

Lighthouse Mission Program Graduate Receives Full-ride to Bellingham Technical College

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THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM - Parris Johnson has seen rock bottom, and has slowly worked hard through Lighthouse Mission Ministries to come back from it.

Thanks to a surprise gift, his second chance is coming sooner than expected.

Johnson is the recipient of a full-ride scholarship to the two-year fisheries and aquaculture program at Bellingham Technical College. The new scholarship, financed by Bellingham Yacht Club, is designed to give a graduate of a local relief organization a chance at an education, and a well-paying job.

But Johnson didn't apply for the scholarship; he was selected by people who had been watching him.

"I'm still surprised," the 38-year-old said Monday, April 5, a day before starting college classes for the first time. "I'm looking forward to a new chapter, and being a student."

Johnson's life began spiraling downward in the late 1990s. After spending about eight years in the U.S. Air Force doing television and broadcast maintenance, he moved to the Northwest to be with his newborn daughter. But at 3 months old, the little girl died.

The New York native spent awhile living off of savings and staying in hotels after previously planned housing arrangements fell through. Eventually, Johnson ran out of money and spent several years floating around, finally ending up at the Lighthouse Mission "pretty much trying to start over," he said.

About a year ago, Johnson was accepted into the New Life Program at Lighthouse. The Christian-based program helps men who want to overcome addiction or other issues dominating their lives.

Participants live in a separate area of the mission and take classes and do jobs around the mission to help prepare for independence. As part of the program, Johnson has been volunteering with Christ the King Community Church, helping to run cameras and lighting during services.

"My outlook is a lot more positive," Johnson said. "It helped a lot with social anxiety, which I still have, but not nearly as bad."



MARK MALIJAN | THE BELLINGHAM HERALD - Parris Johnson, center, and Lindsey Karuza participate in a class exercise during a general psychology class at Bellingham Technical College on April 6, 2010. Bellingham Yacht Club, in conjunction with BTC and Lighthouse Mission Ministries, awarded Johnson a full-ride scholarship in the fisheries and aquaculture sciences program.

"I've done other programs, but others haven't helped as much," he added.

Bellingham Yacht Club raised money for the scholarship through their Sink the Dinghy fundraising campaign, which began in 2002. The goal is to help people affected by addiction, abuse and economic turmoil.

The scholarship provides \$10,000 over two years to pay for school, fees and supplies. If Johnson receives state or federal financial aid he has applied for, he'll be able to use some of the scholarship money to also help cover his living expenses.

"I really commend Parris on moving forward and being prompt and taking this seriously," said Brad Tuininga, development director of the BTC Foundation who will oversee handling of the scholarship. "It gives us comfort ... and gives the donors comfort."

Johnson is grateful for the chance to rebuild his life, and hopes others in his position who want to turn things around do so.

"Take advantage of every opportunity you have," he said, "and don't be afraid to."