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## **Transforming Lives Award ceremony Sunday, Jan. 22**

OLYMPIA, Wash. – Five community and technical college graduates will each receive a \$500 “Transforming Lives” award from the Trustees Association of Community and Technical Colleges at a special ceremony on Sunday, Jan. 22 in Olympia. The awards portion of the event will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Red Lion Inn, 2300 Evergreen Park Drive SW.

The Transforming Lives award honors current students or graduates who have turned their lives around by pursuing higher education at a community or technical college. A selection committee chose the five graduates from a pool of 35 nominations from the state’s two-year colleges. All of the nominees will be recognized at the ceremony.

“These students were told that they couldn’t make it – that they didn’t have what it takes to succeed. But against all odds, they persevered and started new lives for themselves,” said Tom Malone, association president and trustee of the Seattle Community College District. “Their stories are both heartbreaking and inspirational... and a reminder that education elevates lives.”

The following graduates will receive awards and share their stories at the ceremony:

- **Chi Choi, Tacoma Community College** – A childhood of crime, poverty, and drugs may have landed Choi in prison, but the decisions he made there led to his ultimate emancipation. While in prison, Choi decided to change his life and attend Tacoma Community College. The college was affordable and located near his home, making it convenient for Choi to work and attend school. Dedicated faculty, small classes, clubs and resources made it possible for Choi to graduate and pursue a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering. He is now a design engineer for Genie Industries in Moses Lake. “I believe Tacoma Community College has been an integral step in this whole process – from dreaming of what I wanted to become to finally reaching that goal,” he said.
- **Lisa Cook, Bellingham Technical College** – Cook, a single mother of three, came to Bellingham Technical College after years of scraping by on low-wage jobs. The Lummi Tribal member had her GED, but lacked the self-confidence and skills to pursue a degree. On the advice of a friend, Cook applied for, and won, a full-ride ConocoPhillips Lummi Tribal Scholarship to Bellingham Technical College. She earned her degree in process technology and now works as a refinery operator. “I learned that hard work and persistence can make what seems to be the most impossible task possible. And this is the lesson that I would like to share with my (Lummi) community members – if I can do it, then they can do it as well.”

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- **Margaret Debevec, Centralia College** – A victim of sexual and mental abuse, Debevec was on the streets at age 11 and married to an abusive husband by age 16. She was addicted to drugs, had no employment prospects, and spent years in and out of jail. A jail visitor convinced her to pursue a GED at Centralia College. She enrolled in the college with a 6th grade education and graduated with an associate degree. Debevec is now studying criminal justice at Washington State University and plans to go to law school. “I did not just get my degree at Centralia College, I got a life that I can call my own. For the first time, I can stand with my head held high.”
- **Patricia Denga, Whatcom Community College** – As a child in Zimbabwe, Denga lived a life of extreme poverty. Her father abandoned her family, leaving her mother and siblings to fend for themselves. The family lacked running water and electricity. Patricia often went without meals and resorted to begging. Yet she earned a high school diploma and moved to the United States. Denga discovered Whatcom Community College offered the low tuition and flexible scheduling she needed to work and go to school. She earned her associate degree, got a job at the college, and intends to pursue a bachelor’s degree in architecture. “My life will never be the same as a result of my time at Whatcom Community College,” she said. “I even help pay high school tuition for an orphaned girl in Zimbabwe.”
- **Cristian Ramon, Big Bend Community College (Moses Lake)** – Ramon grew up working in the orchards of Quincy with her parents. She decided to end the family cycle of backbreaking labor and poverty by enrolling in Big Bend Community College. “Waking up at three in the morning to pick apples and cherries as a young child was not my version of the American Dream,” she said. “I believe education is the most powerful tool a human being can have.” Ramon won a scholarship with the help of a college trustee and graduated from Big Bend Community College with honors. She attends the University of Washington and plans to study brain diseases such as depression, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease.

Washington’s 34 community and technical colleges serve nearly 500,000 students each year. Students train for the workforce, prepare to transfer to a baccalaureate institution, gain basic math and English skills, or pursue continuing education. The system builds the skills of Washington’s workforce by meeting the educational needs of people at all skill and literacy levels.

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**Note to editor:** Stories from all 35 nominees are available in the companion publication, “Transforming Lives,” dated January 2012.

**About the Trustees Association of Community and Technical Colleges:**

*The Washington Trustees Association of Community and Technical Colleges (TACTC) is comprised of all 150 trustees of the 30 two-year college districts in Washington and is the "trade association" for trustees. The vision of TACTC is to ensure quality, affordable and lifelong educational opportunities for all the people of Washington State. The mission of TACTC is to support, educate and unite Washington State community and technical college trustees in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities.*