



The Show Must Go On

The sound that unwittingly escapes when Aisha Spencer reaches hysterics doesn't produce noise of the Old McDonald's Farm, oink-oink-here, oink-oink-there variety. The rumbling of the bridge of her nose suggests more the slobbery satisfaction of hogs at feeding time.

Snort. Heh. Snort. It's unfettered joy with an accompanying soundtrack.

Spencer actually created this personal Frankenstein of traits, setting it upon the world and now totally incapable of reigning in her creation. The laugh was part of the creative process in shaping the character The Red Queen in the play "Looking Glass Alice" shortly after arriving at Community College of Aurora in the fall of 2009. The invention since has become a part of her DNA.

It isn't the only byproduct of the six theater productions in which Spencer's been involved at what's become her second, and in many ways her first, home at the Black Box Theatre in the Fine Arts Building on the CentreTech Campus.

She'll randomly use sign language learned in "Romeo and Juliet."

She'll flash a geeky expression, courtesy of "25th Putnam County Spelling Bee."

She learned some 'sass' from "Ragtime."

She'll playfully hit people within her reach because of "Anonymous."

And, through it all, behind the scenes, she's managed to embrace cheese, of all things,



Aisha Spencer has been in six CCA stage productions. Yet her story isn't about characters as much as character, as the inspiration and encouragement she's given others has coincided with her own hidden life and death struggle.

like mice at a Kraft factory. She doesn't so much eat this dairy delight but devour it. Giant Costco-sized blocks. Individually wrapped slices stacked like playing cards. Enough cubes to puzzle-piece together into a giant square fortress. All have a short shelf life with Spencer around.

But what many people even closest to the student/actress still don't know was that cheese wasn't just a calcium-rich dietary choice; it was also part of her private means of survival.

Spencer for most of the past three-plus years has hidden away cancer that's wracked her body. Cheese effectively fought the nausea she frequently endured once she finally chose immunotherapy treatments to combat the disease long after her initial diagnosis.

It's often said the show must go on, and Spencer did everything to ensure she could be part of nearly every one, even if a Gouda wheel or two had to go. It helped ensure that her personal travails remained clutched tight to the vest, though, make no mistake, there was silent suffering.

The debilitating pain from scoliosis she's suffered from an early age, has required multiple surgeries to correct and will now necessitate another complex procedure in February. Spencer somehow even managed to hide a bone marrow transplant from all but her closest confidantes, scheduling that procedure between CCA productions.

"There was never a moment

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President Alton D. Scales addressed faculty and staff during two all-college meetings Jan. 18 to clarify the reasons behind the Higher Learning Commission accreditation visit April 15-17 and the anticipated role for college employees.

Scales stressed the role CCA plays as a public institution in an area where so many private colleges are situated and that HLC accreditation is a vital piece in ensuring that a national quality standard is being actualized.

"It talks directly about our future and our viability as a resource in the community," Scales said during his hour-long informational sessions at Lowry and CentreTech.

The HLC visit, and an accompanying self-study report, will provide tangible proof that CCA meets pre-set criteria set forth by the accrediting organization for institutions across the United States.

Those standards ensure in CCA's case: that courses seamlessly transfer statewide, since Colorado four-year institutions are accredited by the same entity; that from a fiscal perspective the college is in good standing and operates in the black; that all efforts to impact the student in his or her totality are made from a quality perspective; and that faculty themselves meet a standard by earning credentials from accredited institutions.

The process also demonstrates that the college has significance to the CCA community and community at large. "The HLC wants to make sure that we're doing things that aid us in being relevant," Scales said.

Scales' speeches weren't just informational in nature but also a call to arms to CCA faculty, administration and staff about their roles in guaranteeing the HLC visit runs smoothly and efficiently.

His message touched upon the importance of all the college's internal stakeholders demonstrating that they're on board and believe in what the college has to offer by speaking in an informed manner about what it is CCA does every day. That lengthy list of daily contributions includes transforming lives; aiding individuals in getting to the next place in life; positioning people for continued growth; and acting as change agents for individuals who often possess potential but are limited by financial/time constraints that make significant modifications in quality of life difficult to achieve.

READY, SET ..

President Scales addresses faculty, staff on impending HLC visit



HLC Calendar of Events

February

8 - President Scales meets with Student Government Association
 11-20 - CCA mural project publicity events, CentreTech and Lowry
 20 - HLC Open Forum with President Scales, CentreTech Campus, Time/Room TBD
 28 HLC Open Forum with President Scales, Lowry, Time/Room TBD

March

Mid-month - Mock visit, TBD

April

1-5 - HLC Accreditation Awareness Week
 2 - All-College Meeting, 4 p.m., CentreTech Fin Arts F100
 4 - All-College Meeting, 4 p.m., Lowry campus, Bergren Room
 15-17 HLC team visit

"In the context of our visit, they're going to talk to you," he told the assembled group of CCA employees. "Some of you are going to be selected because of your role. Some of you are going to be selected randomly and asked questions. ... One of the things

that should be in the back of your mind is, 'What is my role?'"

Scales implored each individual CCA employee to casually examine the criteria descriptors, pick a couple of them, and apply them to their everyday work.

"It shouldn't require a major effort," he explained. "Look at a piece they are going to assess by and think about how what you do relates."

He asked faculty and staff to frame their answers within the prisms of CCA's mission statement, values and lifelong skills already engrained in many of their minds, along with the criteria set by HLC for accreditation.

The criterion includes:

- Mission
- Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct
- Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources and Support
- Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement
- Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness

Those major components tied to the HLC visit already have been addressed in written form during a rigorous self-examination that has been in the works since 2011. CCA's self-study report will be released in mid-

February and is a key component of reaccreditation.

"The self study is a complete physical – touching upon the way we do things, how organizations interact with us, our process, and our systems," Scales said.

Other factors that will be examined by the HLC include an extensive resource room to review documents and other materials.

The public will be asked to comment on CCA's community impact, as well.

Scales asked that faculty and staff participate in upcoming accreditation awareness events in the coming months and encourage others – especially students – to do the same. Students could be picked randomly by HLC and quizzed about their college knowledge, as well.

"No one is in a better position to tell our story than us," he explained. "And it's a story worth telling."

The odds of us not getting reaccredited are slim since CCA has demonstrated excellence, time and again. But the president pointed out that he wanted to be accredited in a way where there are no special caveats or provisions tied to accreditation.

"We all know our student stories resonate," he said. "I listened at our recognition event in December. I heard individuals who came from households where they were the only ones acquiring any kind of degree beyond a high school degree; those who had come from countries ravaged by war; individuals that came from homes where they were less than affirmed; those who were victims of violence.

"They all came here because they knew what we had was going to be a deal maker for them. It would change the way they existed and give them new promise, new opportunities.

We are the purveyors of dreams. We turn ideas, dreams, into reality every day."

Accreditation is merely a chance for CCA to demonstrate this in a tangible manner.



Permission granted: A fresh approach emerges

Law & Order: EDU

Award: \$100,000 **Project Manager:** Margaret Ann Uchner, Legal Studies/Paralegal & Criminal Justice

Abstract: CCA's Paralegal and Criminal Justice programs are converting a classroom into a fully functioning courtroom. The project's aim is to give students an opportunity to experience the workings of litigation in a real-life setting, to learn in a way that cannot be duplicated in a traditional classroom. The courtroom addresses a need for students to enter the workforce with the practical skills necessary to assist in litigation. It will help bolster the curriculum by allowing more real-life learning. The program will tie the courtroom to learning objectives in many classes and disciplines, leading to increased retention and completion.

The Best of Blended Learning

Award: \$100,000 **Project Manager:** JoAnn Burkhart

Abstract: The Community College of Aurora proposes *The Best of Blended Learning for the 21st Century*, a project designed to address the need to increase retention and completion through the development of best practices for innovative, immersive blended learning courses. Project objectives include researching existing innovative course design; developing a manual of engaging practices; training a designated group of instructors from CCA, ACC, and RRCC to help develop full courses aligned with the CCCS competencies for stand-alone use by instructors across the CCCS; and hosting a dissemination event to highlight successful blended course design and materials.

TheiaSys or T-Sys

Award: \$99,500 **Project Manager:** Frederic Lahey

Abstract: TheiaSys will give students studio level evaluative tools to predict audience engagement in their own student film projects. By using real-world resources, students will be able to focus themselves on the essentials involved in audience engagement, so that they can raise the quality of their production projects. TheiaSys will be fundamental in shifting upper level production classes from traditional classroom delivery to hybrid instruction, reserving traditional classroom time for individual meetings to evaluate and partner in the production of student projects.

Checking In: Business Behind the Scenes

Award: \$99,998 **Project Manager:** Tamra Schmitt

Abstract: CCA will implement a multi-level business simulation competition for BUS115 students. Utilizing a D2L virtual lab and the CESIM OnService program, students work in teams to manage all the business activities of a family hotel. Winning teams maximize the overall return to shareholders which consolidates key success factors into one measurable criterion. Competition rounds begin with intra-class (within each class), move to inter-section (between classes) and end with an inter-campus scaling round in spring 2014 where teams from throughout CCCS compete against one another with one team being declared the CCCS champions.

Model United Nations

Award: \$34,840 **Project Manager:** Bobby Pace

Abstract: The Model United Nations will immerse students into the practice of international politics and diplomacy. As a multi-disciplinary collaboration our learning objectives focus on public speaking, research methodology, written communication, group engagement and the development of international public policy. The simulation requires student delegations to adopt a UN member state and work to advance the state's goals within the UN system. National delegations are subdivided into working groups of two students who will represent their state within different UN agencies. Participants will develop the skills necessary to effectively engage the public policy process while simultaneously exploring their own political efficacy.

System issues CCA five grants

Immersive-learning expansion a byproduct

The notions of incorporating hands-on, immersive learning aren't new to Community College of Aurora. The advent of the Center for Simulation and the inclusion of realistic portrayals in the EMS program was only the beginning, leading to faculty development seminars about curriculum that could effectively cross disciplines and use these learning methodologies in a streamlined fashion.

The integration of such curriculum is growing and will continue to do so. No further proof is necessary than the nearly \$435,000 in grant funding the Colorado Community College System recently awarded to CCA to implement five new immersive-learning projects through June 2014.

In total, CCA now has nine different game-based initiatives in the works or past the approval stage.

"What's really amazing about them is that while some of them are about cutting-edge technology, they range across a whole variety of programs, all of our divisions, and all kinds of faculty are new to this," said Chris Ward, the college's executive director of Grants and Planning. "To me, this is a real testimony to the importance of vision and investing in faculty development that helps people see the value in this, and now we're bearing the fruits of that."

And with it, the creativity that's emerged has led to some exciting learning opportunities for students.

New handbook gives incoming faculty early helping hand

New adjuncts and full-time faculty began to receive instructional reading material to help smooth their transition to CCA beginning in January.

The college has eliminated the Faculty Q and A section that for years has served as an online primer for employees joining the college on the MyCCA portal. It's been replaced by a faculty handbook, which includes materials culled from a six-person working group.

The 18-page document has been updated to include information pertinent to individuals teaching their first classes at the college. It welcomes them, advises them of the resources available, and walks them through the expectations stemming from their first class experience.

For existing employees, it can serve as a reminder of processes, locations of information and key contacts.

The handbook was first distribut-

ed at the Jan. 12 new faculty orientation. It emanated out of the self-study process in preparation for April's Higher Learning Commission visit.

"It strikes the right tone," said Ted Snow, dean of Liberal Arts, who led the working group for the handbook. "It welcomes our faculty members and lets them know how important they are to us, and it sends the message that we're here to support you in why you teach."

Victor Vialpando, Bobby Pace, Kerry Johnson, Beth Lattone and Alex Girard rounded out the committee.

"What I really like about it is that we're putting a useful, easy-to-navigate handbook in the hands of our faculty members that immediately orientates them to our philosophy," Snow said. "I think it will make it smooth for them, especially early in their time with us."

Raw reality of situation pushes fear to the side

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where anybody who was a regular around her saw her for what she really was experiencing,” said Jess Hyer, a close friend of Spencer. “She wouldn’t let them.”

Pride, courage and revulsion to somehow being viewed differently all factored into that clandestine mindset. But it was an unbridled love of acting and the symbiotic relationships she felt with the casts that surrounded her that helped keep her going.

“One of the great things about acting is you forget everything that’s going on and become another person,” said Hyer, a veteran herself of several CCA productions and now a former student. “You can become someone who isn’t sick, who isn’t in pain. Even if you have the physical reminder, while you’re on stage, it melts away and it’s almost like it’s not real and you get to live a different life, even if it’s just for five minutes. I think that’s probably one thing that keeps bringing her back.”

The irony is, Spencer admitted that she probably never would have even tried out for a single play had she been perfectly healthy because she dreaded public speaking.

“One thing having an illness does is it tells you there’s no room for letting fear get in the way of doing things,” Spencer said, adding with a laugh, “So, in a way I should be grateful.”

At about nine years old Spencer saw “The Lion King” at the Temple Buell Theatre and was blown away by the effort and enthusiasm it took to create that show. She interpreted what she’d seen as magic. “I wished I had that much passion,” Spencer recalled. “I didn’t know it would turn into my passion in the end.”

Feeling that same magic as an actress at CCA now runs as deep in her veins as the impurities in her body; is as permanent as the metal fastening some of her bones. So this play-in-pain motif was going to be her life, allowing her to live her existence to its fullest before the clock expired on her terms.



Friends came out in support of Aisha Spencer in celebration of her recent Student Success Award. From left are Crystal Bergeron, Jamie Meek, Spencer and Taber Youmans. Said Bergeron, whom Spencer considers more like a sister than a pal, “She’s been told she has to take it easy here or there and she won’t accept it. She has to give it her all or not at all.”

“I don’t want people to see me as a cancer girl. That’s not who I am,” Spencer said emphatically. “I want people to see me as the crazy, weird girl who’s in theater and makes people laugh. I prefer that.”

Still, cancer is an inescapable companion. Doctors dating back to the spring of 2009 told Spencer that living two years was the likely scenario; five years a perfect storm.

The calendar since has been replaced on the wall four times since that diagnosis, and within that time she’s been able to experience what she wanted, as she wanted: without boundaries and devoid of complaint.

Even more remarkable, Spencer inspired merely by the way she carried herself and supported others unequivocally within the college’s Performing Arts department, even though for the longest time nearly everyone was kept in the dark about her back story.

“It was like she had finally found her place at CCA – a good solid nook that she could sit in and get her work done. Then, all of a sudden, life just opened up for her,” said Lana Chavez, another close friend. “All of a sudden she was able to climb out of that black hole of depression she had been in, take a look around and really say,

‘There’s hope. I can do this.’

“There’s something about CCA that enables that in a person,” Chavez continued. “I don’t know if it’s the environment. I don’t know if the energy is good and we’re in an Indian spiritual place here. But every single person who takes classes here, and really every person who’s part of the family in the theater building blooms.”

Spencer’s cancer battle didn’t go public until the most recent play this past fall, “Glimpses” and, again, at a faculty speech at last semester’s Student Success Awards, where Spencer was honored for academics. Both occasions featured mentions of her condition, including a searing monologue in the play that Spencer delivered.

Cast members had suspicions and were hearing rumors just prior to pre-show rehearsals for “Glimpses” that something more was happening to their friend and cast mate physically, but it took her courageously voicing her condition and stripping bare the connected emotions for people that had spent hours on end with her to finally get confirmation.

Spencer was that good at obfuscation.

“As much stress as a show brings her, she can’t survive without them,”

said Crystal Bergeron, a former CCA student and Spencer’s best friend. “She’s been told she has to take it easy here or there and she won’t accept it. She has to give it her all or not at all. It’s her family and every time there’s a new show, she makes more family and grows her friendship base, hones her craft and becomes a mentor. How can you not want that? It’s where she feels beautiful, talented, wanted, and respected.”

Those qualities shine through the more Spencer allows you to see.

Many of her cast mates seek her company and advice metaphorically like moths to a flame, only the warmth that emanates is real. Should an actor or actress need a well-placed kick in the pants for motivation, Spencer isn’t afraid to dole that out, either, but she never comes off as nasty while doing so.

“She’s just been my right-hand girl,” said theatre director Stacey D’Angelo, who has guided Spencer during four plays and through the developmental stages of another before taking time off for maternity leave last year. “I honestly couldn’t have done what I’ve done here without her.”

Yet, true to Spencer’s personal-

Smiles abound, but plight can overwhelm

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ity, she chooses to deflect any credit regarding the impact she's obviously had on fellow CCA actors and crew. She'll tell you that she "isn't doing anything" and "doesn't deserve" any attention. At the same time, Spencer readily admitted that if she projects positivity on others that perhaps they won't look so closely at her own situation.

"These people are so talented, so loving so gracious, that I think they deserve to make it in whatever they want to make it in," Spencer said in a lengthy interview before the December break. "I try to encourage them about that, because they have brilliant lights in them. I just want people to see that light."

So, what then, should people say about Spencer, who counts the time that passes by her plays and not days? "That I like cheese," she responds without hesitation.

Uncontrollable snorting commences.

Spencer hasn't always been so happy-go-lucky. She admits to darker moments and bouts with depression even now.

"I cower in a room and watch TV and eat ice cream sometimes," she said.

It's just that she's done her level best to not reveal those underpinnings of emotion or made excuses when her health might have raised questions publicly.

"I'm human and obviously it's a big deal," Spencer said of her plight. "I can't always keep a smile on my face. When you have something looming over you, you can't help but dwell on it sometimes. I call this the 'numb period' and that's why I'm a TV show addict. They kind of get me out of my head into thinking about anything else. I'll stop talking to people for a couple days, which they try to prevent me from doing."

Even so, the public front she's concocted at CCA has been a masterful cover-up of her underlying condition.

Vomiting was given disguise by a flu bug that hit many of the cast. A substantial loss of weight -- 15-20 pounds on an already slight frame -- was sold as not feeling well lately. Debilitating back pain was chalked up to her scoliosis. Spencer at one point hid under her clothes an electrical shock



CCA Theater Director Stacey D'Angelo held up a boom box and played a tribute that she entitled, "The Aisha Project" at December's Student Success Awards ceremony. Friends gave snippets of their love and respect for Spencer on CD.

"The theater is so important to her that I think she's willing to let all her medical stuff go on stage. It's almost like a drug when she gets up there. She's addicted to it.

**-- Martell Harding
CCA student, actor**

pack that helped regulate overwhelming discomfort from walking or sitting for long periods.

She already was notorious for her asthma and bad allergies, so those were built-in excuses, as well. A device gave her concentrated amounts of medication and regulated her breathing. She stayed away from places where dust and dander may be in substantial supply, sometimes skipping social occasions with the cast because of that risk.

But at least there were people like D'Angelo, Bergeron, Chavez and Hyer who, over time, were let in the know

and could also help run interference, if needed. The play "Blackheart" was particularly excruciating for Spencer physically.

"The theater is so important to her that I think she's willing to let all her medical stuff go on stage. It's almost like a drug when she gets up there," said Martell Harding, who has been in five productions with Spencer and didn't have his own suspicions confirmed that his co-star suffered from a severe illness until last semester.

"She's addicted to it, and she loves doing it so much, I think putting her on bed rest couldn't stop her from wanting to be here. And for me to see that, it's just incredible. I don't know what I would do."

A sense of helplessness actually first set Spencer on her current course from a teenager to the brave-faced 23-year-old she is today. Before the thrill of the theater consumed her, despair had its hold, preceding even her cancer diagnosis.

An Aurora native, she began doing "pioneer" work shortly after her high school graduation in preparation for a future missionary trip as a Jehovah's Witness. She handed out literature 50 hours weekly door to door for several months, a path that reflected more the expectations of her religious father, with whom she lived growing up, than free will. But Spencer soon discovered it wasn't the life she wanted and clashed with her own ideals about

education.

"I just felt I wasn't going anywhere," she explained. "I felt stuck and didn't know who I was."

A suicide attempt followed. She was hospitalized three weeks, received professional psychological treatment, moved in with her brother and took personal inventory, trying to discover a path that did suit her.

One revelation that came from her self-examination was that she was "never, ever going to be that way again" by trying to take her own life. She realized the selfishness of the act and was able to recognize the impact her actions, had she succeeded, would have had on others.

Another insight gleaned at the time was that mundane daily stresses -- relationships, money, family -- were insignificant in the big picture. A positive mindset affected her long view and became engrained even with the short window she'd been presented by the medical world.

"I thought life was something you had to learn lessons from to be better than yourself," Spencer said of her revised thought process. "I thought it was a journey -- a journey that taught you have to love people, how to be a good person and discover what makes you happy."

That rosy outlook could have taken a crippling 180-degree turn after she experienced inexplicable

Pressures of silence, illness finally lead to an admission

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pain that prompted her to seek medical help and eventually produced her cancer diagnosis. Spencer thought the physical agony she was enduring was tied to her scoliosis. Her back had been surgically repaired at age 11 and she had always known she would need additional treatment as her body grew and changed.

Instead, she was shocked to hear that she had tumors inside her and that more than one organ was affected. Doctors said she was in Stage 3 of her cancer and provided her with three treatment options:

chemotherapy, immunotherapy or no treatment at all. She chose inaction, against medical advice, and six months later enrolled in school.

At CCA, she could explore some of life's biggest questions through the prism of Literature, Psychology and Sociology.

"I thought it was an opportunity for me to kind of live the life I wanted to live," Spencer said.

She began taking classes at the Colorado Film School, since it merged her loves of movies and writing. But she also took an Acting I course under D'Angelo and was immediately hooked. "She's a force to be reckoned with," Spencer said. "I thought she was crazy because of some of the exercises where she had us

act like fools, like creature morphs and all that stuff. But she talked about the sense of knowing the self and who you are on the inside. And she taught me to learn my inner self more."

D'Angelo's methodology of portraying characters and characteristics through the exploration of one's own personality -- drawing out the flaws and facets within the mind -- was a wakeup call to Spencer. She would audition for "Looking Glass Alice" then continue to ride the production wave all the way through "Glimpses," missing only one play in the process.

"In acting, I realized that I probably knew one ounce of who I was," Spencer said. "At 23, I still don't know who I am. But I'm constantly on this journey of finding out this person I am."

D'Angelo knew nothing about her student's medical background when she first crossed paths with Spencer but was immediately taken aback by

Spencer's demeanor. "She was just so on fire and so alive," the theater director recalled. "There was this spark and drive and desire. In hindsight, she wanted to do this for herself, and she made it happen."

In a larger sense, the heartfelt commitment to a life's pursuit that Spencer had once seen in the cast of "The Lion King" was only now fully understood from her own personal experience.

"I had never been fully passionate before," Spencer maintained. "I thought I was. But when I did acting, I finally realized that when you're passionate about something, you put your whole heart and self into it and you'd do anything -- anything -- to keep that passion."

The lengths she'd ultimately take to protect that passion would be astounding, but not before some emotional cracks would initially surface. Spencer had attended CCA for a full semester and a half and finished "Looking Glass Alice" while still managing to keep her secret. She'd done such a solid job in the play that D'Angelo even extended an invitation for Spencer to attend a Rocky Mountain Theatre Association regional competition in Montana to showcase the Red Queen character.

But a week away from home wasn't the best medicine for Spencer. Feeling burdened by the lie she was living and trapped

by her silence, she broke down and couldn't complete many of the requirements of the acting camp. Things came to a head when Hyer, who attended the competition with Spencer, expressed doubt about whether she could audition well enough to gain acceptance into an upcoming summer theater troupe.

"She just snapped at me," Hyer remembered. "She was crying and said, 'You're so lucky, because you have all the time in the world and you can go and do anything you want. Some people don't have that. You saying that you're afraid of failing is really ticking me off.' She was like, 'I wish I could do this and have the time for it, but honestly I don't know much time I have left and I try to do as much as I can.'"

Hyer was then the first at CCA to hear Spencer's cancer admission.

"After that competition," Hyer added, "I'd say something about fear or not feeling good and she'll just look at me and say, 'Montana. ...'"



Clockwise from left, Jessica Hyer, Aisha Spencer, Crystal Bergeron and Alexa Casey pose in the Yellowstone National Park gift shop in July 2010. The four friends all met during CCA stage productions.



Aisha Spencer takes her first turn on stage as the Red Queen during the Fall 2009 production of "Looking Glass Alice." Theater Director Stacey D'Angelo said she was taken aback by the passion demonstrated by Spencer during the audition process prior to the play.

The heightened emotions Spencer felt were exacerbated by the thought of letting D'Angelo down by not completing the acting seminar. Fearing that, and desperate to keep D'Angelo's total faith, Spencer went to her office and revealed, as she put it, the "big confession."

"It was crying and tears and release unlike anything I've ever witnessed, to be honest," said D'Angelo, who emanated warmth and concern to Spencer and told her student to confide in others to help her through.

D'Angelo during their long talk also was told about Spencer's very personal decision not to pursue treatment. "I just remember my heart sinking into my stomach hearing that and telling her, 'I respect your decision.' But I knew she was young in a lot of ways and that she was a fighter. I begged her to think about it."

Spencer wouldn't be swayed at first. "I wanted to live life like it could end at any moment. I thought it made everything more precious. But I was really fooling myself into thinking that giving up was precious, because it wasn't."

The tipping point to seek treatment finally came

Spencer

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when Spencer's best friend since ninth grade joked off the cuff that she couldn't live without her and that if Spencer died she'd "haunt her grave."

Immunotherapy started in November 2010 to combat the original and additional tumors that had cropped up since her initial diagnosis. The shots – designed to boost the immune system to defeat the cancer -- were administered weekly for 90 days, then tapered off to once a month. Cheese binges commenced. But Spencer was feeling better. She noted that she "started living a better life, if that makes sense," and that finally, on good days she could hang out with friends or family "instead of being half-there."

But through it all there were still bad days filled with migraines and neurological issues that caused twitching and her legs and arms to go numb. There also was navigating a tricky relationship with her mother, with whom she moved in after years apart, and having to rely on her for meals and hygiene and support when the pain became so severe that she couldn't walk.

"What kept me going through, and what kept a smile on my face was this theater department," Spencer said. "Even though nobody really knew what I was going through, these people put a smile on your face every single day. They give you hugs, even when you don't think you need one. They take care of you. These people are unlike any people I've ever met."

The pull of acting was so strong that Spencer returned for the fall 2011 production of "25th" fresh off her summer bone marrow transplant. The spinal tap she'd endured, the excruciating pain that followed surgery that she compared to "Harry Potter when he lost all his bones and had to grow them all back" and the necessity of wearing masks to interact with others was enough to prompt her to plan to at least take it easy in that production but not stay away.

But Spencer couldn't self-police herself into a reduced role. She ended up assistant directing – which included teaching dance and choreography to the cast and also leading extra rehearsals -- while also being coaxed into joining the cast as an ensemble member.

The workload ended up wearing her body down to the point where she

was eventually bedridden, again, taking her out of CCA and "Spoon River Anthology" last spring.

"I look back on it and think, "That wasn't smart," she said.

Another surgery designed to alleviate growing pain in her back and neck from her scoliosis followed last summer and necessitated wearing braces and teaching her body to walk again.

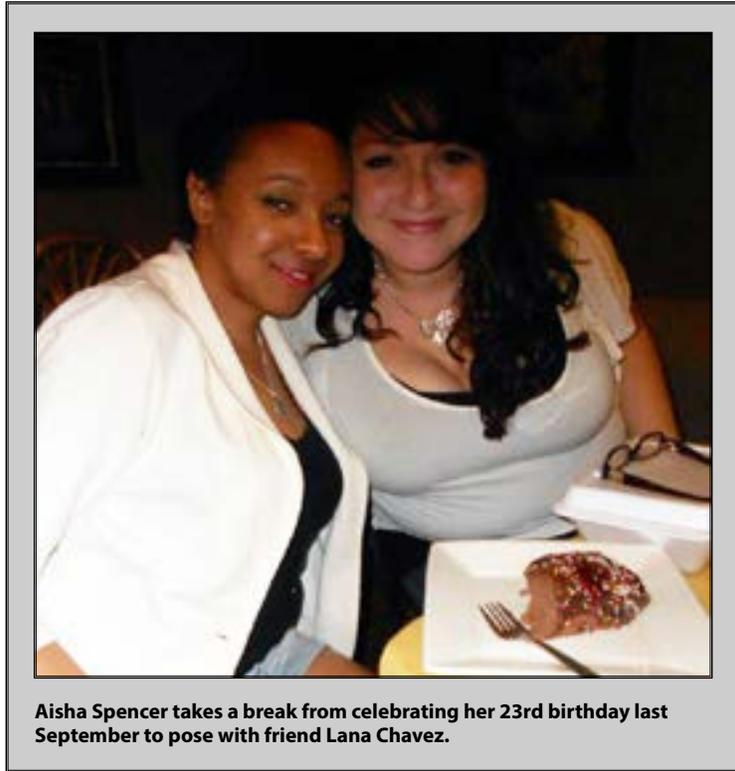
"Even though I knew about the cancer, seeing her in that fragile state shocked me," Hyer recalled.

Spencer needed to walk every day with braces to regain her strength. Chavez often accompanied her as Spencer first took steps across the

central theme was healing. She suspected D'Angelo would ask her to put her heart on the stage as never before, by talking publicly about her physical struggles. But D'Angelo said she "knew it was coming" anyway.

It was at her tryout that Spencer finally said the word aloud – cancer – in the Blackbox Theater in front of D'Angelo and a swathe of empty seats.

"She just kind of let it all out. Everything came out in that audition," D'Angelo recalled. "She just broke down and I remember holding her and hugging her, and for me, that was her first public declaration. And I knew how big it was for her to say that in an artistic way in a public setting."



Aisha Spencer takes a break from celebrating her 23rd birthday last September to pose with friend Lana Chavez.

street from her house, then through the neighborhood and eventually all the way to the end of road as part of rehabilitation.

Bergeron previously aided another one of Spencer's recoveries by sneaking her candy Easter bunnies and jelly beans as part of her constant support system.

"I think one of the ways Aisha's been able to keep fighting is that she doesn't let her body stop her, and it seems like she never has," D'Angelo said. "The theater department has given her an opportunity to really push it in a way that an athlete pushes their body but in a very different way, too, because the emotions follow."

Spencer's emotions reached a pinnacle when she returned this past fall to CCA for "Glimpses," a play whose

It was even more public once the topic was broached in the production itself, first through rehearsals with cast mates, then in front of an audience. The Student Success Awards in December later featured D'Angelo also talking about Spencer's cancer. She underscored her student's courage by holding up a boom box that played a CD with heartfelt expressions from some of Spencer's closest friends.

Bergeron found it difficult to sum up her feelings in the required two sentences she was given for that CD. "It's almost like having your own sister or having a child with the love most of us feel for her."

Such sentiments are needed now more than ever with Spencer facing another, extremely delicate surgical

procedure. More tumors are expected to be removed, but the extent of the internal damage isn't fully known with the metal in her back making accurate internal imaging impossible. Doctors also will attempt to straighten Spencer's neck, which causes her to walk in a hunched position. A 'normal' neck should be about 15-20 degrees; hers currently has a 50-degree curvature.

Best-case scenario is that Spencer has fewer and fewer tumors and goes into remission, can live longer and have neurological pain and tension eased. But even to get there, it will take six months to a year recovery period in order to allow bones to fuse and solidify. The surgery also brings with it the danger of paralysis, or worse, if things go awry.

"I don't know what's going to happen and I want to think of the best. That's kind of where I want to keep my mind at," Spencer said. "At the same time, I'm realistic and logical, which I really wish I wasn't half the time."

And in this case, part of the reality is that Spencer will be separated from the college, and a theatre program, she cherishes for an extended period. It's a prospect she labels "horrible" because her spirits are uplifted when she's on campus. "I have more hope ... and that in itself is more healing than anything else, keeping that belief that you have something to live for, something to hope for."

It's suggested off the cuff that the Black Box Theatre perhaps be replicated in her recovery room to lift her spirits. It is, after all, a place where Spencer has felt like the impossible could happen; where the world wasn't the ugly place it actually is; where the joy she experienced on stage recalled her youthful belief in Santa Claus on a Christmas Day.

It's a locale, too, where Spencer's dramatic and comedic performances have brought scads of color to the dark surrounding hue.

Spencer knows every square inch of the Black Box Theatre, from the curtains where she came out to ominous theme music as the Red Queen, to the spots backstage where numerous pranks were pulled, to the wooden subfloor underneath the black laminate where many of the actors have secretly signed their names and written notes.

Turns out, Spencer has two items written under the floor. One talks about never taking moments in life for granted.

The other lists one simple word. Cheese.

BRANCHING OUT

Thanks to Perkins grant funding, the college's LRC will have a bigger presence at Lowry

The Learning Resource Center at the CentreTech campus is branching out to Lowry.

The project, seeded with Perkins Project grant funding, is limited to career and technical education (CTE) programs, which neatly matches the curriculum taught at Lowry.

The long-range plan is to have the library services at Lowry focused on all students. But, for now, the nearly \$76,000 award for the endeavor will be used for such departments as Paralegal, Criminal Justice, Art and New Media, Business, Emergency Medical training and more for the next year.

A full-time librarian, Dina Hornreich, has been hired for the length of Perkins funding to provide instruction to the CTE programs throughout Lowry on different days, and is available both via rotating scheduling and via appointment through the library website.

There will be no centralized library at Lowry but assistance with research

and citations, individual appointments and classroom sessions will help fill the information vacuum that previously existed on campus outside of science and law libraries that already had physical presences.

"Over 50 percent of the students at CCA attend classes at Lowry, so we need to have the same services there," said Megan Kinney, the college's director of Library Services.

Four kiosks allowing students to access databases, 24-hour live chat and locate physical books also will be in place beginning in late January. They will be installed at the Center for Simulation, Colorado Film School, West Quad and North Quad and provide guidance in research, writing and tutoring.

"So much of what we do is electronic and online in terms of the resources themselves. ... This is kind of a physical manifestation of the LRC at Lowry," Kinney said.

A web page and a short video will



A new kiosk from the Learning Resource Center sits in the quiet study area of the Lowry campus. The machine was installed in late January.

be created to promote the revamped services. New student and faculty orientations will spread the word. The Lowry front desk also is expected to have information in hand.

The long-range plan is to renew Perkins grant funding for another year, while hopefully build a case for a full-time librarian in a future budget cycle. Kinney plays to compile com-

piling quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate how the services positively affected student retention and grades.

"My expectation is that we'll increase student retention and completion by having the support resources that they need on that campus to help them with their research projects," Kinney said.

New scholarship application system eases process for students, staff

The CCA Foundation scholarship selection process has removed the paper trail.

A new online scholarship management software has been implemented beginning in November and not only is saving trees but scads of time.

The software, from the company AcademicWorks, is, according to the company, designed to provide "a comprehensive scholarship management solution that allows colleges, universities and foundations to efficiently match students with relevant scholarship opportunities, manage awards and recognize scholarship donors."

So far, it's done just that, and in the future, has the capability for integration with the Banner system to streamline the process even further.

Community College of Aurora is the second college in the state's community college system after Front Range to implement the software.

"It really benefits the students be-

cause it's so much easier for them, and it allows me to go in and track every single component and piece of the process," said Regina Edmondson, the CCA Foundation's associate director of development.

Previously, applicants for one of the 165 scholarships each semester ranging from \$200 to \$2,500, and totaling about \$260,000, submitted their materials in a variety of ways: in person, via e-mail and U.S. Mail. Given the criteria to apply, which includes an essay, two letters of recommendation and an application, that meant 800 pieces of paper had to be shuffled if there are, say, 200 total applicants.

That information would then have to be filtered through and matched to specific scholarships through manual spreadsheets. Reports had to be run to figure out whether the criteria students needed involving GPA and enrollment hours, also matched up. All that paperwork subsequently would be submitted to scholarship selection committees after all documents were scanned.

"In just every way possible, it was creating stacks and stacks of paper,"

Edmondson said.

But now the process for both students and staff is online, paperless and efficient.

Students access the scholarship link via the Foundation or Student tabs on CCA's website, create a username and password, and can make frequent updates during the open application window. All of the scholarship opportunities and criteria can be viewed. The software will automatically match students to specific scholarships based on eligibility.

Faculty and staff letters of recommendation can be requested through the system, as well. An e-mail will be generated to the party they hope to solicit for kudos, and a link is provided to the specific scholarship opportunity the student is pursuing. Faculty or staff can click on a link and upload the letter of recommendation, again eliminating paperwork and providing a simple, single option.

An ancillary benefit is that benefactors giving CCA money to deserving students get more transparency than ever.

"I can clearly outline the impact of their donations and the scholarship," Edmondson said, adding that profiles of donors are available to peruse, too, alongside the mechanics of applying.

Edmondson sets an opening and closing date to apply in the software settings. The upcoming period to apply for fall scholarships is Feb. 18, ending sometime in May.

As much as the AcademicWorks software already has helped, the prospects of integrating with Banner in the future could increase efficiency.

Edmondson still has to manually verify the GPA, hours of enrollment and Pell Grant eligibility maintained by individual students. Automation of those steps is possible with the Banner link, which requires Colorado Community College System approval since it's a system-wide database that maintains all pertinent student record information at all of its member colleges across the state.

"But the time saving part of it is still enough to go forward, even though you're not using the Banner piece," Edmondson said.



Edmondson

Information bank

Kyla Doddridge began a new position as the college's director of the Center for Outreach and Recruitment on Jan. 14.

Doddridge had served in CCA's Office of Student Life prior to the move and came to the college with significant higher education experience in recruiting, student life, housing and orientation.

Doddridge will continue to direct the new student orientation program.

Additionally, **Robin Blish** is the new administrative assistant in advising.

Two CCA students – **Jessica Harrison** and **John Lyons** – have been nominated to the All-USA Community College Academic Team.

Twenty students will be selected to the national team, with each receiving a \$2,500 scholarship and medallion. Membership in Phi Theta Kappa isn't required but that national organization is a presenting sponsor and will host the awards ceremony at its annual convention in San Francisco on April 22.

CCA is once again partnering with the Denver-based Piton Foundation to provide free tax preparation to low- and moderate-income families through the Tax Help Colorado program.

The Lowry site, in the West Quad, will be open on Saturdays (9 a.m.-3 p.m.), Tuesdays (1-8 p.m.); and Fridays (noon-5 p.m.) from Jan. 26 until March 5.

For more information, please dial 2-1-1 or visit www.piton.org/eitc or www.facebook.com/taxhelpcolorado on the web.

Jack Loar, member of the Glendale Police Department and a recent graduate of the CCA Police Academy, was cited for his good deeds in a January story in the *Glendale Cherry Creek Chronicle*.

Loer and three other officers helped a woman who had all four of her tires slashed get replacements at no charge at a Performance Tire Center in Littleton and free towing to the repair shop.

Meanwhile, **Renee Tremaine** was one of seven new officers sworn in by the Castle Rock Police Department in January. Tremaine graduated from the college's Law Enforcement Training Academy in December after having previously completed an internship with the Madison (Wis.) PD.

Andrew Call joined the Institutional Research staff in December and will be at the CentreTech campus from Monday through Thursday. Call comes to CCA from Utah State, where he completed a master's degree in Environmental Science. Call and **Curtis Baker** are located in Administration Building Room 203C.

Other department shifts include **David Bailey** moving to the Lowry campus in North Quad, Room 201E. His new phone number is 303-340-7707.

Catherine Trough now is in A203-B.

Strategic Partnerships will be housed in A-203A.

Beginning Feb. 1, Student Affairs will be closed on Fridays from 8-9 a.m. so that staff can meet for information sharing, discussion and professional development, Vice President of Student Affairs **Dr. Betsy Oudenhoven** announced.

Additionally, the entire division will meet approximately once a month and reopen between 9:30-10 a.m. These meetings currently are slated for Feb. 1, Feb. 22, March 15, March 27, and April 12.

Director of Theatre **Stacey D'Angelo** announced Jan. 15 that the Spring 2013 play will be Sarah Ruhl's "Eurydice." The production is billed as a reimagining of the classic myth of Orpheus through the eyes of its heroine.

The play will take place March 14-16 and 21-23 at the Larry D. Carter Theatre in the Fine Arts Building at CentreTech.

Anyone interested in participating or sharing ideas, please contact D'Angelo at 303-340-7529 or Stacy.dangelo@ccaaurora.edu.

Rosanne Surine and **Sarah Gallegos**, from Aurora Mental Health, will be back with the college as mental-health counselors for 20 hours each week during the spring semester. Gallegos is available on Mondays from 2:00-6:00 and Thursdays from 10:00-2:00. Surine is available on Tuesdays from 1:00-5:00, Wednesdays from 10:00-2:00 and Fridays from 8:30-12:30.

Rob Hatcher and **Ramona Urias** have been nominated as CCA's two Rising Star nominees. Their accomplishments will be recognized at a April 9 luncheon at Front Range Community College.

Faculty are invited to participate in the honors program this spring. Students work on a project of their choosing in lockstep with their instructor as a means to enhance their Lifelong Learning Skills.

Students must have a cumulative GPA of at least 3.25; have completed six or more credit hours at CCA; be enrolled in a course numbered 100 level; and earn an A in the course and complete the honors project in order to receive honors designation.

Faculty are compensated for each completed project. Applications need to be returned to honors@ccaaurora.edu by Feb. 15.

Full program details can be found at <http://www.ccaaurora.edu/programs-classes/departments/honors>.

The 5th annual Take Back the Night event will be held Thursday, April 18, from 9:30 a.m. – 8 p.m. in the CentreTech campus Rotunda

"Take Back the Night," organized by Psychology faculty **Jennifer Dale**, is an event that traditionally promotes the

CCA bids farewell to Reniece Jones after 25 years

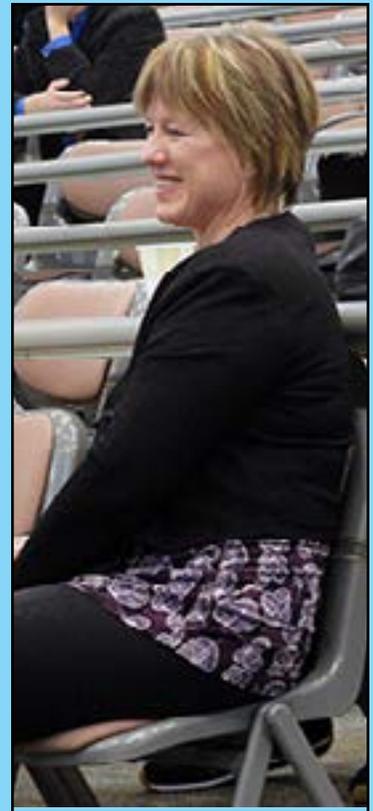
Using descriptive words such as strength, inspiration, service and commitment, friends and colleagues paid tribute to Reniece Jones on her retirement after 25 years at the college.

"She is just nice to the core and that really comes through," said Carla Hoskins, a former Accessibility Services advisor.

Jones was serenaded by Gloria Randolph and Terri Campbell Caron in a manner that brought tears to Jones' eyes. The two colleagues used sign language while the song, 'What A Wonderful World' played in the background.

Jones joined CCA in 1987 and leaves as the Director of the Accessibility Services Office.

Many individuals went to the podium and spoke Jones' praises. Assistant librarian Kevin Dunbar was among them. "No matter what, Reniece is there with knowledge and caring," he said.



Reniece Jones watches as **Gloria Randolph** and **Terri Campbell Caron** interpret the song "What a Wonderful World" in sign language at Jones' retirement send-off Jan. 16 at the Fine Arts Forum.

safety and empowerment of women. At CCA, we have made it about the empowerment and safety of all people, regardless of sex, gender, identity, or orientation.

College Goal Sunday is scheduled for Feb. 10 from 1-3 p.m. at the CentreTech Student Centre Room 100.

The event is an opportunity for students and their families to receive assistance in filing out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) paperwork, ask questions to counselors about the financial aid process, and inquire about savings tips for college education.

Interested participants are asked to bring in W-2 tax forms in order to smooth the financial aid application process.

Any questions, please contact **Kyla Doddridge**, director for Outreach and Recruitment (303-3360-4766) or via e-mail.

The Center for Outreach and Recruitment also will be hosting a college-wide open house on April 25th.

The Annual International Festival will be held on March 13. The theme will be "Dance Around The World."

Maria Halloran, ESL faculty, has asked

faculty to incorporate the event into their curriculum and/or promote it in class.

Student clubs and organizations also are being asked to participate.

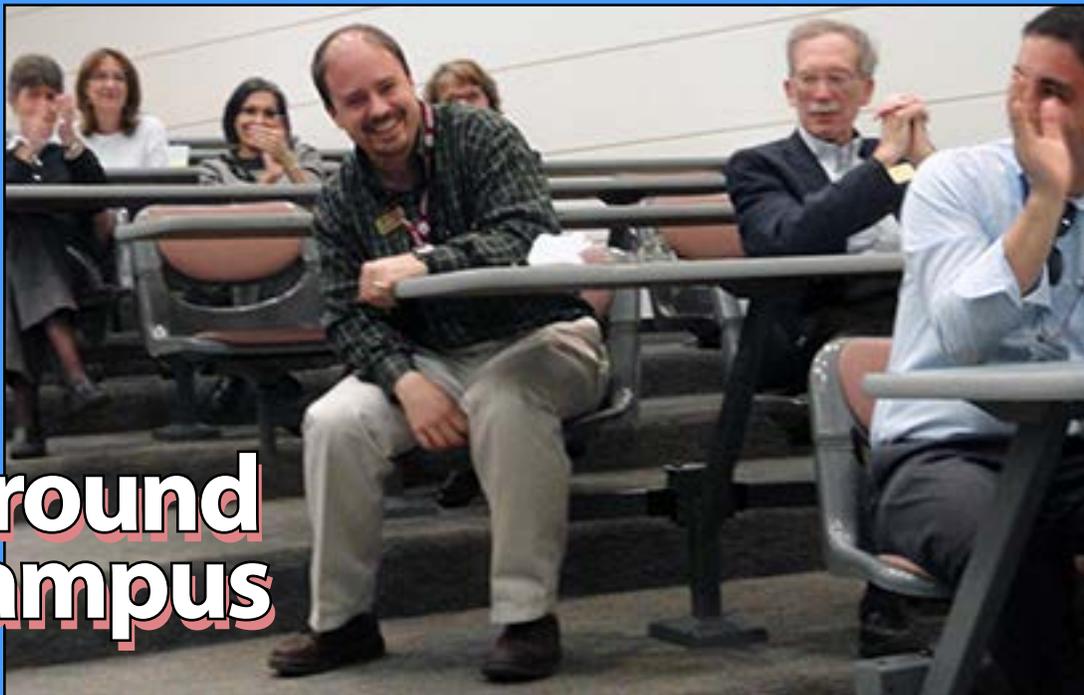
Jim Tharp has been hired as the Equipment Room Manager at the Colorado Film School, Director **Frederic Lahey** announced Jan. 14.

Tharp has a MFA in wildlife cinematography from Michigan State University. He's spent the last two years equipping London-based Wildlife Horizons for its latest, \$20 million nature documentary.

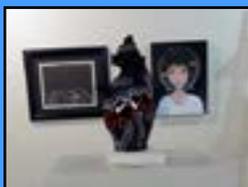
The final professional development training with practice simulation relating to on-campus violence for CCA faculty will be held Saturday, February 2, from 9-11 a.m. at CLCWES 218. The presentation on classroom safety and incident response was created by **Dr. Peggy Norwood**, Security Chief **Steve Marshall** and Deputy Security Chief **Charles Holzheimer** and includes a video presentation, discussion and role-play exercises on what to do if there's an incident on campus.

Please visit <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/faculty-training-2013> to sign up.

Around campus



Christopher Tombari, department chair for the Aurora Language Center, is stunned to learn he has been named CCA's 2012 Employee of the Year during a Jan. 22 ceremony. Tombari will be recognized by the State Board of Community Colleges at a special luncheon and awards ceremony Feb. 13. Tombari has worked at CCA since 2009. He was lauded for his service as facilitator and motivator; faculty and administrator. His nomination stressed many qualities that encouraged excellence, including: his collaborative nature; ability to identify and play to the strengths of others; support of innovation; and aid in developing individual independence. Others nominated were Elizabeth Hirsh, Sasa Jovic, Beth Lattone, and Ruthanne Orihuela.



Student art was on display at the Donna Moravec Gallery throughout January, including works by, from left, Sandra Devos ("Curiosity"), Ashley Fink ("A Broken Jar") and Visi Herman ("Oreko").



(Left) Students take in a variety of games during a Casino Night event held at the Bergren Room on the Lowry campus.



Crickett Phelps was the individual winner during the CCA Health and Wellness Challenge after losing 10 pounds. Martha Jackson-Carter was a close second at nine pounds. The winning team was The Kilogram Killers, with 18.3 overall pounds. The team was comprised of Tara Croom-Sanchez, Victor Anderson and Jackson-Carter, who combined to shed 18.3 lbs. Santa's Little Heifers was second with a 15.6-pound slimdown.



The Center for Workforce Development held an open house Jan 18 to update the college on its programs and progress. The department posed for a picture, including (left to right) Beth Nelson, Assistant Director, Barbara Guion, Program Assistant, Karina Rodriguez, CHOICES Case Manager (Adams County), Alisa Trowell, Employment Developer, in front of her Diane Postell, Director, Center for Workforce Development, Arapahoe County TANF; Nathan Crow, Job Transition Specialist, Crissy Deen, Job Transition Specialist, Adams County TANF; Rodney Lanham, Job Transition Specialist, Crickett Phelps, Arapahoe County Job Transition Specialist, and back far right, Christy Bernal, CHOICES Case Manager.