

Canada students overcome obstacles

Air Force vet, student president and immigrant reach graduation

By Kathy Schrenk
Independent Newspapers
May 13, 2003

REDWOOD CITY – Jessica Root spent six years in the Air Force after struggling through high school before getting a college degree at age 26.

Phil Luna was a smart-mouthed high school screw-up and now is the student body president.

Ali Zargari moved to California from Iran without knowing a word of English to start an electrical engineering education and support his family in this country, all in the last three years.

Theirs are just three of what are surely many inspiring stories to come out of Canada College as students graduate May 23.

Root grew up in Half Moon Bay and was essentially orphaned during her sophomore year in high school when her mother died. Her father had never really been in the picture, so she moved in with some friends. But she cared even less about school than she had before her mother's death. College had never really been in her plans.

She "barely graduated" from high school at age 18 and immediately she joined the Air Force. It was the best decision she ever made, she said. "I loved every minute of it."

She worked as an administrator in various training departments, keeping track of statistics and making sure people working on and flying planes had the proper training. She also saw the world, first being stationed in New Mexico, then South Korea and then Texas. She also did a short stint in Kuwait.

In July of 2001 she left the Air Force. "I wanted to go to school," she said. "That didn't happen very often, so I thought I should take advantage of it."

First she moved to Santa Cruz and went to Cabrillo College, a two-year school. Then she transferred to Canada.

This month she will become the first in her family to complete a college degree. She knows it was a smart decision. When she visits Half Moon Bay, she finds her old high school buddies working the same coffee shop jobs they were working when they all graduated eight years ago. "I see the same people doing the same things."

Luna had an easier time of things growing up. His parents sent him to private schools – St. Raymond’s in Menlo Park and Sacred Heart in Atherton. He didn’t like Sacred Heart, though, and mouthed off to the dean shortly before dropping out, telling him he was “full of himself,” he said. He went to Menlo Atherton High School and struggled because the classes there were not as challenging as the ones at Sacred Heart, he said.

“I was like, what is high school all about? I wanted to be in college *and* high school.”

He found out about Canada’s Middle College, which allows students to take a few hours of high school classes a day while also completing college classes. Some graduate at the same time as their high school class peers, but with a high school degree and an associate’s degree at the same time.

At Middle College, Luna thrived. Now he is completing an associate’s degree, is the student body president and plans in the fall to go to Menlo College, University of Southern California or University of California at San Diego.

Zargari grew up comfortably in Iran and did well academically, but when it came time for him to go to college, he ran into a stumbling block. Iranian high school students take an exam to get into college, he explains. But instead of choosing a college and a major, they are assigned a school and a field of study. Zargari was assigned to mechanical engineering, but his real love was electrical engineering. Moving to America, he felt, was the answer.

He came here alone, having to support himself and not speaking any English. He got a job at Mattress Discounters and started taking classes in English and math at Canada. He picked up English so fast and excelled so much at math and physics that soon his professors encouraged him to tutor high school and college students. Before long he was doing that full time.

Three years after coming here, the soft-spoken young man with a goatee has only a slightly noticeable accent.

Since then, his parents and two siblings have moved here and he supports them. He has another job as a document courier for a mortgage company. His goal is to get a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in the next three years and then get a PhD at Stanford. He worries about money, though.

“I’m supporting my parents, but not in the way I want to. I want them to be comfortable. They took care of us for 18 years, now it’s our turn.”

They were more than happy about the news the family received last month, however.

On April 30, his 23rd birthday, Zargari found out he had been accepted to his first-choice school, UCLA.