

The latest news from Luna Community College

Second Volume 7, Issue 1

January 26, 2024

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Luna adult education graduate takes top national honor

Samuel Gabaldon named adult learner of the year

Submitted by

Luna CCRI Department

When Professor Lisa F. Bentson first heard the news, it took a little while to sink in. But when it did, the reaction was physiological. “I literally got goosebumps all over my body,” said Bentson, the program manager of the College & Career Readiness Institute of Luna Community College, in Las Vegas, N.M.. She had just been told that one of her recent graduates had been selected as the winner of the highest possible national honor for an Adult Education student. It was the first time that one of her graduates – or any student from any New Mexico Adult Education program, for that matter – had been selected.



Samuel Gabaldon

Samuel Gabaldon, who completed Luna’s program toward the end of the fall semester, had been selected by the Coalition on Adult Basic Education – the nation’s leading organization representing the Adult Education system in the United States – as the winner of their prestigious Adult Learner of the Year award. COABE gives the award to only one student each year, out of an estimated pool of 1.5 million Adult Education students. The award recognizes “a student who has overcome difficult circumstances to pursue adult learning, who has supported other adult learners, and who has managed significant adult responsibilities.”

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Luna student-athletes and coaches take a minute for a group photo on Friday, Jan. 12 at the college. Both the Luna baseball and softball team took part in a day-long event where several individuals from different departments spoke to them in an effort to get them more familiar with Luna and assist them in their path to a successful college career.

Luna adult education graduate...

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Adult Education

Historically known as “GED programs” which only serve “high school dropouts,” the modern reality of Basic Adult Education is more complex and nuanced. Yes, the programs still help prepare students who didn’t finish high school for high school equivalency exams, but they also provide basic adult life skills, turbocharge critical thinking capacity, and instill confidence. The programs additionally prepare students for what comes after attaining a high school equivalency: career or college.

And there are a lot of people who need that preparation. The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that, in 2021, two million students quit high school, which works to a bit over 11,000 students every school day over the course of a typical academic year. Young people, a lot of them, are abandoning school every year, for a wide variety of reasons.

Samuel’s Story

But Samuel wasn’t one of them. He didn’t want to drop out of school. Rather, it was forced upon him. In sixth grade he was diagnosed with acute promyelocytic leukemia, an aggressive cancer rarely seen in children his age. It would be nearly a decade before Samuel would return to school. Hospitalizations and chemotherapy lasted for two-and-a-half years, and complications left him bedridden for over seven years. When his elementary school peers graduated high school in 2019, he could barely move, let alone attend.

The first thing Samuel had to learn, well, re-learn, as he began to recover, was how to walk. Literally. Samuel says that the day he started classes at Luna’s College & Career Readiness Institute (CCRI), he doubted his ability “to even physically attend classes,” let alone succeed in getting his high school equivalency. And there was every reason to suspect he had another long, hard road ahead of him. His pre-testing showed his language skills at the 5th grade level, his reading at the 6th grade level, and his math at the 8th grade level. But at CCRI, he would bloom. He not only knocked out the five tests required for his high school equivalency in just over a year, he did it with some of the highest scores the program has ever seen.

As he completed each of the exams, he replaced the time he was investing in each class with volunteer work for CCRI, helping his fellow students as tutor, mentor, and cheerleader.

Reactions to News of the Award

On learning he had been selected as Adult Learner of the Year, Samuel said his emotions ping-ponged between disbelief, joy, shock, excitement, and back to pinch-me-I-must-be-dreaming. That rush of excitement was followed by “an overwhelming sense of gratitude for all those who believed in me.” Then his emotions settled into a somber sense of responsibility to honor the title that had been bestowed on him.

Meanwhile, as news quickly spread throughout the New Mexico Adult Education community, it was as if the state had won the Super Bowl. Which would be no mean feat, as New Mexico has no major league football team. Amber Gallup, the

Director of the Adult Education Division for the New Mexico Higher Education Department, co-congratulated Samuel and the Luna CCRI staff, saying, “They are shining examples of the resilience, strength, and ingenuity of adult learners and educators in New Mexico.” Adding that her staff are “proud and pleased that this amazing student, this hardworking program, and all of New Mexico Adult Education will be in the spotlight” nationwide this year.

Jamie Trujillo, Executive Director of the New Mexico Adult Education Association, who screamed with joy at the news of Samuel’s award, agrees, saying, “this is huge not just for Samuel and Luna Community College, but for New Mexico Adult Education as a whole. This award is extremely competitive, but Samuel is one of the most deserving students I have ever met. I am left in awe of him every day, and I consider myself very fortunate to work side by side with him as fellow advocates for adult education.

While similar messages of congratulations flowed in from adult ed programs across the state, Luna Community College President, Edward A. Martinez, Ph.D., said that the entire school “is very proud of Samuel’s accomplishments.” Martinez added that he’s confident that Samuel will “continue to be a role model for students aspiring to improve their lives through education.” Martinez, who himself pursued higher education only after having a number of low-wage, low-prospect jobs in his youth, is a huge advocate for his college’s Adult Education Program, which is currently housed in the campus’ newest building. In particular, he is proud of the innovative approaches to Adult Education that the program is pioneering.

Luna CCRI

Adult Education has existed at Luna since the college was first founded as a Vo-Tech in 1969. But under Bentson’s leadership, the program has rapidly evolved. When she took over, Luna’s adult ed program was in nearly last place by every possible measure among the 26 programs in the State. It now stands in seventh place. It’s also receiving national attention (in a good way), particularly in the realm of contextualized learning with the program’s innovative approach to providing real-world context to high school-level knowledge, through the Applied STEM Lab that she founded. The Lab uses flight simulators and aviation-focused projects to help students “apply” classroom learning to real life – boosting understanding, increasing knowledge retention, and building new-skill confidence.

An example of one of these projects, and one that Samuel himself participated in, was the CCRI Skywriting Project, a semester-long effort to reverse engineer the aerial skywriting advertisements of yesteryear. Using math and critical thinking, CCRI students modeled a way of skywriting the initials of the college in the heavens above campus. Of the project, Samuel says, “I never dreamed that I’d be calculating flight paths.” The students tested and validated their work on the program’s flight simulators, and then it was flown with an actual airplane, using the student’s calculations. It worked. “They didn’t just do it on paper,” said Martinez of the project, “but they went out and actually did it.”

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Luna adult education graduate...

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“It was eye-opening,” said Samuel of the project, “the Skywriting Project showed me how trouble-shooting as a group is not only educational, but effective in personal growth. I am, for sure, a different person after the experience, and I am grateful.”

The project not only instilled confidence in our students,” says CCRI Faculty member William E. Dubois, who runs the Lab, and who nominated Samuel for the award, “but placed Adult Education in a whole different light in our community.” Dubois, himself a high school “dropout” with a GED now holds a pair of prestigious Master Instructor Accreditations, a Bachelor’s Degree, and an Associate of Applied Science, along with a commercial pilot’s license. He says that the stigma around Adult Education dies hard, but the world is changing. “I think that many employers are beginning to realize that a job candidate with a high school equivalency has had to prove that they’ve mastered the material; while sadly, that’s not really the case with a conventional high school diploma.”

Dubois is one of an estimated 79,000 educators in the United States who work in the rapidly changing field of Adult Basic Education. “It’s an exciting time,” he says, “my peers and I are in a position to not only help individual students, but help the nation as a whole.” He points out that a recent Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy study found that bringing all adults in the country up to a sixth-grade reading level would generate an additional \$2.2 trillion dollars for the economy each and every year. All adults? How many U.S. adults can’t read at the sixth-grade level? The U.S. Department of Education estimates that there are 48 million adults in the country, roughly 18 percent of the adult population, who cannot read above the third-grade level. Because citizens with low literacy rates have the lowest paying jobs in society, CCRI has adopted the motto “Education Fights Poverty.”

“On the surface things look pretty

clear,” says Bentson about the role of Adult Basic Education. “We need to reduce poverty, and give people pathways out of poverty. Samuel, a.k.a. ‘Callsign Spark’ exemplifies what we are trying to do with our aviation focus by giving our scholars a different way to improve important soft skills, and subtly introduce the idea that careers in the aviation industry are one generation steps out of poverty.” But, she cautions, “People who need our services the most are not the ones reading this, so my vision is to lower the barriers, and infuse a new approach to adult learning through outreach and public awareness.”

And part of that outreach includes the fact that, contrary to popular belief, programs like CCRI do not solely serve students who didn’t complete high school. Most are open to assist any citizen who needs to strengthen their knowledge and skills. In short, any citizen who wants to improve their employability by increasing their education.

Advocating for Adult Education

Samuel’s personal and positive experience with Adult Education, and the still existing stigma-esque misconceptions about adult education that he sometimes encountered among family and friends during his journey, have led him to become a vocal advocate for the field. Last year he accepted the position of a New Mexico Adult Education Student Ambassador, which gives him the opportunity to educate the public – and policy makers – about modern Adult Basic Education. Which is no small thing in New Mexico.

Data from the most recent year available show that the State’s programs served nearly 10,000 New Mexicans, graduating 655 students with high school equivalency credentials. Additionally, 56 percent of students enrolled in New Mexico Adult Education programs showed measurable skill gains during the year, which in Adult Education, is equivalent to advancing two full grade levels. Adult ed programs, despite the many barriers to programs, staff, and students alike, are

educating more than half their students at twice the speed of the public schools.

The barrier that Samuel would most like to see addressed is pay for Adult Education professionals, which languishes far behind that of other educators. He says, “whenever I get the chance to talk to legislators, I say, ‘please, please, please – the teachers and people running these programs need competitive wages.’ Part of the point of Adult Education,” says Samuel, “is to raise students out of poverty. So it’s sickeningly ironic that teachers and administrators who do this work have to worry about their own food and housing.”

What’s next for Samuel

Samuel was accepted into the University of New Mexico at the start of the spring semester, where he is now beginning his studies in Civil Engineering. He says he chose that field of study after a visit to the New Croton Dam on the Hudson River, a structure that has been providing drinking water to the inhabitants of New York City for over 100 years, which left him “awestruck.” He says he wanted to be part of something bigger than himself, something that can help people for generations beyond his own lifetime.

Winning the Adult Learner of the Year is more than just an honor, it also provides Samuel with a \$2,000 award, which he says will help him with college expenses. He’ll also attend COABE’s national conference all expenses paid, where he’ll have the opportunity to share his story and his passion for Adult Basic Education.

But even as he moves on to the next phase in his life, his fondness for CCRI remains. Every time he’s back in Las Vegas, he drops by CCRI’s offices, classrooms, and lab on the Luna campus to say “hi,” and to lend a helping hand, proving that Samuel is a one-in-a-million kind of person.

Or, actually, more accurately, a one in 1.5 million kind of person.

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TEAS

Nursing school entrance exam

February 2024 dates

Scheduling for the following dates is taking place now.

Friday, February 9	9:00 a.m.
Thursday February 15	9:00 a.m.
Thursday February 22	9:00 a.m.
Thursday, February 29	9:00 a.m.

Contact: Vanessa Torres

505-454-2566

vatorres@luna.edu

Passing TEAS score is 58.7% overall or higher. There are 30 slots available for qualified applicants for admission in Fall 2023.

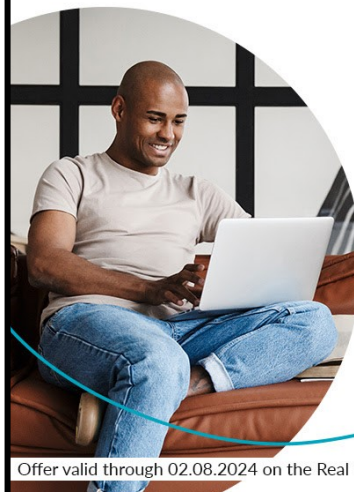
Please provide student ID number, phone number, and exam date in the e-mail.

You have up to three attempts per academic year to pass the exam; the fee for each attempt is \$70.

You're advised to set up an account with ATI prior to the exam date; go to atitesting.com, click on Create Account. Use Luna CC ADN for institution, with estimated graduation date of 5/10/2026

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Luna's Gene Martinez continues to lead successful welding program

Gene Martinez has been teaching welding at Luna Community College since 2019. Little-by-little he has seen the welding program grow.

"I started off with about five students per class and now I am at 15 or more students per class," says Martinez. "This semester I am teaching eight classes; I would teach nine but there is not that many hours in the day."

All of Martinez' classes are eight-week courses. They are: vocational 117 blueprint reading and construction math; intro to welding; welding level I; welding level I applications; welding level II; welding level III; ornamental art welding and welding level I applications advanced.

"One instructor that helps me is Paul Vance who teaches machine operations in metal working," says Martinez.

There is about 50 students registered in welding classes with many taking more than one class.

Martinez, who is no stranger to hard work, has taken an unusual trek to Luna.

"I needed a career change," says Martinez. "I ran our family restaurant for 28 years, Pancho's Roadside Café until 2018. My mom wanted to retire and unfortunately she got sick and I didn't want to run the restaurant by myself."

After earning his American Welding Society (AWS) certifications at Luna, Martinez eventually took over as the welding program's primary instructor.

"It was supposed to just be a temporary thing and ended up being a permanent one," says Martinez.

Perhaps welding compliments Martinez' prior education.

"I went to the University of New Mexico and majored in architecture and did my internship with the department of defense/department of the Navy," says Martinez.

Again, hard work is nothing new for Martinez.

"As an independent design professional for the last 20 years, I can multitask," says Martinez. "When I was running the restaurant, I was the cook, manager, owner, dishwasher, waiter and part-time counselor."

Is Martinez surprised with his welding program being near the top of the mountain at Luna?

"The success we have had here has surprised me," says



Luna welding students Victor Phillips and Rico Rains cut plates at Luna's welding shop.

Martinez. "When I first started I had very few students, now we have many students. I could probably have more students, but I have learned when you have too many students, you end up neglecting a couple of them."

What is the formula for Martinez' success.

"I have a philosophy that we have set a standard to either be consistently good or consistently bad and I try to be consistently good," says Martinez. "My goal is to try to build up our communities. I would like to see our students stay and work here but it's okay that they leave town and earn their money while they can. They can always come back home."

Martinez says that once his students earn their American Welding Society certificate, most of them go out and get a job.

"Over 90 percent of our students pass their AWS certi-

fication," says Martinez.

What can students expect when taking a class with Martinez?

"Students can expect to show up on time and work hard," says Martinez. "I coach my students on technique. I do not tell my students that they are wrong, but I do tell them that there is a better way to do it. I teach them to think and problem solve. I try to get them as prepared as I can. I give them a good foundation."

Martinez says that nothing is easy. However, it can be done.

"It's a lot of hard work," says Martinez. "I work about nine or 10 hours a day including Saturday classes with high school dual credit students. I believe I have good, solid program here at Luna, that's what I contribute my success to."

Martinez says that welding is for everyone.

"I have increased the amount of female students in my program, averaging about five or six female students per semester," says Martinez. "There are female welders out there, although it is male dominated field. Some of our students are working in Los Alamos National Laboratories or they are self-employed."

For more information on Luna's welding program, email Gene Martinez at gemartinez@luna.edu.



The New Mexico Board of Nursing and the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing conducted a coterminous re-accreditation visit for the Luna Nursing Program this week. As part of the assessment of the program, interviews took place with the Luna administration, managers, the nursing administrator, nursing faculty, staff, nursing students, and the public. Participants were allowed to take part either in person or virtually for most meetings. Results from the visit will be available around Oct. 1, 2024.



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Early Childhood Scholarship	Must be actively enrolled PT or FT in the Early Childhood Program	(1) \$500 Award
General Scholarship	Must be actively enrolled in a minimum of 12 credits in any LCC Certificate or Degree Program	(5) \$500 Awards
Veterans Scholarship	Active Duty, Reserve, or Military Veteran enrolled PT or FT in any LCC certificate or Degree Program	(1) \$500 Award

Who is Eligible:

Any student, in good academic standing (GPA 2.0+) who is actively enrolled at Luna Community College, main campus or satellites, either on a part-time or full-time basis in any program affiliated with LCC. Financial need is the general requirement for all LCC Foundation Scholarships. You must have a current FAFSA on file with the Financial Aid Office at Luna.

How to Apply:

You can find the LCC Foundation Spring 2024 Scholarship Application on our website, lunafoundationnm.org, or by picking up a printed copy from the LCC Foundation office, located on the 2nd floor of the Student Services building.

Questions or Concerns:

Feel free to contact the Luna Community College Foundation office with any questions or concerns you may have. **Phone:** (505) 454-5337 **Email:** lccfoundation@luna.edu

Date Due: February 15, 2024

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