At first glance, there’s not much that would seem unusually connect Nathan Guild and Morgan Rose Nolen. Guild is a former Navy Seabee, covered in tattoos and now studying international business. Nolen has designs on becoming a priestess and owning her own metaphysical shop where open-minded individuals come to connect with spirits, listen to spiritual readings and purchase various religious curios.

Yet, here they are, these two, joined at the trip. Both now attend Temple University-Tokyo. And each of them got there after accumulating transfer credits as Community College of Aurora students.

CCA tells individuals that they can “start here, finish there.” For Guild and Nolen, they left – and just kept on going, thousands of miles away.

If anything, they are living proof of what the possibilities can be after leaving the CentreTech and Lowry campuses and continuing to study.

And while Guild and Nolen both are focused on their divergent paths, it’s important to note that when each started at CCA, they were almost completely unsure of the direction they were headed; in life, not directionally toward the Far East.

“I would never have imagined sitting in the classes that I sat in and actually being an international business major,” Guild said by phone from the streets of Tokyo after his last day of classes, pre-finals.

“That would have been crazy thinking.”
Transfers
From Page 1

Those who hesitate …

Guild’s thoughts turned to a return to Japan in the summer of 2011. His then-fiancée had finished her studies at Santa Monica College, came to Colorado, and the pair married and started looking more closely at the future.

Ever since Guild stationed in Yokosuka, his passion for the Far East hadn’t waned.

“It’s kind of a hard feeling to describe, but a lot of it was the culture,” he said of the pull he felt to again head overseas to stay.

“Personally, I never watched anime and I was never into Japanese culture growing up – the whole samurai-sword type of stuff. But it actually was the way I was treated, the food, and just the different vibe that brought me back.”

Guild spent four semesters at CCA. He unofficially sat in a favorite Japanese class for part of Spring 2012 before the move took place.

Continuing college in Tokyo, though, wasn’t as much a plan as happenstance.

“It certainly wasn’t 100 percent when I started preparing to come over here,” he said as the clock hit 2 a.m. Tokyo time during his phone interview.

“It’s kind of a mixed story. I needed a change in my life to motivate myself to push forward. The first step was coming to Japan. Then, I actually found there was a Temple University in Tokyo, and it was probably a 10-15 minute bike ride from the apartment that I rented. So it was a lot by luck that I actually found the school. But once I did and realized what they offered, it pushed me in the right direction and where I’m going now.”

Settling in

Temple University, Japan Campus (TUJ) is the oldest and largest foreign university in that country. It was founded in 1982 and has since developed into a nationally recognized institution that offers a wide range of programs, including core undergraduate degrees and individual subjects ranging from law to business and education.

Including its participants in Corporate Education and English-training programs, TUJ has an enrollment of about 3,300 students that hail from approximately 60 countries, including Japan, the United States, East and Southeast Asia, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Europe.

It is an English-language education where students can obtain American undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Given that geology studies necessitated fluent Japanese at a local university, Guild chose business as his career path. And, given that he had focused on guaranteed transfer classes while at CCA, mainly in science and math, all of his credits transferred when he enrolled at TUJ.

Guild currently has one more year to complete before he’s slated to graduate with his International Business degree. He’s also in talks to join a company as an intern this summer.

“Tokyo is a perfect place for networking,” he said. “I never really thought about corporations and really big business, but that’s basically what it is out here. And if you ever had the idea to travel and see a lot of places on a business trip, this is a place to make connections to get those types of jobs.”

Outside of the classroom, he’s been able to meet a wide array of people, from the animate crowd he only imagined before coming to Japan to veterans like himself. Guild serves as an advocate for veterans in a TUJ club when he’s not going to class.

“The people I meet every day just surprise me,” he said.

Other side of the coin

Morgan Rose Nolen was the restless sort herself, and given her longstanding fascination with Asian culture that started at an early age, finding her way to Tokyo paved by her grandmother. The latter had grown up in the Philippines and, while a Catholic woman, was open to other spiritual practices that she began to share with Nolen over time.

“She was going to psychics. She’d get readings done. She did all these things,” Nolen recalled. “And she came from a country where there were shamans and mediums and all that. As I got older, she would tell me about those things and would tell me that I could do things like that. I was always confused by that, but as I got older, I realized what she was talking about.”

So did Nolen’s sister, Olivia, who was a year older. Soon, both girls were fascinated by the Japanese practice of Shinto and its various sects and would embed those tenets into their lives – and travels.

“My interest did start back in America,” Nolen said. “I did research on it and learned about it. And here in Japan, I’ve gotten a first-hand look at it.”

Nolen spent her freshman year at Aurora’s Smoky Hill High School before transferring to Colorado Connections Academy. She had the opportunity at both schools to take Japanese lessons and found the language fascinating and the culture dating back thousands of years something she was eager to explore.

Her standardized test scores prevented immediate enrollment at TUJ, and she filed that possibility away as she enrolled at CCA in 2010 at the Colorado Film School. Initially, she had designs on exploring writing and film. Soon, she realized it wasn’t what she wanted to do and began to pursue a Fine Arts curriculum while trying to discover a true calling.

Severe stomach issues prompted her to take online courses during her final three semesters at CCA, culminating in Spring 2014.

“I loved it at CCA. There were a few professors I absolutely loved there and I learned a lot,” Nolen said.

Yet, one day she was perusing the Internet when she stumbled upon a page about TUJ, and it recalibrated her thought process. “I remembered how much I wanted to be there.”

But the trip almost didn’t come to pass because of her illness. A Japanese physician at the University of Colorado Hospital provided encour...
Transfers  From Page 1

agement, telling Nolen that he was confident that getting away from genetically-modified foods, gluten and chemicals that are replete in U.S. foods and adapting to a Japanese diet would make her healthier.

“I got on that plane to Japan and I was actually pretty sick on my way here,” Nolen said in a late-night phone interview from her dormitory in the Tokyo suburb of Itabashi, one of 23 wards in the city. “I wasn’t sure if I was going to be OK. But coming to Japan, my doctor was right.”

Nolen still has bouts with illness, including some days when she said she can’t get out of bed because she’s in too much pain. But she hopes to inspire others battling illness, just as much as she’s driven to help people through her chosen profession.

Somewhere to fit in

Nolen, 21, is on a dual track while in Tokyo. There’s learning Japanese and practicing her priestess training in Toronto and will be joining Nolen in Japan later this summer.

That prospect seemed fantastical just a few years ago while at CCA. “I don’t know if I would have believed it,” she admitted. “Sometimes I don’t even believe I’m in the middle of Tokyo right now.”

Some of her friends from back home still don’t understand her chosen path, but overall, she hasn’t met much resistance to her choices. Nolen accepts that there are people who won’t believe what it is she is doing, but because she’s so passionate and it’s her own choice, she’s unaffected by those skeptics.

“It’s easy to discern her happiness at the situation, even through a cellphone connection.”

“It’s been a complete change. It’s incredible,” she said. “Everything here is very convenient. In Aurora, I would have to drive everywhere. There are busses and the light rail, but I never took public transportation. Everywhere I had to go was by car.

“Here in Japan,” she added. “Everything’s so convenient. In Aurora, I would have to drive everywhere. There are busses and the light rail, but I never took public transportation. Everywhere I had to go was by car.

She eventually hopes to be ordained as a priestess under an eclectic pagan order that follows Konkokyo religion as the base of the training. She attends a church regularly in Shiba, Japan, and consults often with its priestess.

Here, training includes “working with different deities from different pantheons that a lot of people don’t know about” or only know in mythology.

“I do a lot of spiritual work for people. I do readings. I’m working on a small business for when I graduate college, a metaphysical store doing spiritual medium work for people,” she said. “Here in Japan, it’s very common. Unlike America, where people do medium and shaman work and aren’t very accept-

People are very friendly and polite. They help you if you just reach out to them.”

Helping people is Nolen’s underlying goal, too, as she continues, then finishes her priestess training and hopefully opens that planned metaphysical shop.

“Going across the Pacific Ocean, I had to grow up really fast, and with other things, too, like studying to become a priestess. I still have a lot more growth, but coming to Tokyo has helped me.”

– Morgan Rose Nolen

Nolen and Guild were unaware that two former CCA students were studying at TUJ. They both laughed when told that a third was expected to begin his studies in Tokyo beginning in Fall 2016.

At a recent CCA transfer fair, the university’s senior admissions counselor was on hand discussing with attendees the possibility of studying overseas.

‘Start here, finish there?’ It’s something adventurous CCA students at least can stop and consider tangibly. Guild, for his part, highly recommends to fellow veterans exploring the notion, if interested. “It’s a good chance to use your G.I. Bill,” he explained. “You can find places that actually are affordable using your G.I. Bill, living out here, going to school. And I can’t lie, it’s a pretty fun experience.”

Nolen made the transfer to Tokyo a priority item in her life and encourages those interested in doing something similar to go for it.

“I realized a long time ago that this life is short,” she said. “We don’t have a lot of opportunities to do what we want to do. And I know people back home who are my friends who want to go to Japan and may never get a chance.

“I have an opportunity that a lot of people don’t get or may not ever get. But I think if you have the chance to do it, or you’re thinking about doing it and you want it bad enough, go for it. That’s all there is to it.

“I had doubts about coming here. I had worries about money, which I still do. I was worried about a bunch of different things. But at the end of the day, I knew if I didn’t do it, I’d regret it.”
New arrangement allows Roon to finish bachelor’s for free – by age 19, then leave Metro St. to pursue advanced degree

Someday, Eric Roon may be seen as a pioneer.

He’s on the path to becoming the first student in Colorado to earn a bachelor’s degree while still participating in the state’s innovative concurrent enrollment program.

Starting next fall, he’ll be attending Metropolitan State University of Denver, fresh off of his graduation at the Community College of Aurora.

And, thanks to an agreement recently brokered between Aurora Public Schools and Metro State, Roon, 17, will spend the next two years completing his four-year degree under concurrent enrollment rules. The sum effect of that arrangement is that his bachelor’s will have been earned free and clear of any personal financial obligation.

“Basically,” Roon said, “the school district will have paid for my entire personal financial obligation.

The substantial savings should come in handy at Roon’s desired next stop – Princeton, where his current plan is to earn master’s and doctoral degrees by the time he’s 24. Remarkably, should he begin his advanced degree studies, he’ll still be eligible as a ‘first-time, full-time college student,’ which broadens the scholar-

ship opportunities available.

“I’m incredibly grateful,” Roon said. “Before the Metro option was presented to me, I was really worried about how much I’d have to pay for college, because I was looking into Ivy League schools, and seeing what the application processes were. It was radical. The amount of money I’d have to spend for a four-year degree was kind of ridiculous. But now, with the Metro situation, I’m so happy there’s a program willing to sponsor students like this.”

Roon started attending CCA for what he thought was a one-and-done scenario as a high school freshman. He wanted to fulfill his language requirement by taking Japanese. “But then I took the idea of concurrent enrollment and really ran with it.”

There are no legislative restrictions limiting the number of concurrent enrollment courses students can take. But usually high school counselors or community college advisors spell out a realistic path to follow that normally builds up the course load incrementally.

“But we’re still small enough that we can look at each student individually,” noted Jeffrey Kenney, CCA’s manager of concurrent enrollment, “especially when we have exceptional cases like Eric.”

Given the positive experience in that CCA Japanese class, and considering Roon’s high score on the ACT, his counselor at Rangeview began working on the more expedited course of action.

Roon took courses both at CCA and at the high school, beginning his ramp-up in credits as a sophomore. Now, having just completed his junior year of high school, he currently stands one credit shy of an Associate of Science degree. He’ll fulfill that obligation this summer by taking Anatomy and Physiology II, and has been granted permission to walk in CCAs graduation ceremony May 9.

Concurrent enrollment and ASCENT in the past have exclusively been a means for students to earn community college credit. ASCENT students are technically still in high school for a fifth year while that degree is temporarily withheld.

“It’s never happened at a four-year institution before because the whole concurrent enrollment/ASCENT program is based around the idea that the state is going to reimburse the school district at the community college tuition rate,” Kenney explained. “And there have been some special cases with some of the four-years to bring the four-year tuition down to the community college rate.

“APS just happened to get a blanked one this year with their ASCENT students with Metro, so they’ve got about 20 CCA students they’re going to be sending over to Metro, where Metro’s charging just the community college rate.

“Eric will be unique in that he’s going over there as a concurrent enrollment student for a year and then as an ASCENT student the year after that.”

Kenney noted that of the nearly 40 graduates at CCA this May who are technically still in high school, only eight aren’t part of the fifth-year ASCENT program. Roon’s the only one who is still a junior, he added. And of the juniors in high school at CCA within concurrent enrollment, the highest credit total is in the 30-35 range. Roon will have 61 college credits by the time he exits CCA.

Still, Roon is quick to admit, that as a young student he had to have some remediation in math.

He called his current situation “the best possible opportunity that I can think of next to winning the Gates Millennium Scholarship,” which gives 1,000 students good-through-grading funding at any U.S. based, accredited college or university of their choice.

“As much as I’d like to think I’m a trailblazer, the concurrent enrollment program has been around for a while,” Roon said. “And hopefully this is just another step towards getting people funding to go to college.”
CRUNCH TIME

High school, college serve as endurance test for dual grad

People have told Chau Tran that she’s crazy and driven, given the remarkable workload she’s endured on the way toward obtaining two degrees in a two-week span this May.

“She’s been driven crazy,” she countered with a smile. “And she’s been a little of that.”

Tran needed 60 credits for a CCA degree, and during her sophomore and junior years at Gateway High School pushed herself to take up to 17 credit hours, or four to five concurrent enrollment classes, in conjunction with her seven-course high school schedule in order to make this impending double-dip a reality.

Tran got so proficient at fencing and cooking classes as relaxing breaks before squeezing in the homework – keeping one eye on the page and the other on making sure her dish didn’t burn. A typical school day for Tran would begin with her rising at 6 a.m. then beginning her first high school class at 7:30.

Once high school ended at 3:30, she would begin slogging in the homework she hadn’t already completed or perhaps one of those cooking classes – keeping one eye on the page and the other on making sure her dish didn’t burn.

CCA classes ran from 6-8:40 p.m., followed by 60-90 minutes of homework and, finally, some shut-eye.

“I still feel I got a chance to be a student, just because I was able to manage things better over time,” she said. “CCA was flexible with my schedule and, while I was used to homework being due every single day, with CCA, I’d have homework due every couple days to a week, so it was easier for me to balance.

“So I could do CCA work every other day and still have time for those after-school activities before my night classes.”

One other diversion for Tran the last couple years has been her steady involvement with Model United Nations (MUN). She was part of the 16-person delegation that represented CCA in New York during Spring Break at the National MUN Conference. Tran and fellow concurrent enrollment student Jessica Pineda on that trip were awarded Outstanding Position Paper in General Assembly session No. 2, yet another feather in her academic cap. Her audition as commencement speaker came two days after returning from New York. She is “immensely grateful” that she was selected, given the experiences and bonds she’s forged at the college.

“Honestly, CCAs graduation to me feels a lot more personal,” she explained. “Yes, I spend a lot more time with my high school peers. But the community I found here, got to explore and get close to is closer to my heart than my high school community. And I just can’t imagine being separated from it. CCAs graduation to me will be the most important in my life, but the most heartbreaking at the same time.”

Tran during CCAs commencement is being tasked with attempting to inspire a group of graduates that not only hail from all corners of the world, but to come up with a theme that resonates on a grand scale with a diverse group of graduates, despite her having just 18 years of life’s experience upon which to draw.

The way she’s chosen to hopefully make that connection is by talking about her own early struggles, which she believes will be relatable to everyone in some fashion.

She can speak about language barriers that can impede progress as the daughter of parents, who, while Tran was growing up, spoke Vietnamese exclusively. She can talk about that one class that seemingly serves as an unmovable obstacle or that one teacher who never seemed to understand.

And, she experienced long ago the mindset of others, telling her she wouldn’t succeed.

“I do know a great deal about the students who are graduating and have kind of been through the same struggles,” she said.

“So I’m sharing words of encouragement. I just want to push them, knowing how hard they’ve worked to get there. Even though we’re not the same age, the component of wanting to get somewhere in life is the same.”

The core theme will be focused on a shared journey, and having the power within to determine the future. “From here on out, it’s up to us to determine what we want to do with our potential,” she said.

“And no matter what path we choose to take, it’s our path alone.”

Which doesn’t sound the least bit crazy at all.

She currently plans to transfer to Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa, where she’ll pursue a biochemistry degree, having already completed many of her chemistry prerequisites.

“I won’t lie – there were some nights where I’d kind of have to be, ‘I don’t know what sleep’s like tonight,’ and just pull an all-nighter,” she admitted. “But most nights I was able to manage it. Since there’s a syllabus provided at the beginning of the year, I was able to plan out my assignments. It was just a lot of organization I had to learn along the way.”

Tran credited Jeff Kenney and Rachel Haag at the college and Don Keeley from Aurora Public Schools concurrent enrollment area for ensuring she didn’t bite off more than she could chew, even while she kept adding more to her plate.

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Chau Tran practices tossing up her graduation cap in celebration on the CentreTech campus. She’ll get an opportunity to repeat the same act twice in early May, first at CCA, then at Aurora’s Gateway High School. Tran also will serve as the college’s commencement speaker.
Two-Year Wonders

Five students share how they made it to the cusp of CCA graduation in a truncated period that’s rarer than you might think

Stephanie Cavanagh

Stephanie Cavanagh at times feels like a circus juggler minus all the makeup, given all of the competing responsibilities she must fit into a 24-hour day.

“I do,” she admitted, adding with a laugh, “and sometimes I feel like a juggler with the makeup.”

Cavanagh the last two years has balanced working for her husband’s landscaping business, a part-time job in an elementary school and her 10-year-old daughter’s many extracurricular activities with her desire to finish school – and quickly – at CCA.

She will walk in May’s commencement ceremony and complete her studies this summer, two years after returning to school after a lengthy absence.

A high school dropout who then earned her GED, Cavanagh lasted only about a half-semester at the University of Northern Colorado – “I wasn’t mature enough to focus on school” – before her life veered off into work, marriage and motherhood.

At age 34, she decided to enroll at CCA after she worked in an elementary school and reinforced her existing passion about wanting to teach young kids.

The practical experience of her school job allowed enough time for Cavanagh to take online classes, which provided the flexibility to navigate all of her other responsibilities and, simultaneously, still earn college credits.

She was starting completely from scratch from that latter standpoint.

“It was a little nerve-wracking because I did feel like I was going to be the oldest person in my group, but, as it turned out, there were older people taking classes, as well. And specifically with the online classes seemed to have an older group because they do have such busy schedules. I also was nervous because I would be taking so much time away from my family.”

Her daughter, Aspen Grace, is a “momma’s girl,” Cavanagh said. So, shutting her to dance and soccer practices during the week and games on weekends would need to occur, regardless, of time constraints.

The summer months – which Cavanagh filled with CCA courses – were buttressed by duties as a secretary, keeping the books for husband Steven’s business. But, at least that came during the summer-school break at her job.

“These days when I finish my classes and it’s time to put down my textbooks, my daughter screams happily. So while she’s encouraged me to get my degree, there’s a sacrifice that affected her too. But she’s been awesome.”

At the height of her juggling act, Cavanagh balanced four CCA classes, her part-time position at Aurora’s Sunrise Elementary and ensuring that her child’s schedule was worked into the mix.

“Time management is probably the key to it all,” Cavanagh said. “Knowing what you can do and how much times it needs. That’s why I really focused on the online courses because I had that flexibility if I need to wake up early and do some reading or if it’s the middle of the night, I can do things whenever I need to around my family’s schedule.”

Summer classes meant perhaps doing classwork on the porch while Aspen swam in the pool a few feet away, or a study session while her daughter spent time with friends.

“We find little ways to balance it all out,” she added.

No doubt, quiet time is difficult to come by for mom, but she figures it’ll be all worth it when she earns her associate degree in Elementary Education and her family witnesses the sacrifices she’s made turn into a diploma.

This will be her first commencement ceremony and, outside of fears of tripping up the stairs on the way to the stage, is filled with pride that numerous family members will be on hand to witness her accomplishment.

“It will be a really exciting moment for me and my entire family. My husband’s always talking about how proud he is. I know my daughter’s very proud of me, and I’m kind of hoping that when she sees that end moment, it will be something she looks back and remembers me for and looks towards as far as her own growth.

“It lets her know that she can do anything at any time of her life.”

Cavanagh already has started classes toward her bachelor’s with Regis University. So now she’s combining the work of two colleges with all the other facets of her life.

Two nights of soccer practice. Two nights of dance. Soccer games on the weekend. Aspen’s student council and choir is wedged somewhere in there. Plus, managing the finances of the family business.

“This is the craziest it’s been,” she said with a hearty laugh.

“But no problem.”

Shukri Adan

The summer semester benefited Shukri Adan in her attempts to complete her CCA experience in just two years.

Last summer, she took American Government, World Mythology and Sociology to speed up the academic clock.

“I personally really liked the summer. The teachers weren’t as strict – and I’m fine with strict teachers. But it was just so laid back,” said Adan, who doubles as a work-study in the CCA Financial Aid Office.

“There was a lot of room for people and it was much faster, where you were always getting work,” she added, referring to the condensed class schedule.

“We had less homework, but more classwork, and I felt the information was being distributed better instead of having homework every night and taking notes in class.”

Adan would recommend summer as a useful tool to accumulate credits faster.

“I would tell people to definitely take advantage of it, because even though it’s such a short period of time, not as long as normal classes, I think you get the same benefit from it, really. And you finish your degree in a shorter time, which everybody wants.”

Adan wasn’t sure what she wanted to do when she graduated from Aurora’s Gateway High School and felt spending additional money at a four-year institution didn’t make sense while figuring that out.

Her sister, Fadumo, had gone to CCA prior to attending the University of Colorado-Denver (UCD), which appeared to be a solid blueprint to follow.

It wasn’t until Adan took a Chemistry class that she recognized she wanted to either go to medical school or study engineering. She started with 12 credits her first semester in Fall 2013, with a high of 16 this spring.

“At first, coming in first semester, taking 12 credits probably wasn’t the best idea. There was a large workload. But after that first semester I got into the gear of things and it got easier. It’s really been an up and down thing. But I think if you stay really consistent, it’s not that bad.”

Working in the Financial Aid Office while attending classes helped her time-management skills and gave her a window into the experiences of students of all kinds.

“My friends here are mostly on the two-year track, but most people when they walk in, I think take a little bit longer. But I understand. They might not be in the U.S. that long and have to take ESL classes, for example. But overall, I’d say people take three to four years to complete.”

Even Adan’s plans had to be modified slightly. Originally, the plans was for her to once again take summer courses and lock in that two-year finish.

“However, because the Chemistry and Biology classes she needs to graduate aren’t offered in the upcoming summer session (that is being addressed by the college with more expansive summer offerings to come in future years), she will likely need to backfill her CCA credits as she transfers to University of Colorado-Denver.”

The plan now is to transfer the missing classes at CCA from UCD and obtain her associate degree while she attends UCD.
**Stephanie Nieto**

Life has a funny way of getting in the way of the most well-intentioned of plans. And so it was for Stephanie Nieto.

She was on the cusp of a bachelor’s degree from the American Music and Dramatics Academy in Los Angeles when she became pregnant with her son, Eliam, and moved to be near her husband’s Colorado roots. She spent a year as a stay-at-home mother before deciding to return to school.

Problem was, none of her credits transferred, because her acting school was non-accredited. “So I was basically starting from scratch,” she said.

Given that new start, Nieto opted for a new career path — dentistry.

And, because of her false start, and starting over at age 22, she felt compelled to plow through her education as quickly as possible. She’ll receive an Associate of Arts and already has been accepted to the University of Colorado-Denver. She plans on applying for dental school after obtaining her bachelor’s.

“My family didn’t entirely understand their way to support her, even if they didn’t entirely understand her dedication to earning a diploma,” said Fajardo, who attended William H. Smith High School prior to joining CCA. “They gave me good words and encouragement. I would go there with my son and bring him books and apps to learn numbers, colors and letters. He would be like, ‘Mommy, are we doing homework?” every time we’d go to Starbucks.”

Nieto admitted there was some trepidation coming back to school at CCA after her L.A. experience.

“I was definitely a little worried about going back, about feeling too old in my class-rooms and with other students. I was worried about starting so late and felt like I’d wasted a lot of time.

“Once I got to CCA and saw the huge diversity in ages and had people in my classes way older than me, I didn’t feel that way anymore.”

Nieto had been warned that her starting a new degree would have to work. All she was doing was an administrator in a local small business, in addition to taking a couple of CCA classes that will complete her credits necessary to graduate. She took advantage of a lighter course load that was possible by attending summer sessions.

“Straight out of high school I think that’s when you should take the chance and be a full-time college student, if you can, because that’s when you have the energy. I know I got a scholarship and some people have to pay for it early on. But I would suggest starting off big, if possible. You’ll be done before you know it.”

— Lisa De La Torre

**Leslie Fajardo**

The hardest parts about Leslie Fajardo’s journey toward CCA graduation were skipping her family’s vacation to El Salvador or hanging out with friends in order to take summer classes.

The motivation to be the first in her family to complete a college degree proved stronger.

“My family didn’t entirely know what it was like, but they tried to encourage me in all the ways they could,” said Fajardo, who attended William H. Smith High School prior to joining CCA. “They gave me good words of advice. ‘You can do it. It’s not that hard. But, truth is, it is hard sometimes.’

Her family helped pay for books and provided rides when she didn’t have a car. That was their way to support her, even if they didn’t entirely understand her dedication to earning a diploma.

Fajardo augmented her schooling by working an internship for Aurora Public Schools in its Communications Department. She would read articles, write stories, and edit.

“Right now, what drives me is that I can be somebody and help change the world,” Fajardo said confidently. “I want to major in Communications, and I see that as an opportunity to help people by telling their stories once I’m in the field.”

Her CCA experience includes 16-credit semesters in addition to participating in the summer sessions.

“I made sure I had set times to study, not when I got to it,” she noted. “Two hours a day was devoted to study. And while there were things I wanted to do that were fun, I put my priorities first, and school was more important.”

The CCA commencement is a tangible reward for that work ethic.

She views her continuing academic career as a way to “have more of a life” than various family members who completed fourth grade, middle school, or high school alone.

“I think it will be a really big milestone in my life and my family’s lives. It’s something to be proud of. As the oldest grandchild and daughter, people look up to me, so I think it will be an achievement since I’m doing it before everyone else. I also know now what it’s like and can tell my siblings about what they’ll need to do and how to overcome things.”

— Stephani Nieto

**Two-Year Wonders**

friends not to overload herself in the summer with too many courses, since the curriculum is condensed into a shorter time frame.

But she felt she had couldn’t take a wait-and-see approach. Nieto also believed that if she sat out for a summer or a semester she would start over-thinking her new career path. And it probably would have taken me an extra year if I hadn’t done the summer and it would have put me a year behind. That was definitely important in the career I’m considering.”

For a brief period at CCA, Nieto’s old and new academic worlds collided: She served as a cast member in Fall 2014 in the CCA production of the play “Mockingbird.”

Changing potential career decisions isn’t unusual for a high school student. Liset De La Torre Hernandez was no different while attending Rangeview High School, until an economics class put her on the path to a future in accounting.

“I like numbers. I like sitting down with paperwork and adding stuff up and seeing what’s missing,” she explained. “I’ve already taken accounting classes at CCA and it confirmed that’s what I like.”

Hernandez entered CCA with three concurrent enrollment courses, so she had a slight head start on quickly finishing her studies at CCA. Still, right after her May 2013 graduation, she didn’t waste any time and began pursuing a degree in two years.

She’ll transfer to Metropolitan State University of Denver in the fall after walking in CCA’s commencement ceremony having earned an associate degree with a Business designation.

“What helped me get it done in two years was that my first four semesters at CCA, I didn’t have to pay out of pocket because I got an ASCENT scholarship. It paid for everything, including my books, so I didn’t have to work. All I was doing was school and I could concentrate on that alone.”

Taking two summer classes each year proved helpful.

“People I graduated with in high school still have a year left of core courses, because not only did they not take college courses in high school, but they took summer off right out of high school and I didn’t. I took classes in summers because I wanted to be done in two years, because I want to get my career started faster. And if I took longer, I feel I’d start to get unmotivated toward the end.”

Hernandez more recently has worked as an administrator in a local small business, in addition to taking a couple of CCA classes that will complete her credits necessary to graduate. She took advantage of a lighter course load that was possible by attending summer sessions.

“Straight out of high school I think that’s when you should take the chance and be a full-time college student, if you can, because that’s when you have the energy. I know I got a scholarship and some people have to pay for it early on. But I would suggest starting off big, if possible. You’ll be done before you know it.”
A manila folder about a quarter-inch thick with paperwork sits within arm's reach of Richard Maestas' leather desk chair on CentreTech campus. It represents the beginning of the vice president of administration's journey at CCA more than five years ago.

Not one month into his new appointment, Maestas was informed of a mold issue at the Colorado Film School. He had to inquire about a potential move to alternate classrooms and, eventually, sign off on a remediation project.

"I thought, 'Holy cow, this is just the beginning?" he recalled with a laugh. "But it got a little bit better after that."

Maestas has essentially served as the college's "money man" during his tenure, which ends on May 31. He'll assume the position of regional vice president of Colorado Mountain College, where, undoubtedly, new, surprising challenges await.

That the folder from 2009 still sits on his desk serves as a reminder that anything can happen at any time. And there have been challenges, surely.

He can recall the time he stood behind then-President Dr. Linda Bowman at a press conference for support as the case of an unstable employee made headlines. Sitting in Cabinet after the Aurora theater shootings and being part of the decision-making process moving forward also resonates.

On a smaller scale, the box of tissues that also sits on his desk is more for the students to whom he's had to provide tough answers than for himself.

But much of Maestas' time at CCA has been dealing with financial health, growth and challenges. The revamped entryway and Student Services area at Lowry have his fingerprints on it, among other infrastructure projects.

State funding and tuition fees—which in terms of budgeting were a 65-35 split, respectively, and have since flipped in percentages—remain the biggest budgetary conundrum he has encountered during his tenure. Enrollment gains and tuition hikes were hoping for, but at least it's something they can work with to make the problem go away."

Maestas replaced the retiring Wes Geary upon his arrival at CCA. It was a natural fit for the longtime Aurora resident. And, through his steady work both for and within the system office, he was well aware of the environment into which he'd be joining.

Given that natural fit, leaving wasn't an easy decision.

"I feel that I've done a lot here and that the college is really financially healthy," he said. "Beyond that, it's almost six years and time for new challenges."

His position at Colorado Mountain College is newly created.

Maestas will be responsible for five unique campuses on the western slope and bringing those disparate elements together as one region will be part of his job description.

He'll also be asked to implement recently completed strategic goals.

Oudenhoven said Colorado Mountain College is "gaining an experienced senior administrator, collaborative colleague and wonderful person."

Maestas has been tasked with oversight over Facilities, Information Technology, Fiscal Affairs, as well as third-party vendors including the bookstore and cafeteria.

When he first arrived at CCA, he supervised Financial Aid, too, but that ended when the college filled the vacancy for a vice president of Student Services.

Maestas said he takes comfort knowing that the college is in a better place as he leaves than when he began. He pointed to the stability of senior leadership and the growth of college reserves that now eclipse $12.5 million – more than double the figure when he arrived – as examples of that improved state.

Of course, those reserves are essentially for a rainy day.

Just don't let it get too damp or here comes that mold again.

"You often hear that CCA is like a family environment, and it really is," Maestas said. "I've been to a couple other community colleges that were bigger and it's really very different here. It's a small metro college that's now becoming a larger metro college, and that closeness can really be seen here.

"It's been really nice."

Prior to joining CCA, he worked in fiscal roles at Colorado College, Pikes Peak Community College, for the Colorado Community College System, and Community College of Denver.

"I think the thing I'll miss most at CCA is the problem-solving aspect and having the ability to help folks get past them," Maestas said. "I think I'll can live with. It may not be what they were hoping for, but at least it's something they can work with to make the problem go away."

"Time for new challenges"

Maestas spent more than five years as VP overseeing college finances
Negative outcomes associated with high-risk professions such as police, fire and emergency-services jobs are well documented. Substance abuse, chronic stress disorders and mental illness represent some of those potential repercussions. People choosing these professions have been found to have high rates of suicide and divorce.

In an attempt to “rescue the rescuers,” CCA’s Fire Academy on April 18 unveiled a new approach to its cadets designed to embed coping mechanisms on the front end of training with the hope of preventing negative results on the back end on the job.

CCA is the first academy in the Denver metro area to introduce these techniques, as devised by members of the Center for Performance Excellence at the University of Denver. The introduction was designed to serve as a “beta test” to determine whether these methods have merit and would be included in all future Fire Academy curriculum.

The training, as presented by a small group of master’s students from an offshoot of DU’s Graduate School of Professional Psychology, has been formulated over the last two years, including the last year working with high-risk professionals, such as firefighters.

The concept of providing help to professionals while already in the field has been a longstanding one, including efforts such as the Critical Incident Debrief Team and the Firefighter Assistance and Support Team (F.A.S.T.). But those are used in response to events that already have occurred for workers already in the field.

Introducing coping methods on the academy level is a concept that has only first begun to creep into military training over the last six years or so, according to DU’s Ryan Marshall, and only recently appeared in EMS/fire-police training in certain areas of the country.

The April 18 exercise ran about four hours and focused on one aspect of so-called resiliency training: coping mechanisms that attempted to combat chronic stress.

Classroom skills introduced included tactical energy management, vigilance, performance imagery, re-laxing training with a biofeedback component, building concentration skills, the application of visualization, and applying mental routines to high stress situations.

The day’s events ended with a “mental cross-fit competition,” which paired physical and cognitive stressors to demonstrate how the two are tied together.

Dave Wilson, a retired, 35-year veteran of the Aurora Fire Department, and the drill ground coordinator for CCA’s Fire Science Academy, was the faculty in charge on site.

While admitting that he wished the training was available when he started “to deal with the stuff that I had to go through,” and impressed by the “scientific approach,” Wilson felt more of the benefits need to be proven on a larger scale before he could endorse its wide-scale use.

In order to test the physical-mental link between stressors and the need to control one’s reaction in a tangible fashion, cadets were asked to perform physical activities, such as placing bare feet in ice water or carrying another cadet up and down the hall, in order to raise heart rate, blood pressure and breathing levels. They were then given mental acuity tests during which they were asked to employ the coping mechanisms they had been taught earlier in the day to bring their heart rates, etc., down.

“I would like to see it taught at the beginning of the class, or perhaps introduced a few times during the semester, then see at the end if they were able to sustain that level of retention and whether they could perform,” Wilson explained.

The best cadets in the academy (i.e., those seriously considering careers in the profession), in Wilson’s view, reaped the most rewards from the exercise. And given that each training cohort only produces several graduates ultimately staying in fire/EMS/police careers, the benefits may only prove useful long-term to that select few.

Still, he noted, “It was pretty eye opening to me that there’s a scientific approach to it now, instead of just sitting and talking to someone about what they saw and did and how they felt about it. You could actually see your results through the testing process and how stressors changed the reasoning level.”

The Community College of Aurora Foundation is launching a new scholarship funding initiative allowing participating students to graduate from the college debt free, an approach born from mounting student loan debt nationwide that’s hit $1.2 trillion.

The Aurora Gives Scholars program initially will pair the Foundation with Aurora LIGHTS Health Sciences Academic and Career Pathway at Aurora Central High School. The latter program leads economically disadvantaged students into health care professions.

Five students from the LIGHTS program beginning in 2015 will be guaranteed the scholarship funding necessary to complete an associate degree in two years or less, eliminating the need for student loans. Funding will cover the cost of tuition, books and fees, and Aurora Gives Scholars will receive a Google Chromebook.

The initial batch of Aurora LIGHTS graduating seniors selected for these scholarships likely will continue their health-sciences studies at CCA under the agreement.

“Aurora LIGHTS has been so enthusiastic about being able to provide its students debt-free access to the associates,” CCA Foundation Executive Director Gene Sobczak said. “And talking to funders and others working with these student populations, everyone is connecting with the message.”

The Foundation has launched a $500,000 fundraising initiative seeking to expand the campaign throughout Aurora Public Schools (APS), with a goal of sending 100 district students to CCA under the plan next year.

“The success of this program is contingent upon two factors: support from the school district to prepare its students for the transfer to CCA and support from our philanthropic community to fund it,” Sobczak said. “The initiative carries with it the additional benefit of being in alignment with one of the college’s stated goals, which is to increase the transfer rate from local schools.”

About 10,000 households throughout Aurora will be solicited to contribute to the plan offering debt-free access to an associate degree at CCA.

A press conference is scheduled on May 15 at 9:30 a.m. at Aurora Central High School to further publicize the program’s launch.

The Aurora Schools Federal Credit Union (ASFCU) is one of the first local businesses to embrace the debt-free concept, with a $5,000 donation to the campaign.

ASFCU also will be offering financial-literacy training to all Aurora LIGHTS students attending the college. Longtime CCA donors Leo and Michele Beserra are early contributors to the campaign, as well.

Other schools offering these types of scholarships, based on CCA Foundation research, typically are private universities with multi-million dollar endowments.

“We’re going to make this our rallying cry, and we believe it’ll resonate because it taps into people’s knowledge of the problems associated with mounting student loan debt,” Sobczak said. “The early response to a guaranteed debt-free associate degree has been extremely positive.”
The creative accomplishments of the Community College of Aurora’s Art & Design students were celebrated April 17-30 at the Donna Moravec Gallery. The show highlighted student work created in studio classes encompassing 2D, 3D and digital work.

Two new staff members were hired and an adjunct promoted during April. Ashley Simpson was named Education Department chair and Brandon Williams History faculty. Daniel Schweissing, a leader in professional development activities in English as a Second Language since 2010, has been hired full time in that department.

Amie Quist, who filled administrative assistant duties in numerous college areas, is leaving the college May 15 to move to Michigan with her family. Quist was a student, temporary employee and full-time admin at CCA.

Important updates from various academic and student affairs areas were imparted during the April 17 “R-U-Ready?” meeting. The session was created as an information-sharing session for CCA staff assisting with enrolling students for the Fall 2015 semester.

The Office of Outreach and Recruitment hosted two events targeting specific groups of students last month. Camino al Colegio on April 11 was an opportunity for 50 Spanish-speaking students and their families to learn about CCA, paying for college and more. Admitted Student Day on April 25 focused on converting admits into enrollments and allowed new students to come and connect with other students who have been admitted to CCA.

Outreach and Recruitment also hosted a week of events in April entitled “Registration Nation.” Activities were aimed at students who registered for summer and fall semester during the first available week in an attempt to promote early registration and year-to-year retention.

Career Services hosted a successful Career Expo on April 22 at the Lowry campus. More than 60 employers were on hand to meet students.

Director of Career Services Barbara Lindsay has developed a relationship with the Undersecretary of the United States Department of Personnel Management; as a result, six federal agencies attended the Career Expo. These agencies also hosted a private session following the Career Expo for CCA’s veteran students. The Undersecretary also hosted a session for students on “Preparing the Federal Resume” on April 21.

Accessibility Services, in partnership with Aurora Public Schools, Cherry Creek School District and community agencies serving people with disabilities, hosted a successful Transition Fair on April 14. The Transition Fair provided opportunities for students with special needs to learn about programs and agencies that will help them plan their post-secondary transition to college or employment.

The CCA Math Club continued its recent speaker series April 30, with Dr. Alvaro Arias from the University of Denver giving a lecture on, “An Experimental Approach to Random Events and Gambling.” Arias has been at DU since 2001 and has authored several publications in pure mathematics.

CCA received a community partner award from the University of Denver Morgridge College of Education on April 24 at a community partner breakfast. The award recognizes CCA for providing DU graduate students in the Higher Education program excellent community college experiences through internships, graduate assistantships and sites for projects. This partnership has not only provided DU students with robust community college experiences for the last three years, but has created a pipeline of new, higher-education professionals for CCA and other community colleges.

Jovan Mays, Aurora’s poet laureate, performed during this spring’s Open Mic Night on April 30 in the Student Centre Rotunda at CentreTech. In addition to Mays’ performance, Open Mic Night – presented by The Office of Student Life – included free performances of all kinds, including drama, singing, creative writing, instrumental performances, film productions, and more.

CCA presented its annual spring Performing Arts Weekend at the Larry D. Carter on CentreTech campus May 1-2. Theater performances included scene selections from contemporary plays by Acting I students, and Acting II students tackling an excerpt from “Marcus is Walking” by Joan Ackermann. Musical selections included classical and contemporary piano and voice solos by CCA’s private music students.

A scholarship to cover books and supplies to needy students is now available. The application window runs through June 26 and can be accessed via www.ccaurora.edu/bookscholarship.

A public-speaking competition was held April 24 that included 51 students giving persuasive speeches to numerous speaking panels staffed by CCA faculty and staff. Austin Roth was the winner from among the 11 finalists that represented a diverse, multi-national group. Corwin Cantin finished second, followed by Casey Hodges. Roth represented CCA at the Denver/Metro-Wide-Speaking Competition held at the Larry D. Carter Theater on May 1 against competitors from Community College of Denver, Arapahoe Community College, Front Range Community College and Red Rocks Community College and, again, was the winner. Roth’s speech was entitled; “The Right to Die: Your Choice.” Azalea Hagerty of Red Rocks finished second; Kathryn Transfitter of CCD was third.

Victor Andersen was honored as CCA Outstanding Faculty in April’s meeting of the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education (SBCCOE).

Students, staff and faculty are encouraged to “let out their inner child” during the CCA Fun Day scheduled for May 13 from noon to 2:30 p.m. between the North and West quads at Lowry. The even will include food, games and entertainment.

Ellen Sandlian, a post-Civil War American Literature scholar, presented her findings on H.P. Lovecraft during an Outstanding American Literature Honors Lecture in the Classroom Building at CentreTech on April 30.

The LatinX Student Alliance and School of Professional Studies (SPS) celebrated its second annual “Graduation Fiesta” on May 1 in the CentreTech Rotunda. The event included dinner, words of encouragement, a student speech, keynote address, and awards and certificates – all in Spanish. LatinX and the SPS dean’s office collaborated on the festivities.

The fourth annual “Crime Scene Investigation: Aurora” project concluded April 19 with the usual mock trial; yet, for the first time, that trial was held in the new courtroom at the Center for Simulation. Departments such as Anthropology, Criminal Justice, Paralegal, and Theater were involved in the project.

Translation and Interpretation joined the mix this year to help with a courtroom scenario during which non-English speaking characters needed help during the legal proceedings. Paralegal students served as attorneys for both sides. Margaret Uchner and Tony Tilger supervised.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Questioning, and Allied (LGBTQA) Alliance organized a pair of successful events, the first around the national “Day of Silence” campaign and the other a movie night that drew about 30 attendees.

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Oh, what a ‘Night’

Psychology Faculty Jenn Dale addresses the audience during the seventh-annual “Take Back The Night,” an international event and non-profit organization whose mission is ending sexual violence in all forms. CCA’s event was held April 23 in the CentreTech Rotunda. Program participants this year included Kimba Langas, executive director of Free the Girls; Chris Turnquist of the Parker Academy of Martial Arts; and Molly Sarubbi, who provoked thought with her presentation, “How Do You Say ‘No More’ to Sexual Violence?” The Blue Bench Project also provided information on bystander intervention.

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Clockwise from top: A police officer’s silhouette is created by a smoky, light-filled room during the March 24 Save-A-Cop exercise at Building 900 on Lowry campus; Amanda Pajonk and Kristen Carlson were honored by the Colorado Community College System on April 7 as CCA’s Rising Stars for their outstanding contributions to college activities and community service; CCCS President Dr. Nancy McCallin answered questions from staff and faculty during an April 2 visit to the CentreTech Rotunda; Political Science faculty member Dr. Bobby Pace shares a laugh with delegates Justin Taylor and Keyara Cooper at a welcome-back event for the National Model United Nations Conference participants April 15; AirServ was one of 60 companies participating in the April 22 Career Expo, held at Lowry.