Law & Disorder

ALCOHOL NEARLY KILLED ROBERT JOHNSON. HIS REMARKABLE TURNAROUND IS ONE FOR THE BOOKS.

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It was the local hangout, the hub of activity, the center of social interaction. At a house on a corner off Monaco St. and Martin Luther King Blvd. in Denver’s Park Hill neighborhood, laughs between friends were shared. So was trouble.

These days, that house serves as a reminder for CCA student Robert Johnson. He makes sure he drives by it often to remember where he came from and what he endured.

It was his childhood home. Remove all those days and nights partying there, of which there were plenty, and it was the place his parents ultimately split, and the place he hit rock bottom before the bank seized the property and sent him onto the streets a homeless man.

No matter what his life threw at him – his own divorce, loss of jobs, deteriorating health – somehow, this building structure was a magnetic force, with the lure of the home repeatedly pulling Johnson back. It remains as a symbol of all that has
there on the corner? Wow, you look good. Congratulations.”

Johnson still insists that doors are opened for him. But he’s well past
the days of arriving early and late to the liquor store.

At CCA, the law library often is
closed for the night when Johnson arrives, prompting him to seek help
getting it unlocked so he can focus
on his studies. At 55, he finally has
found his groove in life, just as he
lost the desire to pursue his lips and
fill his stomach with another can of
Schlitz or Magnum.

I think of all the time I’ve wast-
ed, and I look at normal people
and think, “I could have been doing
that,” he said. “Now, I take my kids
to basketball games, a lot of stuff I
toteness of a top-tier aca-
demic program at the University of
California-San Diego that could be
his one-way ticket back to normalcy.
Johnson sent his transcripts, took a
test and was ready to pursue a new
career path. But it never occurred.
“Just had a blowout, drinking
before the program started,” he said.
It had an even deeper impact on
his marriage. “My wife was through,”
he added. “She had just had it.”

Johnson speaks pridefully about a
recent case of mistaken identity. He
had stopped by a friend's house in
that same old neighborhood where
groups had gathered so often. His
buddy's mom had seen him often
through the years; nevertheless,
she thought it was a stranger at the
doorstep when he arrived. The sto-
ing naturally. Johnson never before
out that because of the onset of de-
generative bone disease that one of
his legs was shorter than the other,
causing the awkward gait.
The mail facility job abruptly
ended when Johnson brought a bag
with beer and tried to store it in
his locker. A co-worker noticed the
back of Johnson's mind he’d always
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The question, then, is why John-
son chose to binge drink over a
possible life reboot. He answered
candidly, “To be in that program
you had to be really on point. It was
really serious. I would be a paralegal
in three months. I just wasn’t ready
for it.”

Nor, for what came next. His fam-
ily clandestinely moved out, leaving
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Johnson alone. A restraining order against him was procured. His children were young, just 8, 5 and 3 at the time, and the close ties he had built with them were severed.

His despair was reflected in his activities. “Get up and cap a beer for breakfast and just keep drinking until I went to sleep, really,” he said.

Rock bottom was when he arrived back in Park Hill and the house one last time. “I’m sleeping in the bed that I slept in when I was 5 years old. The same bed. The same room.”

His only solace was a good buzz. Greeting the liquor store manager as he opened the store occurred during this dark period. Only, the problems he had with his hip during his Post Office days had begun to spread to both hips and both knees. He looked deformed. He felt awful.

“I knew the drinking was going to kill me,” he admitted. “I could barely walk. I had just had one operation on my hip and now my knees had atrophied. People were asking me if I was born like that. Do you have polio?”

In actuality, the continued alcohol use was destroying the cartilage in his joints. Drinking wasn’t just for the emotional pain anymore. It was to salve bones rubbing on bones from the erosion.

Ironically, the last job Johnson held before making the revelatory decision to seek help and take recovery seriously was as a brewing specialist for Coors, making Keystone and Coors Extra Gold.

The last task he’d ever do during one of his shifts involved climbing a ladder to the top of the huge kettles for a quality check one last time. Johnson would have to break off a broom to help navigate that slippery slope with his broken-down body. The plant manager saw his struggles and told him not to come back until he had medical clearance.

“I was pretty much to the curb, at ground zero. I was through. Nothing left. My spirit was broken. I cared about my kids. That’s what killed me. I knew I needed to make a change and go get help.”

Johnson had tried rehabilitation before but was experiencing a particularly dark period at the time and it didn’t take. His improved mindset to take it seriously was driven in part by an added caveat: his mother was forced into assisted living with dementia and the bank had closed on his childhood home. Literally, there was nowhere to go anymore, except for help.

For 18 months, he experienced intense therapy, worked and lived in transitional housing and began to piece his life back together through the help of Denver Rescue Mission and its Crossing facilities.

“They were just everything. I bought into the program. I quit drinking. I prayed to God he would take away my desire to drink. And I’ve been clean four years.”

One part of the rehab process Johnson feared, though, was reconnecting with his family to talk about the mistakes, and progress, he’d made. Johnson through a friend had heard his wife had returned to the state and was going back to school at the University of Colorado. Johnson’s chaplain assigned to his case warned him that there would be ill feelings from those he’d left behind. His family hadn’t seen him for seven years and it was likely that, at least initially, open arms would remain closed.

Yet, it never got to that point.

One day, about eight months into his Rescue Mission experience, Johnson was checking out some books at a library on Welton St. He noticed when he returned to the Crossing facility that he’d left his wallet on the counter at the library, and since it was a Saturday, he would have little time to retrieve it. A friend was about to hop into his car and Johnson asked if he could get a ride to pick up his belongings.

Standing at the library counter a few minutes later, the woman behind the counter said his name aloud to confirm receipt of his lost item.

Suddenly, a voice rang out, “Bobby?”

Coincidentally, Johnson’s estranged family was in Denver for a jazz festival and had stopped at that same library at that exact moment. His wife was standing right beside him at the counter asking about a book. His kids were in the magazine section milling around.

“I thought, ‘God works in mysterious ways.’ But I was just so happy because it was weighing on me.”

As far as his family knew, Johnson still had been clinging to his old ways. But what they saw that day was a clear-eyed man, dressed nicely, with a fresh haircut.

It was the look of change.

There was anger and wariness over the next few weeks and months that needed to be explored between Johnson and his family. But after seven years, he had the chance to work on that relationship at a time when he was on the path to self-sufficiency.

Johnson graduated from the Rescue Mission’s intensive rehab program in December 2012. He has since had the opportunity to watch one daughter go to college, another daughter run track, and a son play elite water polo. The relationship with his wife is cordial even though they remain apart.

“My family forgave me,” he said, wistfully.

Johnson didn’t bolt the second time the prospect of completing a paralegal degree was presented. He arrived at CCA needing 30 credits, or 10 classes, to complete his coursework. He remained serious about his academics, even making up work after taking time off to get his knees fixed surgically.

Acceptance into the prestigious Fullbridge program came with a full fellowship scholarship attached – and no wonder. His application traced his life story.

But the selection body obviously saw potential inside the dramatic events of his life, since only 25 community college students were selected statewide.

Classes in the program were intense. A rocket scientist was Johnson’s mentor. But he survived giving presentations, writing emails and operating nine hours a day for four weeks within an intense business environment.

Johnson has faced worse pressures, of course. In Johnson’s words, perhaps 120 men started the three-phase recovery program he experienced at Denver Rescue Mission and “maybe five guys finished.”

At the same time, “If you finish, some of the stories some of these guys have, like mine, are of people going on to do big things.”

Johnson’s future is uncertain. He wants it to include working for a non-profit, but life has taught him there are no guarantees.

Recently, he’s spoken at high schools in Littleton and Centennial about his experiences with the goal of providing them life lessons they can use on their journeys.

His core message: “I had been drinking for so long it not only affected my judgment but my life. And I couldn’t see how out of control it was until I was sober and had a clear head to see things.”

Johnson now carries a coin marking his sobriety along with his notebooks and textbooks.

The weight of his past is seemingly gone. “I just want to do one thing and finish strong,” he confided.

“That's it.”
Nathaniel Bork has entered the political arena as adjunct representative for CCA Faculty Senate. And in a sense, he’s a lone wolf in that side-job.

That political body – which is returning to the college for the first time since 1997 – is comprised of the college’s 51 full-time faculty, plus Bork.

The fact that he represents 380 individuals in monthly meetings means he’s not alone, even though physically he is on an island.

“It’s a lot of organizing people, getting people moving, negotiating, trying to work things out. It’s also a lot of saying, ‘Here’s a problem, here’s some ideas we have, what do you have?’ and trying to find middle ground,” Bork said.

The size of the task can’t help but be noticed. But he doesn’t appear intimidated by the challenge, especially given that he’s had issues he’s felt passionate about for a long time. The position is a means to express those views not only for him, but also in unison with others.

“It’s nice to actually be heard,” he said. “As an adjunct, when you’re just part of the sea and there’s so much above you, it’s easy to be ignored. So it’s nice to have a platform.”

Bork spearheaded the Adjunct Alliance, a collective body formed in September to discuss issues facing that population.

Still in the nascent stage of its development, the organization’s overriding goal is getting buy-in from the adjuncts and convincing them that their participation and involvement is important.

Two of Bork’s peers – Daniel Schweissing and Barbara McCoy – serve as adjunct representatives who can fulfill his duties when he can’t serve on committees.

Four others – Carla Campbell, Frank Vianzon, Justin Jones and Nancy Fromhart – are council members who are willing to serve on committees on behalf of the Alliance.

Food for thought

Some of the topics germane to the adjunct community, as voiced in a Nov. 18 meeting with President Betsy Oudenhoven and Vice President of Academic Affairs Janet Brandau:

• Selection of class books
• Professional development credit
• Compensation/benefits
• Academic standards vs. enrollment
• Credential renewal process
• Engaging the business community
• Office space allotment for Adjunct Alliance
• Clarification on payment schedules
• Institutional research on adjunct composition
• Internship Program logistics

The purpose and principles of the group is seeking representation throughout CCA in every group making decisions that affect them; advocating for an improvement in the support and standard of living for adjuncts; and helping ensure recommendations from the Colorado Community College System’s task force are implemented in a fashion that supports adjuncts’ concerns.

The vision statement of the Alliance is, “It’s Our College, Too,” while emphasizing that “adjuncts are the face of the college for many people,” Bork said.

Brandon Feres serves the Faculty Senate president and works closely with Vice President of Academic Affairs Janet Brandau. It was Feres’ invitation last spring that initially piqued Bork’s interest.

He was elected to represent the adjuncts and “been running ever since.”

Bork in early October had a one-on-one meeting with President Betsy Oudenhoven to voice adjuncts’ concerns and issues.

On Nov. 18, a group of adjuncts held its ‘MVP meeting’ with Brandau and Dr. Oudenhoven in attendance. A list of 19 inquiries from Bork’s constituents were compiled and forwarded to administrators in advance.

Some of the topics covered during the formal gathering touched on pay, professional development, hiring procedures, and business contacts.

“The administration’s been really fantastic through all of this,” Bork said. “It’s been really nice. I thought it would be much more like fruitlessly banging my head against the wall, where I’d either knock myself unconscious or the wall would come down. But it’s been friendly and open and there’s been an overriding feeling of, ‘What can we do for you?’”

Bork said that before the last few months, there was a palpable sense of isolation among many adjuncts. But having an avenue to participate has been helpful in quelling such feelings.

“It’s interesting, because I’m sort of doing a service both ways,” Bork explained. “I’m taking the adjuncts and giving them a voice and talking to the people in administration. But I’m also giving the people in administration a way to listen to what’s happening down below on the ground level.”

Bork has been at CCA for four years. The fact that he teaches philosophy can’t hurt when making a case for those he represents, because at its core, the subject is about how much an argument holds weight. Even the way topics are broached has taken on a more reasoned approach than a demanding tone.

“Just trying has gotten us pretty far,” Bork said. “We haven’t gotten everything we’ve wanted, but we’ve gotten some things.”

Truth be told, that’s a far cry from Bork’s campaign slogan: Vote for Nate and All Your Dreams Will Come True. The line was a modification of Pedro’s campaign in the movie “Napoleon Dynamite.”

But the adjuncts will take the progress they’ve made happily, regardless.

One of the key items that repeatedly came up during Bork’s four years at the college is a sense that adjuncts concerns would go up the chain of command and suddenly hit a wall.

That sense appears to have been mollified somewhat now that many adjuncts feel they have the ‘voice’ that Bork is providing.

“First of all, I think Nate’s doing a great job,” Geography adjunct Sara Jackson said. “He’s trying to make sure he has input from everybody and addressing issues that are important to everyone, including some people in different positions with different needs.

“Adjunct faculty really needs more representation. I think that’s true anywhere in North America,” Jackson added. “So, hopefully he’ll give us more say in the decisions that affect us, because we are the face of the college.”

There are still items that are a work in progress. In the spring, numerous issues will be discussed, including, but not limited to, a ladder system within which adjuncts work with department coordinators, chairs, deans and administrators throughout the semester; streamlining the process for credentialing CTE faculty; and examining the process under which low-enrolled classes are handled.

“This may be thinking big, but we want to improve the status of adjuncts, not just at CCA, but everywhere,” Bork said.
Geoff Chadwick happily watched a live TV feed Nov. 10 as Boris Cochajil of Downtown Aurora Visual Arts (DAVA) traded a nervous interchange with the First Lady of the United States as part of a White House ceremony.

But Chadwick was hardly shocked at Cochajil’s reaction that stole the show, having worked with him and scores of other DAVA kids during the Colorado Film School’s children’s film camp over the last couple of summers; and, before that, for several years at the community center’s Aurora facility.

“They’re full of surprises,” the CCA faculty member said. “Count the Michelle Obama encounter as the ultimate stunner.”

Cochajil and DAVA Executive Director Susan Jenson were on stage because DAVA was being recognized as one of 12 organizations receiving a 2014 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award. The honor was for the non-profit’s free job training program, which, twice weekly, features middle-school students taking on either computer arts or studio arts positions and treating their tasks like “real jobs.”

The Colorado Kids Camp fits into that same mold. Chadwick, other CFS faculty and some of its students host workshops that lead to five or six groups of DAVA youth writing scripts, pre-producing, shooting, and editing films.

This past summer, Cochajil was the emcee as those movies were shown to the group. He’s worked with Chadwick and Co. the last two years.

Several CCA representatives have sat on DAVA’s board, so the connection and mutual respect runs deep between the two local entities.

“It’s great fun and I love working with this kids and helping in their development,” Chadwick said. “They are really super creative and it’s neat what DAVA can do with them. Not all of them go all the way through the program, but I see kids grow every time I see them and become more responsible as they go through. They just seem to be more complete people – more confident, for sure.”

The hard part for Chadwick is having to turn away some of the kids each summer. “These kids find their voices making films,” he said. “And they love it.”

More than a dozen educators from the Netherlands attending a national conference in Denver made a pit stop to Lowry on Nov. 4 in order to see how the structure and culture within the Colorado community college system might be applied to institutions back home.

Punctuating the academic cultural exchange was a trip to CCA’s renowned Colorado Film School at Lowry. And the Dutch group was noticeably struck by the quality and innovation present at one of the nation’s top career and technical schools of its kind.

“What I saw here was the pride you have in teaching your students a certain skill. Taking the tour of the film school, I felt proud of all the students, and I think that’s something we can learn from,” said Ayla Aydin-Murad, the head of the Dutch delegation.

“The Netherlands, we have a culture where you have to go to college or university to have ‘made it’ and the community college isn’t deemed special. So I think we can change that. And we invited people in community colleges in the Netherlands to see that they, too, can excel.”

Aydin-Murad is project leader of the Sirius Program, which was established six years ago by the Netherlands’ Ministry of Education. It is an official initiative to promote honor programs in that country’s traditionally egalitarian higher-education institutions.

The group of touring educators was associated with the Dutch equivalent of the American community colleges and traditional four-year colleges. The visit was part of an annual study trip to the United States coinciding with the yearly conference of the National Colleague Honors Council. This year, the conference was held in Denver.

The top academic officer of the Colorado Community College System, Dr. Jerry Migler, and members of the State Faculty Advisory Council gave a presentation to the delegation at CCCS’ headquarters before making the short walk to CFS.

Dr. Janet Brandau, CCA’s vice president of Academic Affairs, Dr. Victor Vialpando, the college’s dean of Professional Studies and Sciences, and Frederic Lahey, director, found and faculty of CFS, were on hand as the Dutch group went through the classrooms, editing bays, and greenscreened sets that comprise the film school.

Aydin-Murad was unaware of the film school prior to the trip. But she said she was very pleased the delegation could learn about its national reputation and see students at work there.

The posters of classic movies and a piece of the set from the film “Titanic” had the touring group snapping photos liberally.

The Netherlands has about 70 community colleges, in total. A representative board speaks on behalf of those schools.

“I work for the Sirius Program, so I don’t work for a particular institution but I felt this kind of pride that I want to take back to the Netherlands and give to the students, teachers and everyone who is involved in working in a community college,” Aydin-Murad said.

“For the other members of our delegation who really do work at such an institution, it’s even more inspiring. And they’ll take something back to those institutions.”
UN BELIEVABLE

Students get chance of a lifetime with trip to NY over spring break

The news of the Ebola crisis was yet again flashing across the TV last month. This time, as Jessica Pineda caught a glimpse of where the discussion was taking place, it prompted her to race out of her kitchen and into the living room.

The floor of the United Nations was the forum for discussion. It just so happened to be a place of much debate in her own household over the last several weeks, as she awaited word as to whether she would be selected as part of a 17-student contingent from CCA that will attend the Model UN Conference from March 22-26 in New York.

“I was screaming to my mom, ‘That’s it! That’s the UN!’”

Soon, Pineda won’t have to see the UN only through her mind’s eye. On October 30, she became one of the select few announced during a ceremony at the CentreTech Rotunda.

It’s no surprise, then, that if a TV image could prompt near bedlam that Pineda still stood red-faced, smiling and with hands periodically covering her face in shock nearly a half-hour after learning she would be part of the CCA group.

Political Science faculty Bobby Pace, chief organizer of the trip, CCA President Betsy Oudenhoven and the rest of the college’s Cabinet were on hand for the announcement along with student hopefuls, many of whom were smiling ear to ear after hearing their names announced.

“I actually want to go to see the real United Nations in all of its glory and be part of this exciting experience.”

A fundraising campaign, corporate sponsorship and college funds were combined to make the trip a reality. CCA will be one of just four community colleges in attendance.

Over 5,000 college/university students, more than half from outside the United States, come to New York City each spring to discuss current global issues. CCA will represent Ethiopia as delegates charged with solving three pressing world issues relevant to 21 simulated UN committees.

The Ethiopian tie-in is related to Aurora’s standing as a sister city to Adama in the east African nation.

“We are students now, but in the future, we are going to be leaders or be in good positions to contribute to global peace and stability,” said Abdu Jemil, who hails from neighboring Eritrea. And having an opportunity to learn how the United Nations functions, how countries do things in the world and contribute to international issues as students is exciting for me.”

The Model UN at CCA in 2013 was the first held at a Colorado community college in nearly four decades. The fall event on the CentreTech campus was attended by more than 250 students, each of whom represented a different country and bartered with the world community about resolutions important to its self-interests.

“The stakes will be even higher in New York, as Ivy League schools and other academic heavyweights make their points known in General Assembly, Economic and Social Council, Development, Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, and Peace and Security committees.

“This is a chance to branch out, network and see that there are opportunities for people like me and students who are trying to achieve,” student Sarah Daniels said.

Some of the topics up for debate include the prohibition of lethal autonomous weapons systems, women in development, the impact of migration on development, the rights of indigenous peoples, and much more.

“I think it puts a lot of pressure on us, but I like this group and I’m really confident in our abilities,” said Tyler Mason, who is a Political Science major and hopes to go into that field professionally.

“I know some of the people who have been selected, and I just think we have a great chance to show other schools that we may not have all the credentials, that we’re just a community college, but this is a great school and a great program under Dr. Pace.”

CCA students selected to represent the college have largely cut their teeth in Introduction to Political Science, American Government, International Relations, and Comparative Government courses. Handpicking a group of 17 students was an arduous process, based on students’ academic work, involvement in class, and applications submitted for the national conference.

Joseph Krantz had no idea his “passion.”

“We all worked really hard for this and it means a lot, I’m sure to every one of us,” Krantz added. “We have a lot of work ahead of us, but I’m ready to be focused on that, too.”
Tiffany Christian, in many ways, personifies the spirit behind the Student Success Awards, which will hold its 10th annual ceremony Dec. 5.

She’s toggled between having transportation and needing a ride.

She’s juggled her own schoolwork with the activities of her high-school age daughter.

She’s contemplated quitting CCA several times due to financial constraints.

And she’s done it all with a backdrop to her life that would have brought many to their knees: teen pregnancy, verbal abuse, group homes, a foster home, and juvenile facilities.

“Success is finishing,” Christian said, adding that she’s struggled with perfectionism before only recently learning to tamper down expectations with the help of coaching she’s received in the Student Success Center.

“And to me is not giving up. Success is, ‘Even if I fall, and it takes awhile to get back up, keep trying.’ And it’s about not being defined by other people’s opinions or thoughts about where my life should be.”

Glance through the list of 31 recipients of the Student Success Awards and they, too, have overcome obstacles, perceptions and circumstances to find their own peace of mind, in academics and life.

Some left their homelands without telling their families due to political strife or even imprisonment. Some failed numerous times in their pursuits before finally getting on their chosen paths. Some spent decades in workplace suits before finally getting in academics and life.

Some lost their family due to political strife or even imprisonment. Some fell numerous times in their pursuits before finally getting on their chosen paths. Some spent decades in workplace misery, only to find happiness later in life.

Some have endured the death of others and come close to experiencing their own halfway across the world before somehow making it to Aurora and CCA for a second or even third chance at a life.

Christian’s story is replete with obstacles. Seeing her work in a small Student Life office at the college, or hearing her speak and write eloquently, mask that fact.

But the harsh truths of her journey remain.

She was a homeless runaway by the age of 13. Her family life was the kindling to a flame that only grew, fed by instability, anger and alcohol.

It wasn’t until her own daughter reached her teen years that Christian began to get the tools to douse out what continually burned her up on the inside.

She beams with pride when she talks about her current relationship with her daughter that has stabilized over the last two years, and how 14-year-old Cerae’s grades have jumped 85 percent since mom opted to return to school. “And this is a kid who had quit, who gave up on everything,” Christian explained.

“The other night I was telling her about what I’ve been through and she said to me, ‘Mom, are you so strict with me and tell me the stories because you don’t want me to be where you were when I was your age?’ She said, ‘Mom, I’m never going to do that. I’m never going to run away, and if I did, I’d miss you. Now she’s looking at college, at UCLA. She has dreams, drive and motivation – and she’s interested.

“Sometimes she says sorry that I had to go through the things I went through,” Christian added. “But she thanks me, and she’s even seen a difference in my life choices in parenting, and I see how grateful she is. She shows me.”

It’s not as if Christian has removed all doubts, about her past life and current school experience.

Her present goal is to go to a four-year university; yet she admitted to a little voice inside her that sometimes says she can’t do it.

But with a stronger inner conviction and some help at CCA, she has a hunger to push herself to see how far she can go, because she’s been able to come this far already.

“And maybe a month or two ago, I was talking to a staff member here and they asked where I saw my future,” Christian related.

“I explained that my passion for people has extended to adults because of my experience here. I’ve seen so many stories – and everybody has one – and just because mine is different than the next person’s doesn’t devalue what each person goes through.

“That being said, seeing how diverse it is here and all that people go through here at CCA, it’s far from a traditional school, but I love that, though, and it makes me proud. It’s even piqued my interest about looking into higher education.”

One of the key life lessons Christian has assimilated while attending CCA is that she’s previously seen adults get dismissed or lack the necessary support in handling their academic challenges, more so than with school-aged children.

She feels CCA has been vital in that regard, not just in the impact it’s made in her own life, but witnessing its effect with other unconventional students.

“Not taking away from the youth, but sometimes it feels like adults have more barriers or mountains to climb, and there’s programs here to help.”

The cross-section of circumstances that comprise the Student Success Awards, and her inclusion, is rewarding in that aspect.

“I want people to take away that they can do it, too,” she said, when asked what getting the award means to her. “Despite your age, despite your challenges or circumstances that come up in life, the best you can have is contingency plans, ask for help, and don’t be afraid of support.”
Trolls, superheroes, a ’70s throwback, and, um, Transfer Man (?) were among the participants in a Halloween costume party held by the various departments under the Student Affairs umbrella.
The Blair Switch Project

CFS adjunct Tom Dibble went from serving as an intern for the British Prime Minister to following his dream to write motion pictures. It’s now paying off.

The phrase struggling Hollywood actor has become a regular part of the American lexicon.

Colorado Film School adjunct Tom Dibble was living an offshoot of that during a decade spent trying to crack the movie industry while living in Los Angeles.

“I would just substitute “writer” for actor and you’ve pretty much got it,” he said with a laugh.

Things have suddenly changed for Dibble. A movie he’s written “Highly Functional” is being shot with some recognizable actors as its stars. And it’s a career high point.

Just don’t call Dibble an overnight success.

A life of trying to sell pitches, having projects stuck in “development hell” and lending ideas to other people’s pitches was not an easy existence. He got by, in part because his wife worked on the TV show “Crime Scene Investigation.” But there was an element of beating one’s head against the wall mixed in, as well.

“A very small number of writers are big earners. And then there’s everybody else and we’re all just doing our thing,” he said.

Family circumstances intervened and played a real role, but that uneasy existence was one of the main reasons Dibble, his wife and daughter left California for Colorado in 2009, when Tom began his teaching duties at CFS.

“It’s astonishing how the stars have to align for something to go into production,” he said. “Not least of which is money. It’s all down to money and funding.”

Still, had Dibble not had such a passion for movies, he might have been able to leverage his old life into a career and avoid all these headaches and what-ifs.

Straight out of a master’s program at London University, Dibble landed an internship with then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair while in his early 20s, on Downing Street. He served under Blair’s wife, Cherie, for a while, “then kind of worked in his orbit for pollsters and strategy guides,” before becoming Blair’s personal assistant on his re-election campaign in 2001.

“I had great intimacy with the power base but no power whatsoever,” Dibble said with a laugh, adding that he was young and naïve at the time and “truly a nobody.”

“I was like a moth around the flame,” he explained. “But it was a fantastic experience.”

But it wasn’t politics that was foremost in Dibble’s universe. He wanted to be a writer for a long while, and just as Blair was winning a landslide victory, the University of Southern California’s renowned film school extended an invitation to Dibble.

Turns out, it was an easy call, leaving the U.K. and choosing Hollywood.

“That just turned everything around in a big way and allowed me to actually grapple with the craft itself, even though I had the ambition. I didn’t have the craft.”

Even through a decade of struggles professionally, Dibble never looked back, since there was the underlying feeling that screenwriting was the only thing he was meant to do.

“You can’t have a Plan B,” he emphasized. “You’ve got to jump out of the plane and hope that that parachute opens eventually. And you really have to just not give up. It is a struggle and trying to be a screenwriter is always hard.”

The training Dibble received at USC was invaluable, moved him past American culture shock and created numerous connections, not the least of which was Lawrence Kasdan – writer of “Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back” and “Raiders of the Lost Ark.”

“He said he wasn’t going to read any scripts and then he phoned me one day and said, ‘My people made me read one of your scripts, and you can write.’ And he said it in that fantastic voice of his, ‘You can write…”

It was just the greatest thing ever, and it kept me going for about another 10 years.”

It wasn’t quite that long before the idea for “Highly Functional” began germinating, yet, it was right around a decade after Kasdan’s compliment that one of Dibble’s projects was cast and began shooting.

Sure, there were problems in the casting process. The hiring of British director Marc Forby helped move everything along. But it wouldn’t have been Dibble’s life had there not been some obstacles.

Yet, in November, there Dibble was, standing in Albuquerque, N.M. as a solid cast of veteran actors and crew were shooting his picture. Among those involved in the film: Bruce Campbell (“The Evil Dead”), James Frecheville (“Animal Kingdom”), Annabeth Gish (“Sons of Anarchy”), Missi Pyle (“Gone Girl”), and Judge Reinhold (the “Beverly Hills Cop” series).

The story centers around an autistic man in his 20s and his caregiver, who reveals he’s ill with a serious heart condition. The former has the idea if he can somehow deliver his provider’s favorite country singer for a personal performance, it will bring with it healing powers and a new lease on life.

A kidnapping of the washed-up country star, Chili – played by Campbell – occurs, and “a road movie ensues,” Dibble said. Frecheville plays Bobby, who sets the whole comedic caper in motion.

Only two days after leaving the set, Dibble was back to his normal routine at CFS, where he teaches Short Script Writing, Short Script Analysis and Independent Feature Writing. He was the former head of the screenwriting section in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program run in conjunction with Regis University before it was dismantled.

But even while Dibble returned to the classroom, it’s only human nature that his thoughts often have drifted to the movie set that is using his words and putting them to “Action!” “I’m certainly relieved,” he said of finally having one of his scripts becoming a feature film after all of his struggles.

“But you have to understand I’m a neurotic-depressive, so my overriding thought is, ‘This is good. Now, let’s not screw it up,’ and, ‘Is this actually going to turn out OK?’

“So that’s what I’m worrying about. Is this all going to come together? Maybe that’s ungrateful, but I know these are good problems to have. And when you get punched so much over the years, it’s tough.”

Dibble’s script for “Highly Functional” has been getting raves, from its stars, though, in media reports.

The production is expected to soon move from New Mexico to Canada (which is doubling for Colorado) and finish shooting around year’s end. The film is slated for a theatrical release in Fall 2015. 
To Kill A Mockingbird
 IMAGES FROM THE CCA STAGE PRODUCTION DURING ITS NOVEMBER RUN

Clockwise, townspeople react angrily to the shocking news; a thoughtful Scout (played by Molly Bibeau); Tom Robinson (Patrick Lee Clark) presents his impassioned defense; Atticus Finch (Allistair Basse) cross-examines accuser Mayella Ewell (Sierra Denney) during Robinson's trial.
Information bank

Outreach and Recruitment in partnership with College Communications hosted two key enrollment events. The Fall Fest event Oct. 25 included activities for the whole family and afforded prospective students the chance to visit the campus, take a tour, and ask questions about educational opportunities. Information was provided to the 134 attendees on the application process and paying for college, as well. Camino al Colegio on Nov. 6 was a bilingual college preview night for Spanish-speaking families in the college’s service area. Outreach and Recruitment also launched CCA Express Orientation in November. Designed for first-time college students and modeled after successful orientation programs at several other CCCS colleges, the program helps new students complete the entire enrollment process in one day.

The School of Liberal Arts has implemented a new Academic Intelligence student-tracking database to identify at-risk student populations and to recruit students to degrees with designation. The database utilizes information extracted from Banner (CCCS’s central database) through the program COGNOS and shows students’ course-taking patterns and success rates in specific courses by risk factors, including placement scores, GPA and demographic characteristics.

Advising, Student Life and the Student Success Center collaborated to help more than 30 four-year institutions Oct. 29 on both the CentreTech and Lowry campuses. The fair exposed 238 students to transfer offerings from various institutions. Initial assessment shows that the event was successful, as students were able to make meaningful connections with college/university representatives.

Maria Halloran received the Gladys Doty Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Profession at the annual Colorado Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (CoTESOL) fall convention Nov. 15-16. The CoTESOL board unanimously approved the award. CCA faculty Daniel Schweissing and Chris Tombari made speeches on Halloran’s behalf. The award honors a member of the profession who has made a significant contribution through research, publication, professional presentations, leadership, public service, or by assuming an active role in educational advocacy. Halloran, who is retiring, has been a key figure in CCA’s College Prep ESL program.

Student Affairs professional development opportunities in November included a division-wide training on “Understanding Identity and Privilege.” In addition, Dean of Students Tamara White has implemented a monthly training for the offices of Student Life, Student Conduct, Counseling, and Accessibility Services on student development theory. This month’s student development presentation tackled the “Theory of Identity Development.”

Dr. Derrick Haynes, executive director of Advising, provided an Advising 101 training Nov. 12 for Aurora Public Schools counselors. The training was designed to help school district counselors who work with concurrent enrollment students learn more about course selection and degree pathways at CCA.

Institutional Research presented data at November’s all-college meeting on how concurrent enrollment growth has affected trend data for CCA, and on the different graduation outcomes for students by race/ethnicity. Some key findings included a gap in graduation rates between minority and white students, but also showed that the chasm appears to be closing, especially in certificates awarded. Another finding was that minority females graduate at a higher rate than minority males; in contrast, white females and males graduate at proportionate rates. Overall, a significant portion of CCA’s enrollment growth since 2009 is directly attributable a rise in concurrent enrollment.

The School of Liberal Arts hired a new achievement coach, Ray Keith, effective Nov. 10. The achievement coach’s responsibilities include enhancing academic achievement for critical student populations. Additionally, Liberal Arts has developed part-time and full-time degree completion pathways for students enrolled in degrees with event Nov. 14 to kick off the spring semester enrollment period: “R-U Ready?” (R=Registration, U=Update). The session was attended by faculty, staff and administrators and was designed as an information-sharing session for everyone who assists with enrolling students for the spring semester.

CCA is actively participating in the Community-Campus Partnership (CCP), comprised of institutions on the Anschutz Medical Campus and partners from surrounding neighborhoods in Aurora and Denver. The CCP’s focus is on improved health and economic opportunity for community residents. As an initial step in support of the Partnership’s workforce development efforts, CCA has partnered with a group of public and private agencies to apply for grant funds to launch a program that integrates adult basic education with training for two entry-level healthcare jobs: sterile processing and patient navigation. If awarded, the grant will build on CCA’s recent establishment of an Adult Basic Education/GED preparation program at its Center for Workforce Development. In early November, President Betsy Odenhoven and Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness Chris Ward joined a group of 20 Community-Campus Partnership representatives for a three-day, fact-finding tour that studied the Greater University Circle Initiative, a decade-old measure amending Colorado’s constitution and outlining a statewide drug policy for cannabis.

The Colorado Film School presents its Fall 2014 Student Show on Thursday, Dec. 11 at 7:30 p.m. The show will be comprised of a two-hour viewing of CFS’ best student films. Projects are judged by faculty in the areas of Technical Merit, Storytelling, and Originality. The event will take place at Harkins Theatres (8300 E. Northfield Blvd., Denver, 80238). Doors open at 7 p.m.

Colorado Community College System President Nancy McCallin addressed CCA faculty and staff Oct. 22 just before a campus visit from the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education. Dr. McCallin talked about what’s occurring at the system level and answered questions from the audience.

Students, faculty, staff, and administrators are invited to “Shadow Boxes for the Modern World” at the Mizel Museum on Thursday, Dec. 4 from 7-9 p.m. Join exhibit designer and artist Scott Lyon and create a personal shadow box. Tickets are $36, which includes supplies, instruction and pastries.

The Colorado Combined Campaign is ongoing and is focused on a goal of raising $10,000 in charitable donations from CCA employees. Those interested in pledging can fill out a form and submit to one of four CCC coordinators -- Traci Fielden, Debbie Irvine, Tracy Mendoza or Staci Shulman.

Joshua Farrell has joined Institutional Research and Effectiveness as an analyst. Farrell will research/analyze data for a wide range of audiences inside and outside of CCA.
Clockwise from top, students don protective eyewear to view the partial solar eclipse on Oct. 23 – and the sun’s image captured using said eyewear as a camera filter; students flock to the Transfer Fair in the CentreTech Rotunda on Oct. 29; Communications faculty Vicki Graham captured a group of six deer gathered behind the Fine Arts Building; comedian Dan Mengini performs Oct. 22; Daniela Vallez of Rocky Mountain Planned Parenthood gives a lecture on healthy relationships and consent as part of the “Safe Is Sexy” event Oct. 23.