Drug and gang involvement landed Jack Howard in prison. A political atmosphere cemented Patrick Sheets’ military exit after distinguished service. Their lives at a crossroads, the paths of these two men from wildly divergent backgrounds intersected at CCA.

They answer to “Ebony” and “Ivory” inside the office; “Salt” and “Pepper” to each other. They answer each other’s calls and numerous texts; even at times finish one another’s sentences. They answer in street or military lingo, byproducts of their diverse backgrounds.

But when it comes to the immediate and infinite bond forged by Community College of Aurora fitness instructors Patrick Sheets and Jack Howard, there’s no easy rejoinder. It is what it is.

This is a pair that’s grown so close in less than a year that on an off day, without coordination, the two arrived at the exact same time at the gorilla cage at the Denver Zoo; that, on three to four occasions weekly, will just happen to show up for work wearing the exact same training shorts and shirt ensemble, also without coordination.

“We only have two shirts, a gray one and a black one,” Sheets said in self-defense, wearing a wide smile.

If you see one of them, you likely will see the other not far behind.

“When our paralegal coordinator comes in and only one of them is there she’ll ask, ‘Where’s your better half?’” Stephanie Agner, CCA’s public service administrative assistant, said with a laugh.

Sheets and Howard just as often resemble siblings, whether picking up food together or just hanging out.

Added Agner, “They poke each other, elbow each other, throw snits at each other …”

And prop up one another in a way that makes this bond even more unique.
Unique model becoming (virtual) reality

Film School project’s impact soon could be far-reaching

The Colorado Film School means business.

While creativity remains a cornerstone for one of the top institutions of its kind in the world, the best projects are just ideas if they can’t be implemented due to economic considerations.

Given that backdrop, $99,833 in recently obtained grant funding for immersive and game-based learning from the Colorado Community College System is being used to implement a virtual economy into the classroom which, upon completion, will touch upon all the behind-the-scenes aspects of the studio system.

Using greenbacks now will be nearly as important as using green screens.

“…you’re going to be teaching it from a real-world market perspective. … It’s completely revolutionary.”

Right now, it’s more grind than groundbreaking.

Department funding (in real dollars) initially was used to refine the project plan and formulating landing pages for the user experience. The initial July 1 release of grant funding – part of an overall $3 million outlay to community colleges statewide in immersive and game-based learning – allowed for the purchase of a media server system.

Writing open-source code is the next step, a process that is expected to take about a year. The math involved is so complex that Lahey already has hired one expert and may call upon one of the world’s top economists to further aid the programming process.

Early modules then will begin to be debugged and integrated into the classroom. The plan – driven by Lahey, Scott, equipment manager Laffrey Witbrod, student Pierre Habib and programmer Darren Foster -- is for the new system to be operational next spring, all enhancements completed next summer and the virtual economy to be fully included in all production, acting and skills classes by next fall.

There will be gaming aspects written into the economic platform, as well, with such items as training, guest lectures and festival attendance “leveling up” a student’s score.

“It just makes sense that you bring real life into what you’re doing,” project coordinator Jennifer Scott said. “It’s not just about the craft but it’s about how you manage it and how you get something out of it once you’re done besides a portfolio and actually having the tools to be able to manage your own project financially.”

Basically, every project is a company and students won’t be just filmmakers, but film investors. “We’ve been trying to teach them from an aesthetic perspective, but now we’re going to be teaching it from a real-world market perspective.”

…”That’s our blue-sky scenario,” Lahey added.

Regardless, the paradigm already has shifted simply by recalibrating the thought process tied to educational philosophy in film education that’s been in place for decades.

“I think that, as a young institution, is an advantage we have, because we don’t have huge amounts of institutional baggage that are heading us down this road,” Lahey said.

“We have the advantage we have, because we don’t have huge amounts of institutional baggage that are heading us down to what film education has been for 20 or 30 years.”

The Colorado Film School’s path from residing on the Community College of Aurora’s Lowry campus to inclusion on the Hollywood Reporter’s top 25 film schools in the world only underscores the possibilities.

“When you’re small and an unknown quantity and you’re going against major institutions with tons of money, you have to be more innovative and imaginative and you have to think of new models and always focus on student success,” Lahey said.

“If we get this working and do it right, every film school in the world should want this,” Lahey said.

The virtual economy model will be presented at the University Film Video Association convention next August. And with built-in hooks that allow for integration with other systems, the long-range vision is a global film-school network spawned from the project.

The idea also has been broached about combining cumulative content for a joint, international film-school TV channel and, according to Scott, not only connecting institutions but students “with outside producers not in schools who are seeking gifted talent.”

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Reference:

“InterCom” August 2012 Newsletter
But securing precious cargo in emergency situations is only part of the battle for EMTs and paramedics vying at CCA for the title of the nation’s best tandem

Tipsy bar patrons did the limbo as the music blared. Glasses were raised. Shots requested. Chants ensued.

It was like your typical rowdy bar on a Saturday night.

Never mind there was a man lying face down in a heap on the floor near an overturned table, or that paramedics and law enforcement arrived and were forced to not only respond to the distress call but to try and tune out the taunts and camera-phone flashes of the drunken revelers.

Or that it was a Sunday morning at 10 a.m.

Look closely and it became clearer that this is a staged event and not a real bar.

The customers, mainly actors and volunteers affiliated with Community College of Aurora, were just as much a part of the scene hatched at the college’s Center for Simulation as the timed clinical skill needed by the paramedics.

The purpose of the setup was fostering intense competition in a realistic setting that mirrors the EMT’s work in the field. It was one of two scenes competitors in the National Clinical and Safety Championships held Sunday had to navigate at CCA.

Four two-person teams from American Medical Response vied for top honors: from Olympia, Wash.; Lake Havasu, Az.; New Haven, CT; and Modesto, CA, after local and regional competitions nationwide had pared the field.

All of the duos also had to field a distress call at what turned out to be a staged hoarder house at CCA’s so-called Katrina Building. That event was set up to replicate a low-rent hotel, and came replete with a full array of disgusting props adding to the realism of the EMT’s call.

There was the cat lady next door, with meow accompaniment from her brood. Fly sounds buzzed. A stink-bomb caplet opened in the summer heat in the hoarder room was the desired combustible olfactory mix. An ornery hotel maid argued with the health-care professionals. Painters and custodians did their level best to get in the way of the paramedics every move.

But the theatrics were just white noise if the professionals handled things correctly. They had to drive safely through cone courses, averting obstacles on the way to calls. But it was their clear-headed diagnoses through the staged scenarios, while also saving precious minutes in the process that was most important.

“They prepped us about how amazing it was going to be here, but even still with them prepping us and showing us the mannequins ahead of time, to actually walk in and have it feel like it was a real call, that was amazing,” said Kristy Kuhn, who along with partner Henry Benavides, were declared the winners of the national prize.

“The hoarder house was almost to a ‘T,’” she added.

AMR, whose national headquarters is based in Greenwood Village, returned to CCA for a second straight year and, according to its senior vice president of professional services, Ron Thackery, will come back as long as the college wants to host.

High-tech facilities include a war-room in which judges can watch the teams’ every move on multiple cameras around the outdoor driving scenes and inside the two staged simulation areas. The logistical expertise CCA brings to the event, including the establishment of the realism of the scenes, and knowledgeable staff are some of the reasons the relationship has remained strong.

“It’s been just an absolutely amazing experience to see all the things we’ve been able to do here,” Thackery said of CCA. “I realize it’s a community college, but this could be major university with this asset here. It’s way beyond anything that I’ve been able to use in my job, and everybody who comes here, all the people we bring as judges or as participants, are absolutely amazed at the technology.”

CCA adjunct Irving VanderVegt councils high school students July 10 during the second of two AHEC camps, which are all-day events designed to expose teens to the health sciences. The grant-funded program is run through the Colorado Area Health Education Program at CCA and is affiliated with the University of Colorado. The day included tours, simulation exercises and videos to try to further pique the kids' interest in fields like biotechnology, science and Emergency Medical Services.
The blink of an eye startles. You might know it’s coming. You may even look for it. But as soon as Hal bats his eyelashes, you jump back just a little.

It’s just so human. Yet Hal, is anything but; though resembling flesh and blood nearly entirely.

What Hal is -- as well as the infant, mother, child, and newborn with whom he resides at the Center for Simulation on the college’s Lowry Campus -- is the newest generation of tetherless simulators.

Call them mannequins. Call them dummies, if you prefer.

It’s their abilities that are nearly indescribable, a tour de force in paramedic, critical care and EMT training.

They not only blink, they seize or turn blue when given the wrong medication or are administered improper treatment. They blow a pupil from brain injury. They respond to ventilators. They give birth. The baby’s chest can deflate on one side, mimicking a collapsed lung, when bagging it too hard. A catheter can be inserted.

They can even be programmed to speak another language to relay symptoms.

About all the mannequins can’t do is walk. Trauma arms and legs capable of spurting blood even can be added. Regurgitation is possible, too.

“It’s amazing advances,” said Beth Lattone, a CCA faculty member and field paramedic for nearly two decades in Colorado and Washington who uses the technology in her classroom. “I think about where we were in my paramedic school. We had Fred the Head and an IV arm. It was just so different.”

Hal, or Super Hal, as dubbed by Richard Gentile, the dean for simulation studies when the mannequins were purchased for about $100,000 via Perkins Grant funding, is the most technologically advanced of the group. He accounts for about half of those overall costs. The expenditures by the school come in terms of investment in training, time and payment of technicians that maintain the equipment.

The benefits are enormous for students who will be working in the field on real-life patients under duress.

“They can harm the patient, kill the patient and guess what? Reset. Start over. And when you’re in the hospital or clinical settings, dealing with real patients, you don’t have that luxury,” said Gentile, who exits his current position at the end of July to pursue deeper immersion into simulation studies.

“I think the value of it is that we can throw things at them,” Gentile added. “We can throw curveballs at them they’ll never see coming and say, ‘You know what? That’s something that can happen to you out there in the real world.’”

Lattone in a recent class ran through epiglottitis, an inflammation of the flap at the base of the tongue that keeps food from entering the airway. Her lecture covered the dos and don’ts if such symptoms were encountered. She then prepped the pediatric Hal mannequin to appear as if he was drooling by placing lubrication on his face and set her students loose in the simulation classroom.

“The students performed interventions that would have not been good had that been a real child,” Lattone recalled. “And we got done at the end and debriefed about it and you could just see that now they really understood how epiglottitis looks and felt kind of badly, as they do sometimes, about what they had done.

“We talked about the fact that it was OK to do that in the sim lab and that they’d never, ever do that in the field. And I’m confident that these students when they go out in the field will recognize that case and never, ever, ever do anything at all inappropriate as far as care for that patient because they’ll remember that case.”

Such scenarios are videotaped by technicians, who can then immediately burn a disc to be viewed by the student medical care providers.

“It’s huge for them to have that feedback in real time,” Lattone added.

There are two primary areas at work in concert with the technology these high-fidelity mannequins provide. Assessment can include hooking up an EKG, taking blood pressure and respiration. The treatment phase may require intubation, shocking or dispensing medication.

A radio frequency code scanned with a plastic syringe with no needle alerts a computer program as to whether the proper drugs are being distributed based on symptoms.

The artificial ‘patient’ then responds accordingly, whether it’s turn-
Positive, negative outcomes aid equally

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From Mannequins / Page 4

Counterclockwise from previous page, SuperHal lies comfortably prior to getting poked and prodded in an EMT class. Infant Hal shows his normal hue and the blue when he has difficulty breathing. The lungs are exposed on the SuperHal model to give a bird’s eye view of the ekoskeletal system. Noelle covers up — and puts her stomach off to the side, after giving birth. The pump that forces the baby through the birth canal lies on her chest. An exposed shin bone gives a further peek into the exact modeling of the human body that these mannequins can replicate.

But training to work these life-like robots takes consistent coursework. Richard Gentile demonstrates some of the mannequins’ intricacies and abilities to a group of CCA staffers. The mannequins are hooked up to a computer system that allows for instant recall on procedures done on the dummies.

ing blue, shaking to mimic a seizure or having its vitals stabilize.

The overall process gets into critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills.

“It’s not just about students learning but faculty teaching,” Gentile said. “It’s clinical application of knowledge. They’ve given the students knowledge, but they are asked to apply it, and there’s a big gap there sometimes.”

The decision to ramp up simulation in the EMS, Paramedic and Critical Care was a conscious one. Older, unreliable technology often frustrated faculty, who were then hesitant to write simulations into the curriculum. But a new partnership with the Gaumard company, which makes the new-age mannequins, bolstered maintenance on equipment, enhanced training, and supported its use by running equipment during exercises. Now, the technology is more integrated into the course work.

“I don’t have to sit there, watch and make up stuff that would have happened if it was a real patient. It’s not, ‘Woulda, coulda, shoulda,’” Lattone said. “If they don’t do compressions right, the baby turns blue. If they don’t bag the baby, the baby turns blue. If they do it right, they get the positive feedback. And even though they know it’s a mannequin or a doll and not a real patient, it’s amazing how much they invest in that.”

Lattone believes her students may not have ever seen a case such as epiglottitis in 500 hours of rides and 200 hours of clinical training.

But even Super Hal has his limits, despite the ability to convulse, make bowel sounds and breathe with multiple airway sounds.

Said Lattone, “When I can teach him to do my dishes and mow my lawn I’ll be satisfied.”
Jamie Corchado’s experience at NASA conducting a zero-gravity experiment in Houston last summer was thought to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Turns out, the Community College of Aurora’s student commencement speaker in May was selling himself short.

Corchado has been selected to enter even more rarefied air: as one of a few select students nationwide chosen as interns for the national aeronautical agency.

His position begins in September and will postpone his first semester at Colorado School of Mines. Corchado will be a part of an application software team working on the Spaceport Command and Control System at Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

The 15-week opportunity is expected to culminate with Corchado contributing to the development of a fully tested software utility, while improving processes in concert with application developers.

The newest experience has served to prop Corchado’s eyes wide open.

“I told my supervisor that being an employee at NASA one day seemed like a distant, unreachable goal,” said Corchado, who vacillates between mechanical engineering and physics as his major area of study moving forward. “But since my interview, and securing this internship, it’s given me hope that a position there is at least within reach, or at the very least within sight.”

Corchado had submitted an application for the upcoming internship but after looking at all the posted offers on the web and seeing them filled, he felt all the spots were taken and interviews completed.

Then, he got a phone call from an unfamiliar area code on his phone.

“I thought it was a prank at first,” he admitted.

The supervisor in charge of the NASA internship first wanted to make sure Corchado had no fall commitments. His pending enrollment at Mines could have ruined his chances, so Corchado furiously tried to get more details on the offer and keep the interview going.

“I think you could hear my heart beat through the phone,” he said.

Ultimately, he was able to defer his Mines semester by reaching out to the head of admissions.

Corchado’s track record to date seemingly has earned him the benefit of the doubt. He began at CCA as an Ascent student in 2008, building college credits while attending high school. He went on to win student success awards both from CCA and the community college system; was the president of the engineering club; and served as team leader for two NASA robotics competitions while earning an associate of science degree.

He’s already working this summer at the School of Mines.

Corchado has a good idea of the atmosphere within which he’ll be toiling throughout the fall when he arrives at NASA, based on prior experience.

“I was really impressed with the way NASA employees talked and behaved. There was an aura of ‘smartness’ around you. It was nice to be in, and I was happy to be there.”

The biggest difference between his past and future experience is that he worked with a student team the first time. But his work this fall lies more completely on his shoulders.

“My job will be to make their job easier by developing software to help their testing,” he said.

A task list will be matched to Corchado’s skill set when he arrives in Florida, and his assignments will be tweaked based on those matches.

“The general goal is to help the development team with new software that I’ll have to create,” he said.

And while his first NASA experience served as an important life milestone, his upcoming internship has only served to further boost his confidence about attaining his future goals.

“Up until then, becoming an engineer was like, ‘maybe I could do it, maybe not.’ But when I went down there and flew my experiment I realized I was able to do the work. And even now, with the internship, I feel even more reassured in myself that this is something possible for me to do.”

Recent CCA graduate Jamie Corchado already was up in the clouds after delivering the student commencement address in May, and headed to Colorado School of Mines to continue his studies. But his educational path is taking a detour with an internship to work at NASA.

Corchado’s trek to Mines suddenly takes a star turn
“I was talking to my mom the other night and I told her that everything I needed to learn again about education I learned at CCA. It’s about students being everybody’s priority, and the thing that’s so wonderful about CCA is that it’s absolutely true.”

-- Outgoing interim president Dr. Geri J. Anderson

Anderson proud of short interim stint

Added faculty, implementation of pay plan stand out

Dr. Geri J. Anderson learned a thing or two she could bring back to her job when she stepped foot on the Community College of Aurora campus, a common experience for those who return to school.

Only Anderson has served as the college’s interim president since March, and as her tenure ended July 20, making room for her full-time replacement, the knowledge she gleaned goes back to the Colorado Community College System office — which helps serve as the institutional compass for its membership, including CCA.

“I went into it saying that those of us who work in policy and in the system need to have time at the colleges to understand our decisions and how they impact the colleges,” said Anderson, who leaves to return to her vice president and provost roles in instruction at CCCS. “That’s the one thing that was so good for me was to really have that time.”

A couple main issues in particular touched upon her dual jobs over the last 3½ months.

Complications sprung up about the Faculty Load and Compensation (FLAC) system that paid employees. Questions also were raised involving concurrent enrollment questions might have put CCA on the front burner had Anderson not been around.

“Added faculty, implementation of pay plan stand out,” she said.

Other unfinished business: A couple main issues in particular touched upon her dual jobs over the last 3½ months.

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“The latter now holds dual jobs in Colorado education, including positions at CCCS and with the University of Denver, helping prepare the next generation of educators. Anderson was asked if she had any advice to offer her successor, now that she has a better feel for CCA as an institution.

“To listen,” she responded. “People there have a strong sense of what CCA is and so don’t come in like a bulldozer. Come in and watch, listen and identify what the strengths are. And don’t make sweeping, overnight changes.”

“That’s the one thing that was so good for me was to really have that time.”

Dr. Geri J. Anderson says her goodbyes at an ice-cream social organized July 17 to mark the end of her tenure as Community College of Aurora interim president. Anderson returns to her regular position as Associate VP and Provost for the Colorado Community College System.
The Emergency Medical Services Paramedic Program at CCA had perfect pass rates by all 15 students taking the national board registry exam on their first attempt during 2011-12, smashing national averages that had a 73 percent success rate to start.

All 45 participants at CCA over the last two academic years passed by their second attempt. The cumulative pass rate nationally for those with three or fewer attempts was 83 and 84 percent, the last two years respectively, dating back to 2010-11.

The annual employment rate for CCA graduates in the program is holding steady at about 80 percent for paramedics. About half the remaining 20 percent find employment related to the health-care field, though not specifically as paramedics, said Beth Lattone, primary instructor in the Emergency Medical Provider and Fire Science Technology departments.

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Stan Yan’s unique work is featured in the Donna Moravec Gallery’s latest exhibition. Yan teaches graphic storytelling at CCA, and his pieces feature celebrity zombie caricatures, illustrations and comic art.

The show, entitled, “Drawn of the Dead: Perspectives from a Rotted Mind,” runs through Aug. 9 at 9202 E. Severn Place, Room 118 on the Lowry Campus.

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Five new faculty members will join the Liberal Arts Division this fall: Laura Stone, Audra Pickett; Rachel Ankney and Bobby Pace.

Stone, a longtime adjunct at Front Range Community College, and Pickett, who has been faculty lead on the Biology/Reading pilot project at CCA, will become members of Academic Enrichment. Stone will teach math; Pickett will serve as a reading specialist.

Ankney joins the English Department after three years in Academic Enrichment. Pace becomes the college’s first full-time faculty member in political science.

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The Learning Resource Center has tapped into more than a half-million books, DVDs, CDs and other catalog items from 33 Colorado libraries through its new association with the AspenCat Union Catalog.

Full access to CCA materials in AspenCat will be ready by the start of the fall semester. All items will be accessible through the LRC webpage.

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Sandra Tompkins was hired as the college’s new Director of Information Technology. She began her new job Monday.

CCA goes to bat for fire victims

More than $2,250 raised via charitable events

Several volunteer initiatives were hatched at CCA in support of those affected by the Waldo, Flagstaff, High Park and other wildfires around the state.

Erin Hoag, Kyla Doddridge, Megan Harris, Bailee Bannon and Angie Tiedeman were particularly involved in fund-raising activities, as well as spreading the word about cash donations. "Jeans Day" on July 9 allowed employees to dress casually in return for a minimum $5 donation. Bake sales on both Lowry and CentreTech raised calorie counts and funds July 10. A silent auction, featuring more than 50 donations from various campus departments and employees, was held July 16 in the Student Rotunda.

In total, $2,250.87 was raised and dispensed to firefighter connections in Colorado Springs and Northern Colorado.

Information bank

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New dean brings wealth of experience

Dr. Renie DelPonte has been hired as the Community College of Aurora’s new dean of health sciences, public safety and Lowry campus. VP of Instruction Xeturah Woodley announced July 23. Dr. DelPonte will begin her new duties Wednesday.

Dr. DelPonte brings a strong background in career and technical education to the college at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. She served the last four-plus years as CTE director at Jefferson County Public Schools, the state’s largest school district. She previously functioned as both dean of instruction at Red Rocks Community College (1999-2007) and its coordinator of health careers programs (’97-’99).

In total, Dr. DelPonte has spent a decade within Colorado community college leadership.

Her varied roles have meant: creating and implementing CTE certificate and degree programs; building strategic external and internal partnerships with stakeholders; executing budget planning and fiscal accountability for multiple academic units and a branch campus; and service as a chief officer of a branch campus.

Dr. DelPonte’s educational background includes two master’s degrees, a doctorate and bachelor of science.
Trainers

Continued from Page 1

It’s like a reality-show script come to life, without cameras or actors: Five Points meets West Point.

A squeaky clean graduate of the service academy from Noblesville, Ind., and a burly convict from crime-laden neighborhoods of Denver becoming fast friends, CCA colleagues and helping hands.

Sheets, a former Army captain, is protective of Howard, confident that the latter’s forged a new path but focused on ensuring old habits and friends aren’t reintroduced.

Howard credits the positive influence Sheets has had in his life and doesn’t want to disappoint.

One of their primary functions together in their part-time jobs at the college is training four police academies per year in addition to individual sessions with staff, students and faculty. They’ve developed curriculum for the cadets, entered it into the computer, and distributed it as a manual to follow.

But perhaps above all, they’ve sold the workouts to their pupils, with buy-in equating to results.

“It’s amazing synergy,” said Michael Carter, the college’s director of the police and personal trainer academies and chair of public safety. “I’ve never seen anything like it in the 17 years I’ve been at CCA.”

For Sheets, molding cadets into hardened, and hard-bodied, cops would hardly raise an eyebrow. But if Howard’s friends can only see him now after he spent a dozen years in and out of prison from 1999-2010.

“I know if I went back on the block guys would be like, ‘What?’ The homies would be tripping out,” Howard admitted. “But I’m not getting no younger, and I feel like what I’m doing right now I should have did 20 years ago. I really enjoy it; first, because I love to work out, the fitness aspect and all that.

“Right now, I’m in the best position I can be for my situation.”

But sometimes that place can hit just a little close to home.

Howard recently was asked to aid in an exercise involving the same Police Academy cadets for whom he’s been charged with unleashing their top physical potential in his work as their fitness instructor.


The gun wasn’t loaded with real bullets but instead “simunition” pellets – high-tech training ammunition used in law-enforcement training.

The situation couldn’t have been more lifelike and it made Howard was strangely nervous. Sweat poured down his forehead despite full knowledge that this was role playing and he was doing nothing wrong.

It just didn’t appear to be fun and games -- and for good reason.

It was a vivid reminder of earlier times, when crime infiltrated his own life and the police truly were his enemy of freedom.

Howard’s never made excuses for his unlawful misdeeds. Caught on a couple occasions in a web of drug distribution and gangs, Howard has been trying to do everything possible to get his life settled into normalcy. That process started with his first move to take a physiology class at CCA last August, completing the personal trainer wellness academy and getting his part-time gig in February, all steps on a path he hopes someday will include training high-end athletes.

Jumping around corners and seeing these police-in-training eye-to-eye was like hitting the rewind button on his past existence.

“I was in a drug raid one time and the only difference between this and the drug raid was that I didn’t know they were coming,” Howard recalled. “This one, I heard them coming, so I had time to react. In the drug raid, I didn’t have time to react and when they came in, I had all these infrared beams on me. It was like the scariest thing in the world.”

The laser focus is different now.

CCA took a chance on Howard and hired him following an extensive background check. Dan Agresti, who runs the college’s personal trainer program, honed in on Howard’s enthusiasm and knowledge. Carter ended up vouching for Howard after meeting him and having some pointed discussions. Howard’s parole officer signed off, too, and since has written glowing letters about the progress of this one-time felon.

But all the new CCA employee may really have needed was an Army of one.

... 

Patrick Sheets had a resume that counterbalanced Howard’s rap sheet. Buttoned-up demeanor. Indiana kid. Middle of three boys. Leader of men, charged with training NATO
Sheets was accepted to Regis University for West Point. "I wasn't fulfilled," Sheets explained of his decision to leave the military, something he'd decided even before exiting his Midwestern home for West Point. "I wasn't fulfilled."

It went beyond self-satisfaction, too, and into military red tape he envisioned -- and had witnessed firsthand.

"It gets to a point where you reach a level where it's a lot of politics and a lot of BS and it's not who I am. I like to ... be down at a normal level. I'm not all high and mighty."

Now out of the military, divorced, and adverse to the scholastic rigors of becoming a medical doctor, Sheets leaned on his practical side to make his next career choice. He opted to become a physical therapist, with a future goal of helping fellow soldiers deal with the emotional and physical changes they endure in combat.

Sheets was accepted to Regis University, where he's scheduled to begin classes this month. But at the time he had nearly a year to kill before his admittance, and Sheets happened upon CCA's personal training academy. It offered such recommended courses that aided physical therapy curriculum as kinesiology and exercise physiology, and, with him not working at the time, could fill his days productively (along with his other side job, training dogs for the blind).

But as CCA's motto proclaims, Sheets also would go beyond the book: this time, helping a stranger in need.

"They're both very drastically different people that somehow came together as friends," Agner said. "And they've just succeeded in it ever since."

Sheets missed the first day of class, but the next time he sat in the middle row right in front of Howard. It didn't take long for them to strike up a conversation.

"I don't know what it was," Howard related. "But he must have come to see that I had a struggling look on my face or something like that and he automatically offered his support."

The helping hand didn't extend just to academics. When Sheets discovered Howard was taking the bus to CCA, he offered rides. They soon began working out together. Sheets even would drive Howard to appointments.

The initial bond formed, it wasn't long that Howard would have to come clean about his criminal past replete with ill-fated decisions. Putting his life out there for his new friend to scrutinize was a call made easier by the ankle monitor under his clothing he wore that Sheets would inevitably discover.

Howard was bluntly honest, telling Sheets everything: the four-year sentence with a three-year tail for drug possession. Getting caught with drugs 90 days after leaving prison and being labeled a habitual offender under Colorado law. His involvement with the Gangster Disciples, or GDs, based out of Chicago but housed in Colorado Springs. The stints at Crowley County Correctional Facility in Olney Springs; at Four Mile in Canon City; to Delta on the Western Slope and a halfway house before making parole.

"I could still be behind bars or dead," Howard says now. "Just being a drug dealer I was robbed a couple times at gunpoint, by knife. I dealt with different people jumping me, stuff like that. Broken ribs. Broken jaw. All kinds of things."

Funny thing was, Howard didn't go the wrong way as some know-it-all teenager deciding there was no other route in life. Howard grew up in the rough Five Points and Park Hill neighborhoods of Denver. But he was a "late bloomer" to crime, opting for that route only after he was passed over for promotions at several jobs, leaving him scarred emotionally.

"I took it more personal than I should have," he admitted.

So, at age 29, he got sucked into the drug lifestyle and began hanging with dealers. Five Points was his "stepping ground" but his real malfeasance occurred in Colorado Springs, getting him "involved in some heavy stuff ... moving a little weight."

Prison only added weight on his shoulders. About to turn 40, facing another lengthy sentence, he feared the worst: that his diabetic mother would pass away while he was behind bars.

He told himself simply that enough was enough and that he needed to leave this life behind.

He worked out every day in prison, programming himself, too, to get on every work group no matter how hard the labor. He'd become a crew leader, enduring funny looks as a hulking black man in the Rocky Mountains fixing cattle fences. But once he was paroled, he couldn't shake his felon tag. He worked as a flagger on construction sites but hated battling the elements.

"So I went to school," Howard explained. "I struggled with trying to find something that I liked to do. Instead of going into a lot of dead-end jobs, working out was something I enjoyed doing, so why not make that my career?"

Class was one thing. CCA has an open-door policy for students. But...
Howard on Sheets: “He doesn’t have a ‘no’ bone in his body”

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it wasn’t your normal rubber-stamp process once the now 45-year-old student expressed an interest in working part time at the college. He had to do an extensive interview with Human Resources. A background check was performed. Carter took a gander at Howard’s rap sheet, didn’t see anything signifying violent or aggressive tendencies in any fashion and spelled out his expectations moving forward.

The job was his. Another position was open, and Howard invited Sheets to join him.

They’ve since become partners in ensuring a top-notch fitness experience for all their clients.

Sheets is an endurance athlete, having recently completed his first official marathon and training toward a triathlon within a year. Howard’s the power lifter, with muscles seemingly there to support other muscles.

Their styles only complement their personalities. It’s amazing synergy,” Carter said. “I’ve never seen anything like it in the 17 years I’ve been at CCA.

Carter, a former gym owner in Hawaii for 12 years added, “I’ve never seen two instructors work so well together.”

Bad decisions happen everywhere. Sheets saw it in the Army among some of the cadets, who would take weekend leave, smoke marijuana or snort cocaine and get caught. Even some of the stories of why these young kids enlisted sounded like escapes rather than calls to action. He’d served with people of all backgrounds, helping shape his worldview.

So Howard’s story didn’t really faze him; in fact, it just locked him right on target, in a sense.

The rides to work. The frequent calls to talk. Text blasts. This was undercover friendship, of sorts.

“I think that’s part of the natural leader side, a willingness to help people and not just get some personal gain out of it. …,” Sheets said. “It’s not where he is now. It’s not where he plans to go. I can genuinely see that. You can judge a person by his past, but it’s just that – his past. It’s not what’s hopefully going on right now.”

It would be unusual if Sheets didn’t reach out to help.

He knows change, both mentally and especially physically.

Change in his life has come in the forms of fellow soldiers – some dear friends – losing limbs in combat and suffering traumatic brain injuries. Change for these men and women are imposed through shards of metal, weaponry and wrong-place, wrong-time events.

A reputation is in the ether, more easily eradicated.

“I used to teach all my soldiers that when you’re in a situation or circumstance you’re required to make a decision and based on that decision you make, there’s an outcome, result or consequence, good or bad,” Sheets said. “Jack made some bad decisions. He was in a situation where growing up it was hard and he had to make some money, so I could see it, sure. I’m empathetic. I don’t agree with it. But that’s life. Not everybody grows up the same or in the same situations. If the roles were reversed, I’d want Jack to be open enough to give me an opportunity as a friend.”

Sheets also believes that with an improved support system Howard’s chances for a relapse are markedly diminished, though not assured. “Actions say a lot. He’s always punctual. He always does what he says he’s going to do, and he doesn’t make bad decisions for the most part.”

Having completed his personal fitness classes, Howard not only teaches at CCA but enrolled in a pair of computer classes so that his record keeping and spread sheets used in his job can improve. It’s self-improvement, but also his way of aiding Sheets in that portion of their partnership.

Still, no schooling can help Howard improve Sheets’ Michael Jackson dance impressions, or attempts at mimicking his vocal stylings. Giving the impact on his life, Howard will cut him some slack there.

“I don’t know how he feels but he’s a benefit in my life, not just because he’s a smart guy and everything, but he’s a good friend,” Howard said. “I treasure his friendship. He helps me with everything. If I ask him, he’s going to help me. He doesn’t have a ‘no’ bone in his body. He’s a very caring and giving guy.”

Giving grief counts, and there’s plenty of that, too.

“Clients see Jack and think, ‘Dang, I want to look like him,’” Sheets said. “Then they see me and think, ‘I don’t want to look like that skinny white guy. So Jack brings ‘em in, and dishes them to me.”
And to our many injured and involved ... you have our unwavering support

Anastasia Bacca; Jarrell Brooks; Emma Goos; Hannah Judson; Antanette Ongaro-Watson; Adrienne Henderson; Stephanie Izaguirre; Luisa SanLuis; Jennifer Seeger, and anyone, anywhere struggling from this tragedy.

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**Alexander “A.J” Boik**  
9/20/93-2/20/12  
Concurrent enrollment student in Spring 2012. Took class at Gateway HS through program.

**Jonathan Blunk**  
1/20/86-2/20/12  
Fall 2010 EMS graduate, who also took courses at the college as late as Spring 2011.

**Micayla Medek**  
5/5/89-2/20/12  
Took three courses at CCA over the course of two semesters, Fall 2010 and Spring 2011.

**Rebecca Wingo**  
10/8/79-2/20/12  
Had amassed 49 GPA hours at the college towards Associate of Arts degree.