

Final Version

Good evening graduates—and everyone else,

Forgive me if I'm a little nervous. I'm not exactly used to sharing my story in front of a crowd. I'm way more comfortable solving math problems than speaking into a microphone.

But today, I want to share a little story—about my journey, and how I got to where I am—all thanks to LCC.

Let's rewind to high school. I didn't get to walk with my class—I was a late graduate. Honestly, I didn't think much of it at the time. School and I weren't exactly best friends. But I was the first in my family to graduate high school, and that meant something.

I took a couple of years off. Worked some brutal labor jobs. And after a few heart-to-hearts with financial aid, I decided—*“Okay, let's give this school thing another shot.”*

I've always been into cars and driving. (*Fake cough*) Of course I obey all the rules of the road—for any officers in the stadium. So I figured, *Let's go to school to be a mechanic*. But I found out you don't really need school for that. I was a wizard when it came to math and critical thinking, so I swapped to engineering.

Coming to LCC was one of the best decisions I've ever made. This college—this community—was a turning point in my life.

I lived with my mom and my brother at the time. My mom—who I love dearly—worked long labor shifts, 12 hours a day, six days a week. No vacations. She'd come home with cuts, bruises, aching joints—and still tell me to go study. She had to leave school in the third grade to support her family in Mexico. But she always made sure I knew the value of education.

We struggled. There were nights when the fridge was empty. I'd go to bed hungry, wake up, and do it all over again. Sometimes I couldn't even scrounge up quarters to wash my clothes—so I'd just walk around campus a little... *stinky*. But no matter what, I kept showing up. Because the hunger for food never beat out my hunger for a better life.

Even though I eventually graduated from the University of Washington with two engineering degrees, the road to higher education was anything but smooth.

It wasn't easy. But I didn't go through it alone. I had support—TRiO, my professors, my peers. TRiO helped me figure out classes, financial aid, campus visits—all the stuff that felt impossible on my own. And they believed in me, even when I wasn't sure I could do it.

I went from being literally at the bottom of my high school class... to receiving awards in Engineering, Math, and the Hall of Honors. I earned my transfer degree, applied to UW, and—three weeks before classes started—I got accepted. That was the beginning of round two.

I remember the day of orientation at UW's School of Mechanical Engineering. They said, "*Look to your left. Look to your right. Only one in three of you made it into this program.*" And I just sat there thinking, *I wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for LCC.*

Because back in high school? My GPA was barely above a 2.0. Let's just say UW wasn't exactly knocking on my door back then.

I spent two amazing years at UW—just killing it up there. Then COVID hit, right around graduation. All we got was a slideshow with our names and photos. No ceremony. No cap toss. And all the engineering jobs? Gone.

I had no future in sight. But then an opportunity came up—a one-year master's program in Materials Science. I applied, got some scholarships, and went for it.

Online school during the pandemic was brutal. I'm talking twelve-hour-long "*take-home*" exams. Y'all remember Zoom fatigue? Imagine that, but for grad school.

But through it all, I kept pushing. I had the biggest case of imposter syndrome. *How can someone with a past like mine become an engineer?* But again—I kept pushing.

And then the craziest thing happened—I got a job. Man, it felt like the biggest weight lifted off my shoulders. All that doubt, all that pressure... and here I am, *almost senior engineer status* at my job.

And to anyone here who's ever been doubted, overlooked, or underestimated—I just want to say:

You are not the product of your environment.

You can rewrite the narrative.

I'm not standing here because I was lucky. I'm here because I didn't give up.

Though my time at LCC ended years ago, one promise still guides me: to give back where I can. To be the role model I never had. To be the person younger me needed.

And hey—if anyone needs help with math homework, I got you.

To the graduating class: **you made it.** Through the hunger, the stress, the doubt, the all-nighters—you made it. And *that's* what matters.

And keep this in mind: **when one door closes, another one can open.**

The sky is the limit for all of you.

Thank you to LCC. Thank you to my mentors. And most of all—thank you to my mom.

I hope I've made you proud.

And thank you, graduates, for listening to my story.

Go Red Devils!