



News Release

July 6, 2009

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Century Cosmetology Instructor Graduates with His Students

Century College cosmetology instructor Thom Costa received his college diploma at the same time as his students during Century's spring graduation at Aldrich Arena.

In an unusual move, Costa first filed in with his fellow faculty members, but later joined his students as they advanced to the stage for their diplomas. At least one faculty member whispered, "Thom! What are you doing? Why didn't you tell us?" Others knew about his student status and cheered him on.

While Costa, who is vice president of the college faculty union, had his vocational teaching license and the experience he needed to teach cosmetology at Century, he did not have a college degree. Several years ago, he decided to take the advice he was constantly giving his students and pursue his associate in arts degree. This fall, he will begin working on his bachelor's degree at Metropolitan State University. He figures he will take him another three years of evening, weekend and online classes to finally earn his undergraduate degree.

Like more than 57 percent of the students at Century, Costa is the first in his family to earn a college degree. “It feels great,” said Costa, 48. “I can’t believe how nervous I was at the ceremony. It brought me back to feeling like a 22-year-old.”

Professors in liberal arts disciplines must have a master’s degree in their subject area to teach at Century, and many have doctorate degrees. But in the vocational programs such as cosmetology and automotive service technology, it is experience that counts. In 2001, Costa gave up his successful 26-year career at a Roseville salon to teach at Century, where he attended the Intermediate School District 916 cosmetology program from 1976 to 1980 while still in high school. Born and raised in Vadnais Heights, he graduated from White Bear High School.

“It is not an easy thing to start school at age 45 in a class that is taught by one of your peers,” said Costa. “But all the instructors were very gracious and never told the rest of the class that I was a faculty member. Sometimes I had classmates who would ask me, “You work here, don’t you?” after they saw my picture on one of the large posters in the theatre area. But it was never an issue with students or faculty. In fact, it turned out to be a great experience. I am telling all my age 40-plus friends who are unhappy with their dead-end jobs that they should go back to school.”

Costa said earning his degree at Century was like taking an extraordinary journey that changed him. “I understand so much more about economics, biology and earth science,” he said. “But logic was my most memorable class because it was the farthest from my skill set. I had to really stretch. I would go to sleep at night not being able to get a problem, and then wake up in the middle of the night with the solution. That class made me strong. Any time you do something you didn’t think you can do, it’s huge.”

Costa said the whole-hearted support of all Century’s top administrators also helped stoke his motivation to finish his degree. “They were all great,” said Costa. “They told me I should be very proud.”

“It really does take courage to move out of your comfort zone and put yourself in the vulnerable position of being a student,” said Jeralyn Jargo, dean of science, technology, engineering and business. “Thom had

the added challenge of being a student of his colleagues on Century's campus. I just applaud him for being a living example of the value of life-long learning."

Earning his AA degree has given Costa a new respect for people with advanced degrees. "I now more fully understand what it takes to earn these degrees," said Costa. "I have so much respect for what they have accomplished."



Photo: Thom Costa at graduation with his students