

Congratulations, Class of 2017!



Happy graduates prepare to walk in the 2017 Clark College Commencement ceremony.

On June 22, approximately 800 graduates gathered at Sunlight Supply Amphitheater to participate in the 2017 Clark College Commencement ceremony. A strong breeze tried to whip their carefully decorated mortarboard caps off their heads, and the summery sunshine forced many to unzip their gowns to avoid overheating, but nothing could stop them from celebrating their achievements.



Amanda Owens with her daughter, Naya, at Clark's 2017 Commencement.

This year marked the first time that graduates wore differently colored robes based on the degree/certificate they earned. Bachelor of Applied Science recipients wore white robes; associate degrees and certificates, royal blue; and GED completion and high school diploma, light blue. This is the second year that the college graduated baccalaureate degree-holders, and the third year that GED/High School Diploma graduates from Transitional Studies students participated in the ceremony.

Graduates hugged each other to celebrate the momentous day. Some held their children in their arms. Associate degree recipient Amanda Owens watched her 5-year-old daughter, Naya, play with bubbles as she waited to enter the amphitheater. The

two had lots to celebrate: Not only was Owens graduating, but the single mother had recently found out she would have stable housing for the first time years, thanks, in part, to her part-time job as a program coordinator in Clark's Workforce Education department.

In line with Owens was her friend, Amanda Williams, who was also graduating with an associate transfer degree. Like Owens, Williams had enrolled at Clark straight out of high school but then dropped out—in Williams's case, because of a family crisis. By the time she returned to school, she had a family of her own to care for. "Juggling being a mom with schoolwork was the hardest thing," said the mother of two. "There were some late nights doing homework after the kids went to bed."



Amy and Tom Merfeld get ready to graduate together.

Williams, who plans to continue her education at Washington State University Vancouver to become a social worker, did not have her children with her in line—they were being watched by her husband, which only seemed fair since she had watched them during last year's Commencement ceremony, when he graduated with a welding degree. A few yards down the line, Amy and Tom Merfeld were doing the Williamses one better: The couple, who have been married for 10 years, were graduating together.

The Merfelds pursued different educational paths at Clark—Amy earning her degree in Addiction Counselor Education and Tom, one in merchandising management. As such, they were never "study buddies," but they did support each other's educations with some creative scheduling. "When she was at school, I was at work," said Tom, who installs windows and runs his own entertainment company. "A lot of classes I was able to do online, which helped."

Clearly, many graduates struggled with competing time commitments while pursuing their educations. When, during the ceremony, President Bob Knight asked all graduates who had worked while attending Clark to rise to be recognized, the vast majority of graduates stood up.



“Remember the feeling of what it’s like to complete something you set out to complete,” said actor Ernie Hudson during his 2017 Commencement keynote address.

This year’s keynote speaker, actor Ernie Hudson, could empathize with those students. As he described during his keynote address, Hudson had grown up poor, and by the time he tried to enter college, he was working as a janitor in order to support his wife and young son. “I was at my wit’s end,” he recalled. “It was a rough time.”

Hudson went on to recount how he enrolled at Wayne State University and fell in love with acting—how he helped found what is now the oldest African-American theater company in the United States, and then drove with his wife and two sons from Michigan to Connecticut in order to personally convince the admissions staff at Yale University to allow him into its celebrated Master of Fine Arts program in drama. He also spoke about the difficulties of trying to launch his acting career while simultaneously adjusting to being a single father, balancing the duties of work and family—and the work ethic that helped him eventually find success in films like *Ghostbusters*, *The Crow*, and *Miss Congeniality*.

“I’m not that brilliant,” he said. “I know how to work hard.”

But Hudson added that, along with his work ethic, he credits trusting his “spirit” to get him where he is today. “There’s a part of you, and it speaks to you in the strangest ways, in the middle of the night,” he said. “You have to listen to it.”



Student Ambassador
Abigail Volk was
the 2017
Commencement
student speaker.

The ceremony was also occasion to announce two major awards. Early in ceremony, President Knight announced the names of the recipients of the 2017 Exceptional Faculty Awards: economics instructor Patricia Atkinson; English instructor Dr. John Caruso; American Sign Language instructor Becky Engel; computer science and engineering instructor Dr. Nicholas Macias; and welding professor Brian McVay. Later during the ceremony, he announced that graduate Nicholas Freese was the recipient of the 2017-2018 Community College Presidents’ Award in Honor of Val Ogden. This annual scholarship is given to a Clark College graduate who demonstrates leadership potential, a commitment to community service, and academic achievement. The scholarship award provides full-time tuition at WSUV and is renewable for one additional year, essentially providing full tuition to complete a bachelor’s degree.

Thanks to the Clark College Foundation, scholarship finalists Sarah Moe and José Augusto Barcelos Espindola Neto also received \$1,000 each to attend WSUV.

In all, more than 2,100 degrees and certificates were conferred upon the Class of 2017, Clark’s 81st graduating class. Of those graduates, 413 were Running Start students—a record number for the college, which has the largest Running

Start program in the state.

At the end of the ceremony, President Knight said, "Your time at Clark has provided you with new skills, new perspectives, and new confidence. These are powerful tools. As you take your next step, use those tools to build a bright future for yourselves and for our community."

See a video of memories from the Class of 2017:

Photos: Jenny Shadley/Clark College. To see more photos, visit our Flickr album.

Video: Nick Bremer/Clark College

To watch the Commencement ceremony in its entirety, visit CVTV's website.