

FOR RELEASE: Immediately

DATE: January 25, 2018

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Once Hungry and Homeless, Highline Student Now Has Hope
Primer Is First From Highline College to Receive Top Transforming Lives Honor

DES MOINES, Wash. — Formerly an executive chef at a Michelin-rated restaurant, Vanessa Primer is now a thriving college student, overcoming unemployment, homelessness and a debilitating injury.

Primer's story represents the transformational nature of the state's two-year colleges. Sharing her story earned the Highline College student special recognition and a \$500 award.

She was one of five Transforming Lives Award recipients selected as a keynote speaker at the annual awards dinner given by the [Washington State Association of College Trustees](#). The dinner, held Monday, honored a student from each of the state's 34 community and technical colleges.

This is the first time in the seven-year history of the [Transforming Lives Awards](#) program that a Highline student was selected among the top five recipients.

Her current positive outlook on life is in stark contrast to the lowest point in her life when her van was her home. Thinking back to those days, she recalls she “never had enough gas for my van, food in my belly, or hope in my heart.”

Primer was without work after an ankle injury left her unable to continue in the kitchen, where chefs are constantly on their feet. The ankle injury was the first of a progression of injuries that prevented her from holding a job, which led to losing a suitable place to live.

She reached an especially low point when she realized she would no longer be able to do even the most basic tasks without pain and the assistance of a cane.

“A friend, who is a Highline alum, asked me to remember how bad her life had been and to look at what she had made of herself,” she says. “She challenged me to enroll at Highline.”

Although she struggled daily, she knew training for a new career would help her move forward.

“I knew that I could receive help paying for tuition at a community college. I had many friends who had gone on to success after going to community college.”

She is now pursuing an [applied bachelor's degree in cybersecurity and forensics](#).

By the time she graduates in 2020, she will have also earned two applied associate degrees, one in digital forensics and investigation and one in network security engineering, as well as a certificate in homeland security, all with honors.

“I would not be the person I am today, nor would I have as bright of a future if I had not enrolled at Highline College,” says Primer, who enrolled two years ago and has made the most of her educational opportunities while giving of herself in return.

She is active in student government, serving as president of Highline's student body and as a regional director of the Washington Community and Technical College Student Association. She is Highline's first applied bachelor's degree student to be elected student body president.

She lends her voice and time as Highline's student engagement liaison to the [Washington Student Engagement Networks](#), which is active in ensuring student voices are heard in the Washington State Legislature. The group advocates for full funding of the [State Need Grant](#). The grant program provides need-based financial aid to qualifying students.

A recent transplant to Spanaway, Primer spent many years living in King County cities, including Burien and West Seattle, where she remains involved. She has volunteered for more than a decade at the West Seattle Food Bank.

What many of her fellow students don't realize is that up until the fall of 2017, Primer had been living in her van while attending classes. She shares this side of her life in the hope other homeless students will seek resources on campus and in their communities.

Primer still struggles with pain and relies on a cane. But the memory of living in the cramped quarters of her van is being crowded out by a powerful vision of her future: “I will go on to a career that will fulfill me and allow me to give back to my community. I will do this because of advice given to me that I pay forward as often as I can.”

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Attachment: Photo of Vanessa Primer

Links within this release:

- Washington State Association of College Trustees: <https://www.sbctc.edu/about/college-trustees/default.aspx>
- Transforming Lives Awards: <https://www.sbctc.edu/about/college-trustees/transforming-lives.aspx>
- Applied bachelor's degree in cybersecurity and forensics: <http://www.highline.edu/bas/cybersecurity/>
- Washington Student Engagement Networks: <https://www.facebook.com/WashingtonSEN1/>
- State Need Grant: <http://www.wsac.wa.gov/state-need-grant>

Founded in 1961 as the first community college in King County, Highline College annually serves more than 17,000 students. With over 70 percent students of color, Highline is the most diverse higher education institution in the state. The college offers a wide range of academic transfer, professional-technical education, basic skills and applied bachelor's degree programs. Alumni include former Seattle Mayor Norm Rice, entrepreneur Junki Yoshida and former Washington state poet laureate Sam Green.