

JULY/AUGUST ISSUE 2006

today's woman

IN SOUTH ORANGE COUNTY

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Discover your potential with local community colleges

Discover Your POTENTIAL

Local community colleges open up a
wealth of possibilities for local OC Women

BY BASIA CHRIST

You've always had a dream of earning a college degree. Yet somehow, "life" just got in the way. Does this sound like you or anyone you know? Women of all ages have experienced this difficulty; there are also those who have obtained their degree, only to find that their career of choice is not what they had imagined. Maybe they realized their middle management job was really a dead end. Or maybe they began to dread getting up in

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the morning because today was going to be just like yesterday – no challenge, hope or future. Perhaps their children were grown, and they discovered they had too much time on their hands, and too little to do.

Regardless, if any of the above applies to you, perhaps now is the time to reevaluate your situation. Identify what really excites you, what you love to do, and what your dreams are at this point in your life. Furthering your education may be a part of making this dream come true. If so, it's as easy as a phone call to set the wheels in motion. Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College are two local community colleges that provide a wealth of possibilities for women that have headed back to school to further their careers or launch new ones.

Below are three women that are pursuing their dreams and broadening their horizons at the same time. Going back to school was a huge commitment, but none regret the day they left their old life and walked onto their college campus.



MELISSA ATKIN

Melissa Atkin

A 24-year-old resident of Irvine, Melissa was always a good student. In high school she maintained a 3.6 GPA without much effort. She won a \$13,000 scholarship to Pepperdine University, but her parents would still have to help because the scholarship wasn't even close to covering tuition.

Melissa decided she wanted to do it on her own. She opted for cosmetology school in Las Vegas a year after graduating from high school, hoping to make enough

money to get her started at a community college. After graduating with a cosmetician license, she moved to Orange County and found that building a clientele was going to take more time than she had imagined because she didn't know anyone. Lacking funds, her plans of attending college were put on hold. She married at nineteen and told her husband, Daron, of her dreams to one day attend college. He was supportive and when she took a job at California National Bank he encouraged her to start a savings account for tuition.

It took four years before she was able to follow through on her commitment, and now she is attending Irvine Valley College. She's majoring in International Studies hoping for a career in global conflict resolution.

"We no longer just live in the U.S., we live in a global community," Melissa begins. She's most interested in working in the Middle East and is well versed in what's happening in the world. "I wonder how I would feel if I were an Iranian. Would I think the U.S. was trying to control my country? Would I see every country as a threat or would I think nuclear weapons would be a threat to the world? The more I think about it, the more I realize nothing is black and white."

This summer she's traveling for thirty-six days visiting England, France and Italy. She has taken three years of Japanese and five semesters of Spanish because students in other countries, "speak many languages and for an international career, it's a requirement." Melissa is quite involved in Student Government whose role is to represent students and vote on policies presented by the school district. She previously was a Senator and was elected by the student body as Vice President.

She worried about returning to school, but "the staff is great. They tutor students with writing and math. They've helped me write 'fabulous' papers, better than I could have done on my own. The professors are very much in touch with students. My required classes average 40 students and between 10-25 in my major. I encourage anyone who's thinking about going back to school, to do it. Education is so important!"

Melissa's family has been very supportive of her decision to return to school. She explains, "I'm the oldest of four girls. Shauna, three years younger, went back to school before I did. Laci, 10, and Shelbi, 12,

look up to both of us. My parents are very proud, too. My husband, Daron, knows how much this means to me and has always supported my efforts. And the best thing is, I'm doing it on my own!"

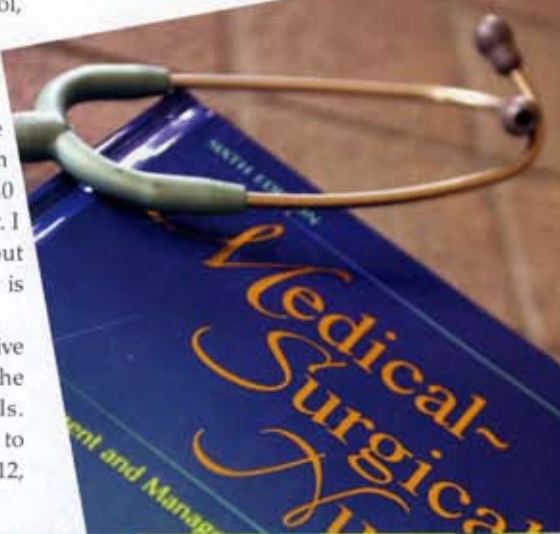


TANIA REED

Tania Reed

Thirty-year-old Tania Reed, a Laguna Hills resident, was always an A student who attended honors classes and maintained a 4.23 GPA. Her dream as a child was to be a doctor and after high school, she attended pre-Med classes at UC Berkeley. By the time she graduated, she realized the role of a doctor didn't fit her personality. "Their hands are tied by so many people and I wanted to work more closely with patients."

She married her husband (who she has known since she was 16 and a high school junior) at 24 and had a son at 25. But she never actually stopped



going to school, taking night classes at Saddleback College and working as a manager in doctors' offices. She decided on a career in nursing, feeling this would give her the direct contact with patients she desired. The nursing program at Saddleback is recognized as being one of the best in the county, and at first Tania was put on a waiting list. When she was accepted in the program both family members and friends shared her elation. She admits it was a bit difficult at first; organizing her time between her son and husband, her job, classes and homework. "Everyone's been incredibly supportive though. They all want to see me succeed," she says.

Tania has even broadened her responsibilities by becoming involved in CNSA (California Student Nurses Association). The organization is politically involved in establishing resolutions that will benefit nurses and patients as well as legislation to help children in hospitals and the homeless.

"There's a huge nursing shortage, especially a shortage of men pursuing this profession. My hope is that with the stereotypical roles becoming less prevalent, men will come to see nursing as a viable, rewarding career. Fortunately, there is no longer a waiting list at Saddleback so anyone can apply to get into the nursing program. The college has changed their admission and it's now based half on grades and half on a lottery."

Tania loves the new building where the nursing program is held with its high tech computers. "The staff is very involved in ensuring we get the best education. In fact, we have a 100% pass rate for the state board exams which is pretty amazing!"

She finds the tuition affordable and the campus is close. "Saddleback has so many resources for its students, like tutors and mentors, up-to-date software programs and a wonderful skill lab with real hospital equipment and beds."

She's appreciative that her husband, Marcus, and five-year-old son, Donovan, are "unbelievably supportive. My mom and mother-in-law (who also has been a nurse for 31 years) help with childcare. My employer, Dr. Gaon, a plastic surgeon, gives me flexible working hours to work around my class schedule."

She states that Saddleback nursing students receive a great deal of respect from local hospitals' staff because they

know, "We have received some of the best tutelage available."

Once she passes her Boards, Tania hopes to keep learning by transferring to different areas of nursing - trauma, emergency, obstetrics and pediatrics. "I want to continue my education and attain a B.A. and Masters - even get a Practitioner's License so I can teach, get into management and conduct research. I want to do it all!"



PAIGE CHASTAIN

Paige Chastain

Aliso Viejo resident, 45-year-old Paige Chastain is a single mom with a 12 1/2-year-old son, Nikolas. Before 9/11, she worked in the travel industry and was fairly content with her career of choice. However, after that tragic incident, the travel industry suffered greatly and she consequently lost her job. After months of searching she finally secured a position with an architectural firm that lasted for three years.

In high school, she was a straight A student, but at 16 ran away from home and quit school. She eventually got her G.E.D., left an abusive relationship at age 28 and "ran for her life". She moved to Orange County from Northern California to start a new life. Paige hadn't thought about furthering her education until recently when, as a result of corporate restructuring, she lost two jobs in 3 months which left her wondering, "What am I going to do now?"

She longed to have a career - not just a job. Something she would be passionate about and

that would give her the opportunity to help others. She knew the only way it was going to happen was to go back to school and get a degree. When she applied and was accepted at Saddleback College, her son was extremely proud and supportive of her decision.

When Nikolas was younger, Paige had always walked him around school the night before he started so he would know where his classes, locker and cafeteria were located. "The night before my first day of school, Nikolas warmed my heart by walking me around my campus so I would know where to go. Still - I was so afraid the next morning that I threw up before leaving the house and told him, 'I'm not going to make it.' He just looked at me and said, 'Yes you can. I know you can do it!'"

Paige is a perfectionist and being in school full time has caused her to make some adjustments. "I'm focused completely on school and had to let a lot of 'stuff' go like keeping a perfect home. In the over-all scheme of things does it really matter if my laundry is not always done or my home is not immaculate?" She was nervous when she had to take the first test in 28 years, but did well. "Some days are tough and I want to shut down, but my son looks at me as a role model. I won't disappoint him."

Has the rest of her family been as supportive? Her brother, three years younger, questioned her reasoning for returning to school. "He said 'don't you think it's a bit late for that?'. I didn't talk to him for three months. When I sent him my grades, he admitted he knew deep down I could do it. My best friend Nichelle said I'm brave because I gave up everything to pursue my dream. In all honesty, I chose to attend full time because I needed to give it my all. I was afraid if I didn't, I wouldn't finish."

The vision of eventually wearing a cap and gown keeps her on track. "I tried on a neighbor's cap and gown recently and started crying," she remembers. "I cashed in my 401(k) and got loans so I could attend;

it's been extremely difficult financially. I work



part time as a chef for the Brookside Institute in their residential treatment facility. The Saddleback professors have been very caring – especially to us ‘older’ students. I worried about ‘fitting’ in with other students, but there’s a diverse group on campus – all ethnicities and ALL ages.”

Paige, recently elected as a Senator on Saddleback’s Associated Student Government, is pursuing a career in the human services field – focusing on helping domestic violence victims. “I also want to help children express themselves in a safe environment through art and will consider a career in art therapy.” She cuts the interview short because she says laughing, “I have home homework to do!”

Anything’s possible

Have you put your dream of going to college and earning a degree on hold? Do you wonder what your life would be if you had an advanced degree? Have others been promoted quicker even though you have the experience, but they have the credentials? Do you think you don’t have the time or it will take too long if you can only take one class at a time?

Today, education is for everyone. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that 90

million individuals participate in some form of adult education each year, including training and basic education offered outside traditional higher education. To serve this immense market, community colleges like Irvine Valley and Saddleback have structured programs and services specifically for adult learners. Forty-percent of American college students, or almost 6 million people, are 25 years of age or older.

When I went to college, I was 33, newly divorced, with three babies (4, 5 and 6) and worked two jobs as a single mom. But I attended a local community college one evening a week or a Saturday class now and then and hired a sitter. Sometimes I even took my children to class with me when I couldn’t get a sitter. A friend once laughed at me and said I’d be old and grey before I finished my degree. I laughed and said, “I’ll be old and grey no matter what.”

I received my Bachelor’s at 41 and my Master’s Degree in 2000 at 54. And someday I’m going to get my doctorate. It’s possible. It’s possible for anyone with the desire and the dream.

Do it now!

The most important tip Melissa, Tania, Paige or I can share is this: Do it now! Do

something - anything - as long as it is in the direction of getting that degree. Start now - NOW - today, when you read this. Time passes at an ever-accelerating rate. Remember how long it was from one birthday to the next when you were young? At my age, it seems that as soon as the smoke drifts away from the candles on the cake, another year has passed, and it is time to light them again. Once you enroll and get the process started, you will be amazed at how quickly the credits accumulate, and in a few years, you will be well on your way. Don’t wait another minute, and don’t worry about making the wrong choice. Go to one of these colleges’ websites after you read this. Find a suitable course that interests you, contact an advisor, and register. When you do, continue to apply this tip to every assignment, to every temptation to take a semester off, and to every feeling that you’ll do it later. Later might become ten years, twenty years, or thirty years. Do it now! A college degree when you are fifty is great; getting one at thirty or forty is even better!

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(For information about Saddleback College or Irvine Valley College readers can log on to www.saddleback.edu or www.ivic.edu.)