Tough times couldn’t keep them down. Now, they’re reaching new heights.

In darker times, they may have looked up to the sky, searching for answers. Soon, they’ll peer up to a darkened sky and see solutions by their own design.

Thomas Horning, Gregoria Olivas and Juan Garcia-Colque are three of the Community College of Aurora’s handpicked, five-person contingent to attend a NASA camp this June, where they will develop payloads to fly on a suborbital rocket.

To say this operation began from the ground up undersells the perseverance, determination and hard work it took for this trio to get to this point.

They soon can say they are NASA Grant Scholars. The labels affixed to them in the past were far less prestigious.

Not long ago, Horning was a homeless teenager, sleeping in a parking garage near a Borders bookstore in Silver Spring, Md., which he used as his own personal library while dreaming of space.

Olivas got mixed up in the gang and drug scene in Colorado Springs, and even after she tried to extricate herself, bad fortune continued despite the best of intentions, including a mid-life goal of becoming an engineer.

Garcia-Colque was raised in poverty in Guatemala by grandparents who tried to provide for him but weren’t always completely successful when it came to putting food on the table and clothes on his back. His journey toward normalcy began about 15 years ago when he moved with his wife – “and a lot of debt” – to a new start in the United States as a computer programmer who wanting much more in life.

Heading to Wallops, Va., Flight Facility and the Rock-
On! Workshop will serve, not only as a resume builder, but a confidence builder for each of these students.

They are well aware they’ve been handed golden tickets and are eager to redeem them.

“Our backgrounds may seem a little dark, but something that needs to be taken into account is we’ve made the best of our problems,” Garcia-Colque said.

“They’ve pushed us to actually move forward and not backward, despite our difficult pasts. Some people decide not to move forward: ‘It’s bad. Nobody’s helping me. I’m not going to do anything.’ But if you actually have the strength to say, ‘I don’t want to be in this place and experience these bad situations,’ that’s what actually pushes you away from it.”

“The key is not wanting to be in that position.”

**Possibilities abound**

That a potentially life-changing experience will occur in a place called Wallops seems fitting given all of life’s difficult pasts. Some people decide not to move forward: ‘It’s bad. Nobody’s helping me. I’m not going to do anything.’

But if you actually have the strength to say, ‘I don’t want to be in this place and experience these bad situations,’ that’s what actually pushes you away from it.

“The key is not wanting to be in that position.”

**Humble beginnings**

The idea of college, at one point in time, seemed far-fetched to each of the CCA participants in the aeronautical workshop.

Horning’s early vision probably comes closest to what is now unfolding before him. In third grade, he was the kid with the space helmet and NASA gear. A middle-school vacation to Florida was more noteworthy in his mind for the stop at Cape Canaveral than Disneyland. He watched intently as Curiosity was launched in November 2011 as part of a mission to Mars.

“I’m one of the few nerds that actually watch NASA TV,” he said, adding with a laugh, “They need better programming.”

Horning’s own life veered off course during high school, when he spent a half semester on the street. His daily excursions to the nearby bookstore served as his education while formal schooling was on hold.

“I just read every day and tried to learn as much as possible,” he recalled.

His father eventually bought him a ticket to Colorado and Horning did just well enough to graduate and begin the process of joining the Marines.

He was a poolee, waiting to be assigned to boot camp, when “for a lack of a better term, I broke my back.”

Horning ended up working at Walgreens, and despite getting promoted on a couple of occasions, his physical condition deteriorated.

Mentally, he wasn’t fulfilled and the life-altering decision to return to school was made. “I decided to attempt what I always liked doing and thought about, which is physics.”

The decision to attend the RockOn! Workshop, though, wasn’t a no-brainer. He had to be convinced. “I needed summer classes and I also had applied for a NASA internship, which was driving all my plans, so it took awhile and other people telling me I’d regret it if I didn’t look into it. I looked into it and learned I definitely would regret it if I didn’t do it.”

The main attraction was the chance to work alongside people he’s admired from afar for many years – ever since he remembers saying to himself that he wanted to send something up toward the stars. Horning envisions a future plotting the trajectories of spacecraft. And getting a chance to see professionals doing actual work in the science and engineering at NASA is as important to him during this program as the actual technical aspects of integrating a payload for flight.

“Everyone who goes into physics wants to be the Einstein theoretician breaking rules and making a name for themselves,” he said. “But, to be honest, I’ve always found doing research for NASA would just be the most exciting opportunity.”

**Huge turnaround**

Breaking the rules is something with which Olivas has been all-too-familiar during her life. She’s worked hard to ensure that her missteps don’t define her.

“I did a lot of things I’m not proud of,” she admitted. “But it’s made me who I am.”

She uses the term black sheep often to describe her upbringing. She recalls being told she would never become anything. Hardship seemed a constant companion.

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This 2014 photo from the RockOn! Workshop shows the launch that culminates the program’s activities.

**PHOTO BY MIKE HOGANSON**

Thomas Horning and Juan Garcia-Colque fine-tune their robot in preparation for a dunes trial near Alamosa.
NASA

From Page 2

“It was always, ‘bad this, bad that,’” she explained. “But it’s like I tell my kids, just because we make bad choices doesn’t make us bad people. I always tried to stay positive. I have a lot of patience. I try to stay happy. And I’m doing this because everyone said I couldn’t.”

What this is only partially revolves around the NASA opportunity. Science and engineering are fields where females are highly underrepresented. Sprinkle in her past, and the uphill battle may seem insurmountable to some.

“I already knew that it would be a task to break through some of that,” Olivas said. “And, as I went through school, I had to get past that at first, thinking I wouldn’t get picked because I’m female or something like that. My husband helped me through it.

“He was like, ‘You have to set the stage for other females, other Hispanics, just anybody.’ I’ve overcome a lot of things in my personal life that have been struggles before where I am now, and it would have been easy to say, ‘I can’t do it.’ This can help set the stage for somebody to say that they can get up there, if they choose.”

Yet, even when she attempted to navigate that straight path, trouble seemed impossible to find her. Attempting to become an engineer while also serving as a work-study already had challenges.

“Try doing it while homeless and without a vehicle,” she said. “That’s what I had to do.”

During the spring semester, a well-intentioned purchase of a recreational vehicle started a domino effect that forced Olivas to miss some classes. The RV – purchased for $2,800 as her living space – broke down two exits down the road. It was towed off the road, but it had no tags and was impounded. That’s when outstanding warrants, for both her and her husband, for traffic violations were uncovered.

Shelling out more money to extricate them from those issues didn’t end the string of problems. Her mother, with whom she only recently had begun rebuilding a relationship, fell ill. Her husband was hospitalized. But even after selling the RV and moving to a hotel, “the money didn’t last long.”

The low point came when she said, “I can’t preach to my children to keep going if I can’t do it myself.”

A new life

As a child, Garcia-Coque can recall playing with TinkerToys and the joy that he felt assembling something. That the toy wasn’t his but belonged to one of his friends frames his humble roots in Central America. He’s been piecing together an existence ever since.

“All of my life I always thought I would be one of the males, other Hispanics, just it. My husband helped me through some of that,” Olivas added. “We can’t be one of the first one to be beaten, Garcia-Coque explained. “Having an opportunity like this has changed the entire picture.”

Now the father of teenagers, he was 29 and desperate to change his life when he left Guatemala. His accumulated debt meant he had less than nothing in his pockets when he arrived.

“I didn’t start from the ground up,” he said. “I started from under the ground.”

But the rebuilding process began with his penchant for building things. The TinkerToys of his youth, though he didn’t know it at the time, were the building blocks of his future of creating programs on a computer.

He now makes a living working at Dish Network in territory. For Garcia-Coque, it’s meant long hours studying and working, without time with his children. The counterbalance is the personal pride he said he feels when his grades or test results reflect his efforts.

“CCA, by no means, is an easy step. It’s challenging. It’s inspiring,” he said. “It also has been the best choice I’ve ever made.”

The RockOn! Workshop is an add-on that “means a lot.”

“CCA is already working,” he said. “It’s something you’re not going to get just anywhere working, and, being in school, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Garcia-Coque said he’s going to Virginia for the program “as a blank notebook, willing to learn everything.”

The future ahead

Having already worked as Horning’s partner during the robotics project, the two are comfortable with their working styles and already have been exposed to one another’s strengths and weaknesses. Olivas was on the other team so the two only knew her work tangentially.

The three potentially could turn this experience into a longstanding partnership.

Two other NASA programs are possible next steps for participating students in the RockOn! program. RockSat-C and RockSat-X involve the development of the rocket payloads during the next academic year with oversight on design, testing, integration, and launch readiness. Those programs culminate in the final selection by a NASA team of the most able payloads to fly next summer.

If boundless determination is a prerequisite for advancement, there should be no stopping them.

“I think there’s a special view of the world that you get from going through hard times and persevering through them that a lot of people don’t have,” Horning said. “I’m not saying people should go homeless – don’t do that. But it definitely gives you that fight and that mentality that you’re going to work hard whether or not people are going to see it. And I think that’s when people see it the most.”

Olivas, Horning and Garcia-Colque will make the trip with two other CCA students, Phillip Baranowski and Steven Kenney, who were selected shortly after the initial trio was identified.

But a bond between the first three selectees already is plainly evident.

“Are there people who have the same drive or more drive? I cannot tell. I cannot speak for anybody else,” Garcia-Colque added. “We can’t be the only three. But are we the best choices for this? We’re going to make it that.”
In recent months, Janet Brandau sometimes feels like she’s added chess to her many vice president’s duties in Academic Affairs.

“With all the pieces moving around?,” she said with a smile. “That’s true.”

The end result is a reorganization of Brandau’s area and a reduction of its affiliated schools from three to two. Still in place in slightly different forms are the School of Professional Studies and Sciences (SPSS) and School of Liberal Arts (SLA).

What had been the School of Health Sciences and Public Safety and its five departments – Diesel, Emergency Medical Services, Health Sciences, Public Safety, and Legal Studies, were absorbed by SPSS as of May 9.

Meanwhile, the Art and Design department has been repurposed as a new Arts and Communication area, moving campuses from Lowry to CentreTech. Scott Wakefield retains his position as chair after the move and reorganization, which combines existing art programs with music, theater and communication in an effort to better serve students.

The third-floor of the Classroom Building at CentreTech will have three science labs converted into art studios as part of the makeover. Geology and Astronomy will shift to Lowry to more completely cluster science offerings at that campus.

Brandau, the vice president over Academic Affairs, said the changes will present new challenges but feels the new direction will be well worth it. The moves at their core are driven by CCA President Dr. Betsy Oudenhoven’s desire to grow as an institution, Brandau added.

“Are we offering what students need to go out and be employed? And there’s a community tie-in there. Are we meeting the needs the community is asking for? We want to create partnerships in a more deliberate fashion with our career-technical education (CTE) programs.”

Numerous personnel moves have been necessary due to the makeover. Dr. Bobby Pace moves into a role of department chair of Social Sciences. Dr. Geoff Hunt takes on a new role of advisor and degree navigator in SLA.

Two new associate deans will be coming on board – one replacing the departing Christina Murray in the SLA, the other an addition to SPSS made necessary by the overall reboot.

But no one, it would seem, will see their roles tweaked more than the college’s two deans, Dr. Ted Snow (SLA) and Victor Vialpando (SPSS), who now oversee a combined 15 departments. Both see the changes as a blessing that will result in improved organization, a refined focus that combines different but related areas, and increased opportunities.

“The biggest thing is that the structures are more efficient and it’s a better use of resources,” Vialpando said. “It’s helping us build a capacity that can count more students as successes from an academic standpoint.”

– Victor Vialpando, dean of the School of Professional Studies and Sciences

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in SPSS is that more funding can be allocated to support services, such as the hiring of advisors and an achievement coach, in addition to the pending addition of another associate dean, who will be housed at the Center for Simulation and have CTE responsibilities (credentialing, program approvals, Perkins grants, etc.).

Growth opportunities in SPSS exist particularly in the Health Sciences (which has numerous grants pending), Diesel and Business areas. The latter is exploring delving into the city’s growing hospitality sector.

Snow said that, overall, efficiencies have been created that make “better use of faculty time and allows them to spend more time doing pure faculty work rather than administrative duties.”

The merits of having two schools became clear only after extended discussions that weighed the myriad complexities.

One of the driving forces for Snow in that direction was a desire to create a performing-arts area, one which Brandau noted now will “support students’ academic success, promote the completion of certificates and degrees, and reach out to the diversity of the Aurora community through the arts.”

The Art and Communication Department’s components of theater, visual arts, and communication are closely related and creates a department of sufficient size to succeed,”

Snow said. It also “creates opportunities for those faculty members to collaborate, which they enjoy, and which usually results in good things,” he added.

And with Wakefield at the helm, there’s “a proven person who can come in and do the work” as a leader.

“What it means for the School of Liberal Arts is that for the first time we can adequately support instructional programs and degrees and certificates in the Performing Arts and Communication areas,” Snow said.

“Those areas have always sort of been stepchildren of other departments, but they are not now. They can have their own goals, strategic plans, and they can work with CCA’s Communications Department to have their own marketing efforts. It gives those areas the profile of an academic department that they need.”

While visual arts moves, digital media remains in the Computer Science department. Lab-based science classes in Anthropology and Geology allow SLA students to meet their degree requirements in the lab sciences at CentreTech.

Again, the aim is complementary areas supporting each other in the two schools.

The reduction from three schools can change in the future, should additional factors surface.

“But right now, we feel like we’re in a place where we can handle it all,” Brandau said.
CCA satisfaction soars in just-released survey

At least 94.3 percent of transfer and career and technical (CTE) graduates indicated CCA programs met their educational goals, aided in job placement and retention, and prepared them for further education “well” or “very well,” according to a Spring 2015 follow-up survey conducted by the Office of Institutional Research.

The percentages were much higher in many categories among the 429 respondents, which represented 50.1 percent of the total number of surveys distributed.

Five-year trend data also revealed positive gains (and statistical highs) across the board for transfer graduates. A breakdown of the numbers:

- Transfer graduates surveyed said CCA met their educational goals “well” or “very well” on 98.2 percent of surveys, up 4.4 percent from 2014. CTE graduate responses rose 4.4 percent to 94.3 over the same period.
- An astounding 99.1 percent of transfer graduates said CCA prepared them “well” or “very well” for further education. The rate for CTE graduates was just 1.6 percent lower (98.3).
- CCA’s programs aided in job placement and retention “very well” or “well” according to 94.7 percent of CTE graduate respondents; 92.7 for transfer grads.
- Transfer graduates continued their education after CCA at a 67.4 percent clip. CTE figures were influenced greatly by those graduates venturing into the workforce and stood at 28.7.
- The employment rate of all graduates in ’15 one year after graduation broke down as 86.1 for CTE; 83.6 for those transferring (representing a 12.8 percent increase over ’14).

The average hourly pay of both graduate categories was $17.42 (CTE) and $17.29 (transfer).

Among the qualitative data, students surveyed in total mentioned high-quality instruction, programs and classes; ease of transfer credits to four-year institutions; advisors providing a clear path for transfer; and affordability, culture and atmosphere.

“Student respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences at CCA – and even more importantly, how well the college prepared them for their futures,” Oudenhoven said. “This study is evidence that access and affordability do not preclude quality instruction and support services, but work together to provide students with the opportunity to succeed in college and beyond.”

Summary of findings

- Numbers were up in nearly every category measured by the Office of Institutional Research
- Trend data were the highest CCA has seen over the last 5-6 years
- Employment was up for CTE graduates, but pay has been stagnant
- A significant majority of graduates indicated their CCA program prepared them well for transfer or employment.

Bowman Award presented to pair at May ceremony

William Hicks (Film/Video) and Elizabeth Hirsh (Anthropology) were recognized for making a significant difference for CCA students.

Each was presented May 12 with the Linda and Roger Bowman Faculty Award, which was founded by the former CCA president and her husband. The award, which is given to one or more faculty members yearly, comes with an ample cash prize and an annual luncheon.

The two 2015 winners were selected out of a pool of worthy nominees, whose candidacies were put forward by their colleagues and students.

Hicks is no stranger to accolades, as he was also awarded the 2011-12 Faculty of the Year award. He is active as not only an instructor, but also the founder of the screenwriting club, Fade In, while also serving as a faculty advisor.

Hirsh has been part of CCA’s Anthropology faculty since 2008. Her own educational background in the classroom is augmented by the two years she spent abroad working with her own educational background in the classroom.

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Top left, Elizabeth Hirsh hides from the attention as it becomes clear she’s one of the winners; top right, William Hicks smiles as Colorado Film School Director Frederic Lahey sings his praises.

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Top left, Elizabeth Hirsh hides from the attention as it becomes clear she’s one of the winners; top right, William Hicks smiles as Colorado Film School Director Frederic Lahey sings his praises.
The Student Success Center held its end-of-year celebration May 5 at the Aurora Public Schools Conference Center. Among the honorees were 34 students named to the Dean’s List; 15 to the Vice President’s List, and 19 to the President’s List. Those three designations are for GPAs ranging from 3.5 to 4.0. Additionally, six students were given Star Awards. They were Kevin Cabrera and Glendy Gonzalez (North Star recipients), Lolo Tisseglo and Karyl Lewis (Shining Star), and Peter Reyes and Kingsley Lawson (Rising Star). In total, 70 graduates were recognized for their achievements during the ceremony, which included a year in review, welcome from President Dr. Betsy Oudenhoven, and a graduating students’ poem entitled, “I Am,” by Tiffany Christian, Michelle Ortega, Mauricio Rivera, Claudia Valerio, and Jarrell Brooks.

Resounding Success

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Resounding Success
The Colorado Film School continues to pile up accolades from the most respected magazines covering the field of moviemaking. The oldest and most widely read industry publication, The Hollywood Reporter, recently provided an endorsement. Variety included CFS in its top 30 domestic film schools in April. International Cinematographers Guild Magazine and Backstage previously had noted the quality education available at CFS as compared to other top film schools in the nation/world. The attention is proof positive of the school’s excellent work under its director, Frederic Lahay, and his talented staff.

Dr. Christina Murray, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs in the School of Liberal Arts (SLA) for the last year, announced she is leaving the college, effective June 3. Dr. Ted Snow, to whom she reported, lauded Murray’s “excellent work” in an all-college email, mentioning her role in the creation of a new concurrent enrollment faculty, aiding in the course approval process, co-chairing the College-Wide Advising Task Force, and completing an extensive SLA student profile description. An extensive search already is underway for Dr. Murray’s replacement.

Joshua Farrell, a research analyst in the Office of Institutional Research (IR), has been awarded a 2015 Data and Decisions Academy Presidential Scholarship. Farrell will have an opportunity to expand his knowledge base this summer during two seven-week scholarship courses, “Longitudinal Tracking for Institutional Research” and “Introduction to Learning Outcomes.” Farrell’s scholarship, bestowed by the Association for Institutional Research based in Tallahassee, Fla., covers partial tuition. CCA has committed to the rest of the up-front financial outlay, as well as paid study time for Farrell while he completes his course work. He was nominated for the award by CCA President Dr. Betty Oudenhoven.

CCA’s Offices of Student Life, Concurrent Enrollment, Accessibility Services, and the Counseling Center jointly hosted the spring semester De-Stress Fest May 4-5. The program offered a variety of options to reduce stress, including therapy dogs, massages, de-stress balls, yoga, stress reduction tips, and more. The two-day event was open to all students to help them melt away the stress from finals, papers and studying by using proven and healthy methods to reframe and rejuvenate.

CCA’s commencement ceremony May 9 at Magness Arena on the University of Denver campus featured a record 287 students walking in the proceedings.

The School of Liberal Arts is moving forward with a new plan to support student success in College Composition and Reading 92 (CCR 092), a developmental course with high minority student enrollment. CCA will co-require CCR 092 and AAA 109. The latter course is a student success course focused on academic and non-academic factors that impact performance. The pairing of courses is designed to help students acquire essential reading and writing skills, while gaining a sense of inclusion in the campus culture and learning essential college-going skills.

CCA was awarded a $500 scholarship for its outstanding submission to the National Model United Nations 2015 video contest. The work of staff videographer Ryan Elam documented the highlights of the student experience in New York and was recognized for its quality, creativity and content alongside the other four winners: Bundeswehr University Munich (Germany), Université Libre de Bruxelles College (Belgium), André-Grasset (Canada), and Mercy College (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.). Scholarship awards are used as a credit towards next year’s delegate fees. CCA sent a 16-person delegation to the National MUN Conference for the first time in March 2015.

CCA’s Office of Outreach and Recruitment implemented a new Welcome Center model at both the CentreTech and Lowry Campuses in May. The Welcome Centers are designed to encourage further enrollment at the institution and improve upon current outreach and recruitment initiatives. The centers are each staffed with a full-time staff member and work-study students to provide resources to current and prospective students for extended hours, including evenings and Saturdays. Staff at the Welcome Centers provide general customer service; assistance in completing the college application; prospective student recruiting; campus tours; appointment scheduling; ID creation; assistance with parking passes; welcome calls to all admitted students; and preparation for outreach and recruitment events. This initiative redefines the department’s value proposition by increasing accessibility beyond regular business hours, developing current human resources, providing quality services, and promoting operational excellence, as it was budget neutral and implemented without procuring new fiscal resources.

James Gray, CCA’s Math Department chair, will be heading to Arlington, Va., on June 8 to present at the National Science Foundation (NSF) on the Equity in Excellence project. He will be co-presenting with Dr. Estela Bensimon, the director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California. NSF Program Director Dr. David Brown watched the pair speak at the Association of American Colleges & Universities Conference in San Diego in March and asked them to present to the NSF staff at the national headquarters.

Aurora Mayor Steve Hogan has appointed Director of Financial Aid John Young to a two-year term as a City of Aurora Human Rights Commissioner. The purpose of the city’s commissions program is to promote a mutual understanding and respect among all people; disseminate information and educational materials to eliminate prejudice; promote human relations; and investigate complaints. Young’s specific assignment as a human rights commissioner is to oversee the immigrant and refugee program in Aurora. CCA’s large immigrant student population will help him make important connections between the city and the college in his new role.

Six Aurora Central High School students are the first to be named “Aurora Gives Scholars” through the CCA Foundation. Accompanying scholarships are designed to provide high-achieving seniors with debt-free access to a two-year associate degree from CCA. In exchange, scholarship recipients agree not to apply for student loans or other sources of financial aid that require repayment during their participation in the program (or face potential fiscal penalties tied to the agreement). The program is the first of its kind in Colorado. The CCA Foundation partnered with the Aurora LIGHTS Health Pathway at Aurora Central for its initial foray into the new scholarship effort during its pilot year. The Foundation hopes to raise $500,000 annually for 100 scholarships to Aurora Public Schools students in the future.

Kathryn Sturtevant, director of the Office of Student Life, has been accepted into the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Mid-level Management Institute. Going into its 17th year, the program is designed for those desiring to understand authentic leadership, strengthen their capacities, and understand self and organizational dynamics in order to lead well. The institute is a successful development resource to hundreds of student affairs professionals. This summer’s institute will be held June 13-17 in Nashville.
Clockwise from top: Ginny Steele's history class studied the Middle Ages and punctuated the semester with a medieval feast; the photo booth was a popular destination for staff, faculty and administration during Fun Day held at Lowry on May 13; CCA videographer Ryan Elam's documentary (which included this screen shot) of the Model United Nations delegation's trip to New York was one of five winners in the event's scholarship contest; the first six recipients of the CCA Foundation's Aurora Gives scholarships pose with State Representative Su Ryden after a press conference at Aurora Central High School on May 15.