to change."

"I came to IVC and felt comfortable. I decided to go to school full-time and change my career, even though I was in my early 30s," Jennifer says. "I was concerned about money and how I would pay for school, but I got help with their assistance." Through IVC's financial aid department, she was able to receive financial aid including a job through the work study program.

"I'm the oldest in my family and my three siblings have all graduated from college. They are so happy that I'm in college and going to graduate." Jennifer adds that when she graduated from high school her aunt told her, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. School is the most important thing in life and can help

you attain those dreams."

Jennifer is enthusiastic about the IVC faculty. "If you communicate with your professors, they really help you. They want you to succeed. If you ask, 'What can I do to get a better grade,' they sit down with you to figure out a way. Many students are intimidated by approaching a professor. They think teachers see them as just a number, but that's not true at IVC. When I went to Penn State, it was a huge campus and I felt lost there. I think we're spoiled at IVC."

Jennifer wants to encourage others, especially those who might have doubts like she once did. "Take advantage of the pride that IVC teachers take in their students. Stay in contact with the school on all levels and don't be afraid to communicate. If you're having trouble in a class or have outside obligations that are



Returning to school in her 30's has allowed Jennifer Clark to pursue her dreams.

holding you back, don't just drop or bail, talk to teachers, counselors and financial aid. Then you can achieve your goals."

With the help of IVC's Transfer Center, Jennifer met her goal to transfer to UCI. She is taking classes this semester toward her major in psychology/social ecology. She wants other older students to know that "by coming to IVC, I felt really welcomed, even considering my age bracket, by the institution and by the students. I definitely think that if I was going to do it over again, I would start at a community college."

Saddleback College in Mission Viejo and Irvine Valley College in Irvine are both part of the South Orange County Community College District. The colleges help students with financial assistance, career counseling, on campus child care, distance learning programs, and much more.

Information about Saddleback College can be found at www.saddleback.edu or by calling 949-582-4500 and Irvine Valley College can be found at www.ivc.edu or by calling 949-451-5100. **tw**

