

The Plant Has Become a Tree by Celeste Velarde

My journey at Kauai Community College began in 2019 after earning my GED. I left high school because I was anxious, depressed, and not mentally equipped to continue. The daunting social escapades discouraged me from believing I could endure it to achieve a degree as a shy, introverted, and autistic young woman. In my first year at KCC, I struggled to find my voice. My instructors from that year know all too well how I sank into my seat, avoiding eye contact during class discussions, in the back of the room with my forehead squished into my palms on presentation days, refusing to participate.

However, I grew dissatisfied with the quiet person I was once content to be. I yearned for growth, and the time came when I realized this was the perfect opportunity to push my boundaries and work harder than I ever had. I set goals for myself – to express my ideas and ask if I needed help. I would even challenge myself to participate in those dreaded presentations. Publicly expressing my lack of understanding and seeking help made me feel weak, but ironically, this was when I began to develop self-confidence. I realized the potential within myself unknown to me before. Sinking into that seat and avoiding eye contact was easy; vocalizing my thoughts was much more challenging. However, as uncomfortable as I was, I enjoyed these small achievements. I savored the community and camaraderie with my classmates and professors. I was inspired as they shared their stories, and I looked to them as my role models. I became exponentially more determined to achieve my full potential.

Many, many times in the past, I've doubted myself. I thought I was unworthy and incapable of earning a degree. Today, there is no doubt that I deserve to be here with my fellow graduates. College has empowered me to push myself further than ever, working harder in not only my

studies but in my desire for growth and improvement. Although often challenging, I have worked tenaciously to cultivate assertiveness and perseverance. I transformed, realizing my self-worth, identity, and potential. By changing how I was developing, I established a better version of myself. The nurturing environment of this campus and the encouragement I received from my family have allowed me to metamorphose. I will continue to develop these qualities throughout my life as I move into this next chapter.

I express my endless gratitude to the faculty at KCC, who have fostered an encouraging environment where students can grow and flourish, and also to our loved ones who have made tremendous sacrifices, allowing us to seize this beautiful opportunity. I am so proud of myself and each of my classmates. We have blossomed into hard-working and capable individuals. This year's commencement theme, "The plant has become a tree," can inspire us to carry forward the qualities we have cultivated here as our journeys at KCC come to a close. As we continue to strengthen into solid trees, let us become the best version of ourselves.