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First men complete Life Transitions Program

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MOUNT VERNON — In a cozy room filled with supporters, four men and one woman honored the turning points in their lives Thursday as they were graduated from the Life Transitions Program at Skagit Valley College.

The program, offered at the Mount Vernon and Oak Harbor campuses, helps people explore who they are and where they want to be with classes in everything from stress management to interviewing to time management. The free program was traditionally filled with women looking to find new directions for their lives, but Thursday, the program graduated a class of mostly men.

"I think most people believe that what men and women go through are very different," said Margo Grothe, the program coordinator. "I believe they are the same." All of the participants have gone through difficult times. Some have had health problems, battled addiction or spent time in prison. "They've come through a lot of adversity," Grothe said. About two years ago, graduate Matt Castle received a heart transplant. "There was a point where I almost died," he said.

He had been a fisherman in Alaska and worked in restaurants. After his health crisis, he realized he needed to find another career path. A social worker in Anacortes told him about the class, but he thought it was only for women. He met with Grothe, and ended up joining the men's class.

"I was a little nervous about that," he said because he didn't know anyone in the class. Since being in the program, he's gained wisdom from his classmates and confidence in himself.

"I learned so much from each one of them," he said.

He is now starting classes at the college and is interested in the Human Services program and counseling.

Unlike Castle, graduate Ryan Freeman is looking to move on from college.

Freeman was paralyzed after a hiking accident in 2007 and was in and out of rehabilitation for six months.

"The injury really woke me up," he said. "I didn't have a solid direction in life."

That event was a "domino effect" he said, and led to this class.

"I realized after coming back to school off and on, I was ready to move on with my life," he said. The program is personal and honest. Within a week, Freeman said, he was sharing his feelings and his past with others in the program and focusing on where he wanted to go in life.

"You're just kind of thrown into the fire," he said.

However, the men's class almost didn't happen because of state budget reductions.

"The college decided to pick it up," Grothe said. The program continued its classes through funding by the college and never broke its stride.

Classes run from September to November, and each lasts about a month. December's class was special, after receiving so many inquiries from men interested in participating, Grothe said.

"And they all decided to come," she added.

At the graduation, participants shared their stories and received journals to record the changes in their lives.

"I learned that guys can open up and express their feelings," Grothe said. "They're all different and they're all amazing."



Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

Matt Castle gives program coordinator Margo Grothe a hug during a graduation ceremony for the Life Transitions Program at Skagit Valley College.