

# An employer knows how Castro Valley Adult & Career Education changes people's lives: She's also a CVACE graduate

by Matt Jocks

When Julia Siroy's 27-year career with Macy's fell victim to the Great Recession, she had a logical mind that told her one thing: No matter what happens with the economy, there would always be a need for people to provide medical care.

"I didn't have experience in any other field," she says. "If I can get laid off after 27 years and have to start over, older than most people who are getting started, what am I going to do? You know what, the medical field."

So that's where she headed. And her timing turned out to be perfect: She joined the first Medical Assistant training program at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education.

Siroy says cost was an initial factor in choosing Castro Valley—and she is thankful today to not be burdened by student loan debt—but she found the affordability came with excellent quality. "The instructors I had were really awesome. They were very supportive and they made everything seem easy."

At the start, Siroy says she needed the support because she entered the program with some apprehension about her ability to thrive as an older student.

"That was challenging," she says. "I was going to school with these young adults who were around my daughters' ages."

There were, however, a couple of students of Siroy's generation and they bonded quickly ("We called ourselves the threesome"). She maintains personal and working relationships with both more than a decade later.

After getting her certification, Siroy worked for a short stint with a temp agency, gaining experience in a variety of offices with different specialties. That led to her being hired at a private practice and then at Hayward Family Care, where she serves as office manager today. There,



Julia Siroy, office manager at Hayward Family Care, now hires staff from the program she received her medical training from. Photo by George E. Baker

she deals with matters like billing and scheduling and serves as liaison between doctors and patients, drug representatives and pharmacies.

She also oversees a crew of five and has supervised many externs who followed her path from Castro Valley.

Seeing the quality of workers that have come from CVACE has reinforced Siroy's view that its programs continue to offer solid professional training—at a fraction of the cost of private schools in the area.

"I've heard from people who paid a lot more money going through other programs," she says, but CVACE graduates are her most frequent choice to fill extern roles or open positions.

In fact, CVACE has impressive statistics to back up Siroy's hiring preferences: In 2022-23, 309 students enrolled in CTE classes, and 273 completed their coursework, an 88% completion rate. CTE health care programs now include:

- Clinical Medical Assistant
- Administrative Medical Assistant
- Community Health Worker
- EKG/ECG Technician

- Direct Support Professional with ESL Support
- Medical Terminology with Anatomy & Physiology

And in Siroy's specific field, Medical Assistant, Castro Valley graduates have a 99% pass rate on the state certification exam (CCBMA) and/or national certification exam (NCCT). CVACE alumni have been hired at UHA Stanford, Kaiser Permanente, Sutter East Bay and Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center, as well as a myriad of private practice and clinic offices.

As for Siroy, after 10 years at Hayward Family Care, the days of working retail—and job insecurity—are long past. "Honestly, I couldn't have imagined it," Siroy says of her midlife career change. "But I'm glad it happened. I'm really happy doing what I'm doing."



To learn more about Castro Valley Adult & Career Education, visit <https://www.cvadult.org/>, email [cvaceinfo@cv.k12.ca.us](mailto:cvaceinfo@cv.k12.ca.us) or phone (510) 886-1000 .

# A Path Forward: How Castro Valley Adult & Career Education inspires students to be the best version of themselves

by Raul Clement

In 2018, Iema Becerra was enrolled in Castro Valley Adult & Career Education, working on her high school diploma. Completing her education had been a lifelong goal. However, between having to work at a young age and having children, there had been no time to go back to school. Now she was finally getting the chance.

But then she learned she was pregnant with her fifth child. The pregnancy was classified as high risk. She would have to leave school again, and this time it might be for good.

“I’d put my education on hold for so long,” Becerra says, “and I felt like the pregnancy was going to set me back even more.”

But after speaking with a counselor at the school, Becerra realized that this didn’t have to be the end of her education. Now, in 2024, she’s back at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education and is almost done with her diploma work. She credits her counseling sessions for having helped her make the right decision.

This experience has made her a strong advocate for CVACE. She recognizes that not all adult schools offer such hands-on guidance.

“I tried another adult school years back,” she says. “They didn’t give you that level of support. I think it’s something a lot of students could benefit from. It really helped me.”

Another way CVACE supports students is through its flexible curriculum. Becerra does her coursework online, an important convenience for a mother of five children. She has also been able to enroll concurrently in Chabot College, taking classes that weren’t available at CVACE.

“I needed a lot of credits. The English classes I took at Chabot helped me a lot.”



Iema Becerra is a CVACE student and member of the Student Advisory Council. Photo by George E. Baker

As part of the dual enrollment, these classes will count toward her high school diploma and earn college credits. Becerra plans to pursue a career as a Childhood Intervention Specialist, an occupation she feels a personal connection to due to her own experiences.

“My firstborn was premature—born at 6 months, 2 pounds. He received full services. And my middle daughter had problems walking, so she received services, too. And now I have a cousin that’s an intervention specialist, and I see how she works with the children. She goes to their homes and helps them get what they need. That interested me.”

Once again, CVACE helped clarify the process. Becerra took a course called Get Focused, Stay Focused, a college and career readiness program. In this course, she created a 10-year career plan. The first step is a two-year course at Chabot College. After that, she’ll pursue a Bachelor’s at a university.

Finally, after years of putting the future on hold, Becerra has a path forward. And as an added bonus, she’s modeling good choices for her children.

“They see me studying and reading,” she says. “It reminds them that education is important.”

So deep is Becerra’s appreciation for CVACE, she’s joined the Student Advisory Council, a group of 10 students who meet once a month to brainstorm ways to make CVACE even better.

“The goal of the council is to figure out how we can improve the school even more, how we can get the school noticed more,” she says. “We use ideas inspired by our own experiences.”

And Becerra, of course, has plenty of positive experiences to draw from.



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# All Means All: How Castro Valley Adult & Career Education strengthens the community as a whole

by Castro Valley Adult & Career Education

During the economic downturn of 2008, California allowed school districts to close adult schools or reduce their funding. But one school district understood the importance of their adult school and decided not to make any cutbacks. The school, Castro Valley Adult Career & Education, has been open for over five decades, and has become a foundational part of the Castro Valley community.

“They recognized how important the adult school was, not only for the adults but also the kids,” says Parvin Ahmadi, Superintendent of the Castro Valley Unified School District. “It’s all part of a continuum of services. We know when our adults are successful, and they have skills and knowledge, they in turn help our students in K-12.”

In other words, better and more diverse educational opportunities for adults lead to better employment. This in turn leads to a more robust and sustainable local community. To that end, Castro Valley Adult & Career Education, also known as CVACE, offers career education programs ranging from Wastewater Treatment to Medical Assisting to Business to Computer Technology.

These programs are developed with an eye toward local industry.

“In our area, there’s a high demand for people that have certifications, training, connections,” says Lavender Whitaker, President of the Castro Valley School Board. “In a lot of fields you don’t necessarily need a degree, you need technical expertise. This is a wonderful opportunity for people who haven’t had the same educational opportunities or support. It creates equity.”

This equity extends beyond Career Education. Students at CVACE can get their high school diploma or GED. They can also take English as a Second Language classes, reflective of the increasingly diverse linguistic background of the area.



Parvin Ahmadi, Superintendent of the Castro Valley Unified School District (left), and Lavender Whitaker, President of the Castro Valley School Board (right), together at the CVACE campus. Photo by George E. Baker

There is even a very popular program for adults with disabilities. Called Strides, this program helps students achieve independence by teaching them valuable life skills, such as how to use money in real life situations and make appointments. It also places people with disabilities in internships with participating local businesses.

“Our local employers love the program,” says Whitaker. “The students are dependable. They go to work every day. They do a great job.”

All adult students can also be enrolled in multiple programs at once. This is part of CVACE’s approach of tailoring education to students’ needs.

“We have a philosophy of not being a cookie-cutter district,” says Ahmadi. “We ask what’s best for the individual. We have a lot of people who are learning English at the same time as they’re going through the medical technology program or the water treatment program.”

This approach has yielded tangible success. About 90% of the students who complete Career Education programs have gone onto local jobs within the industry. Students regularly meet with counselors who can connect them to local employers or help them transition to further

educational opportunities, such as getting an Associate Degree at Chabot College, the local community college.

“There is a seamless transition from our adult school to Chabot and other educational entities,” says Ahmadi. “I love that. That’s been really needed and something that’s been very effective.”

All this has made Castro Valley Adult & Career Education a staple in the community: It survived one economic downturn and is not going anywhere anytime soon. More than being just another school, CVACE embodies the values of the entire Castro Valley area.

“We have this saying in our district,” says Whitaker. “We say ‘All Means All.’ What we mean by that is that the services we provide to our community, to our students, and to our families, should lift everyone up.”



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# Staff Spotlight: Three teachers at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education exemplify the school's dedicated and warmhearted staff

by Whip Villarreal



Elisa Dasalla, or 'Mizz D,' in her Medical Academy classroom at CVACE. Photography by George E. Baker

Teaching can be a challenge, and never has that been truer than in the last few years, when COVID created an unprecedented upheaval educators scrambled to work around. But adult students face a unique situation even without an international pandemic: holding down a job, caring for a family or navigating a new country, all while trying to attend school. The fact students are forced to overcome so many barriers, however, makes their teachers even more committed to seeing them succeed.

## Elisa Dasalla

Elisa Dasalla, lead instructor for the Medical Academy at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education, is better known by students both past and present as “Mizz D.” A pivotal figure in the establishment of the Medical Academy, Dasalla has witnessed its evolution from a single class to a comprehensive program encompassing EKG, Medical Assisting,

Medical Terminology and Community Health Worker.

“At first I taught in a classroom that was also used for computer classes for medical billing and insurance before the campus expanded,” recalls Dasalla. “Slowly, the classes filled up and we had to accommodate the increased demand and offer more classes. As word of mouth got out, more and more students continued to enroll and the Medical Academy has been steadily growing.”

Dasalla’s personal connection to adult education at an early age is a driving force that motivated her to pursue her teaching career. Born to a family of Portuguese immigrants, she didn’t speak English until the age of 6. She recalls her dad going to an adult school to learn English through an English as a Second Language course while simultaneously taking classes to obtain his U.S. citizenship. She would sometimes accompany him to class and

remembers how happy he was to get his citizenship.

“The generational impact of getting education from an adult school is huge,” says Dasalla. “People underestimate what an adult school does day in and day out. I have had previous students come up to me in places like Starbucks and say, ‘Mizz D, I’m going to buy your coffee.’ I try to politely decline and they insist and say things like, ‘If it wasn’t for you and the school, I wouldn’t be able to drive that car to take my kids to school’ or ‘I wouldn’t be able to pay my rent or mortgage.’”

She adds it’s easy to identify with her students in terms of the struggle they go through. Growing up as a non-native English speaker, there wasn’t much help available. She would be put into a class to practice English, but it often wasn’t helpful. She says she ended up having to learn English the hard way.



“Back then it didn’t occur to me that I might have had some undiagnosed learning issues or didn’t know how to learn effectively,” says Dasalla. “It wasn’t until I went to college and got much older that I realized maybe that’s why I didn’t do well in school as a kid. I didn’t know what my preferred learning style was—and adult school has that mastered. It’s the first thing we learn about students when they enroll. We assess them to understand how they prefer to learn and we offer different techniques to ensure their success. We really emphasize understanding our students and what’s the best way they learn by giving them lots of ways to understand the course material. At the Medical Academy, we never do it just one way, we show students different ways to grasp the material depending on what kind of learner they are.”

## Joanna Lee

Joanna Lee has been making a significant impact on the lives of local immigrant communities through English as a Second Language classes at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education. Lee has taught for nearly six years at CVACE and doing this work is her way to help serve and lift her community.

Born and raised in the United States, Lee spent a few years living abroad in Spain and Tokyo and can speak multiple languages, including Spanish. Having lived overseas, Lee often empathizes with students who are newly arrived to the U.S. She is all too familiar with how it feels being new to a foreign country and being far away from family. This helps her connect with students.

ESL Teacher Joanna Lee at the CVACE campus.

“I love language and can speak a couple of different languages so sometimes it encourages the students to speak with me in Spanish if they really need to,” Lee said. “I think they feel comfortable knowing that I know their language. Sometimes after class, students will come to me and confide in me about things they have going on or to get advice because they are comfortable speaking to me in their first language.”

CVACE has a partnership with the International Rescue Committee and many of its students are refugees from



ESL Teacher Joanna Lee at the CVACE campus.

Afghanistan, Ukraine and other parts of the world that have been ravaged by war. Because of this, sometimes Lee finds herself in a unique position to help these students get their lives back on track.

“There was a couple from Ukraine who moved here because of the war and luckily they had family here and were able to live with them and they went into the ESL program,” recalls Lee. “The husband was looking for a job and through one of my volunteer contacts, I found a job opportunity and encouraged him to apply. Our transition specialist worked with him to get his resume together and he got the job. It was a full-time job with benefits and everything. When I talk about them, I get really excited because they are great examples of how hard work, motivation and setting goals can help anyone be successful, no matter the circumstance.”

In fact, Lee says her students often want to learn English so they can better

communicate with their child’s teacher. She adds many of her students want to be good role models for their children and motivate them to also study hard and set goals.

Not only does Lee find teaching ESL at CVACE fulfilling, collaborating with her colleagues motivates her to improve as an educator. For example, Lee says the ESL department collaborates with the Medical Academy, with the aim to support students who are immigrants and are training to become medical assistants. Lee not only helps them become more fluent in English though ESL, but helps them understand their medical coursework that is in English.

“Adult school is a place where there is a lot of collaboration, a lot of camaraderie,” Lee explains. “The administration is open to ideas and each department has collaboration time for teachers to work together and I have learned so much from my colleagues that have more experience.





Shelli Sherman teaching a medical class at CVACE.

It is valuable for someone like me who is fairly new to the field.”

## Shelli Sherman

Shelli Sherman currently teaches courses in the Medical Academy at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education, but her connection to the school originated when she first stepped into the classroom—as a student.

Sherman’s inaugural class was in Anatomy and Physiology with Elisa Dasalla, lead instructor for the Medical Academy at CVACE. At the time, Sherman was trying to enroll in a nursing program, but during her time at the school she found her passion as a medical assistant.

She first learned about CVACE through

catalogs she received in the mail. One day she flipped through the pages and found that it was offering medical classes. This piqued her attention and she soon found herself enrolled at the school.

“Taking the classes was a great way for me to get back into the workforce from being a stay-at-home mom for 15 years,” Sherman says. “I thought this would be a great place for me to get my start back into education—and I see that in a lot of the students. They have had a long, winding, bumpy road and the adult school is a safe and comfortable place to take a chance to start over or start something new.”

After she completed her studies, she acquired an externship and got hired directly afterwards by the same employer. After a period of time, she landed her

teaching position at CVACE, and for a while, juggled the two jobs, but eventually she started teaching full-time.

Shelli Sherman teaching a medical class at CVACE.

“It wasn’t my intention to get into teaching when I came to the school as a student or started working as a medical assistant, but when I was a student here, I would think to myself, ‘I think I would really like it if I was teaching here,’” Sherman recalls. “This would be something that I would want to do someday: come back and share what I learned with students.”

Sherman now co-teaches with Dasalla at the Medical Academy and they have been working together for nearly seven years.

Sherman says one of her favorite things at CVACE is the opportunity to expand what she teaches. Even though she was hired to teach in the Medical Assisting class, the school allowed her to develop an array of related courses, like Core Skills and Medical Terminology. She has also collaborated with Dasalla to develop a Community Health Worker class. But she isn’t solely dedicated to medical classes: she is currently teaching Improv at the school.

“There are so many ways to grow and explore and figure out your own passions as a teacher and the different things you want to teach to students,” Sherman explains. “The administration is supportive of that and gives the tools and resources for students and faculty to be successful. There are a lot of opportunities to continue to grow and learn and expand.”



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# Staff Spotlight: Learn why a counselor and a transition specialist at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education are inspired by their students every day

by Castro Valley Adult & Career Education



Linette Escobar has been on staff at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education for 10 years. Photography by George E. Baker

## Linette Escobar

Linette Escobar, a teacher and transition specialist at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education, has been teaching English as a Second Language to adults for more than 24 years. For the last 10 years, Escobar has been part of the staff at CVACE.

In addition to teaching classes, she helps people forge a pathway to their goals, whether that's getting into college or starting a career training path. This might include finding resources for housing and immigration services, or assisting students in drafting resumes and practicing interviews.

"I love the second chance adult education brings," Escobar says. "Seeing a 40-year-old woman who got pregnant during high school come back to complete their education is super rewarding. I feel like adult ed is really for people who fell through the cracks and it gives them a second chance and I really love being part of it."

Prior to teaching, Escobar worked in politics and youth development. It was during that time she took steps to go into teaching. She started teaching in

community colleges while simultaneously working for a nonprofit assisting refugees and immigrants. Escobar accepted a job in legal immigration services, but she soon realized she missed being in education. When a teaching and leadership job opportunity opened up at CVACE, she found herself positioned to merge her myriad of experiences and get back into adult education.

As both an ESL instructor and transition specialist, she plays a pivotal role in guiding students through the intricacies of academic and career transitions. While she has played a part in many students' success stories, one student is particularly memorable.

"We had a student who had never been allowed to attend school as a child and arrived here as an adult who couldn't read or do math," recalls Escobar. "She would have to pretend to read to her children and make up the stories as she held a book open and she felt immense shame. She would always sit in the back of the classroom with a hoodie on and would not really participate because she was so ashamed of her level. She started with the adult basic ed program and last year she graduated after ten years with our school.

She won an award from the state and in some ways, she is our biggest success story."

Escobar emphasizes the value of receiving an education and believes it is key to creating fair and equitable opportunities for marginalized communities. She feels it opens up opportunities to earn a higher income, attain a better quality of life for their family, and ultimately uplifts the community as a whole. She says that CVACE not only offers a rewarding work environment and opportunities for collaboration with colleagues, but also serves as good place for those embarking on a journey toward impactful transformation.

## Alina Tet

In a landscape where mental health services for adult education remains under-addressed, Castro Valley Adult Career & Education stands out as a trailblazer, offering short-term therapy to all enrolled students. For many, CVACE is an institution that has fostered support and transformation in the community thanks to staff like Alina Tet, a mental health counselor, whose dedication and





Linette Escobar has been on staff at Castro Valley Adult & Career Education for 10 years. Photography by George E. Baker

empathy have left indelible marks on the lives of students she has assisted.

For more than four years, Tet has served as a counselor at CVACE, a role that encompasses myriad responsibilities within the student services department. However, her journey to this role was marked by personal and professional challenges, reflective of the very population she now serves.

Tet immigrated from Romania and moved to the United States about 11 years ago. Her studies did not transfer completely and she had to rethink her career and essentially start over. She first got the idea of going into counseling when her friend noticed that she was good with children at the job she had at the time. Her friend recommended that she become a therapist and that is when Tet really started pursuing a career in counseling.

Her first exposure to counseling was through an internship with the school district. As time passed she learned that CVACE was hiring for a mental health counselor and was hired for the position. Initially, the job focused on counseling students with disabilities. However, the program eventually expanded to all

students as there was a growing need for support among the broader student body.

Tet's role extends beyond individual counseling sessions. She helps provide critical resources ranging from housing assistance to immigration services, all tailored to meet the unique needs of each student. She collaborates with fellow transition specialists on the student services team to enhance the support network available to CVACE students. Tet is often a lifeline for students grappling with a multitude of challenges, from educational and career transitions to personal crises.

"One story that sticks out is a student who was going through our GED program and while he was taking classes, his wife was diagnosed with cancer," Tet recalls. "He wanted to quit so he can help his wife, which is totally understandable. But he came to see me because he wanted to learn how to support his wife. We ended up having couples counseling and they would both come to sessions together. They worked on a plan that was supportive for her chemo treatment and also supportive to help him get his homework done and attend class. A year after our sessions, he graduated from the program

and eventually his wife ended up being cancer-free."

Despite witnessing the hardships some students face firsthand, Tet finds profound fulfillment in her work.

"Out of all of the jobs I have done in my life, this is the most rewarding because I am directly helping people," she says. "Don't get me wrong, there were times that I would go home and cry because some of the stories the students have shared with me really brought tears to my eyes. At times it can be troubling because I see the gaps and how certain marginalized populations fall through those gaps. But being there to see a person transforming their lives and putting in that effort and being there to help them in times of need is really rewarding and I think I am in this for the long run."



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# From GED to a Job: CVACE helps students build their own path to success

by Whip Villarreal



Edel Lopez-Cruz found the help to build his own path to success with Castro Valley Adult Career and Education. Photo by George E. Baker Jr.

Edel Lopez-Cruz's journey to academic success is a story of perseverance, determination and the transformative power of education. Graduating with his GED from Castro Valley Adult Career and Education (CVACE) in Spring 2023, Lopez-Cruz overcame various challenges to achieve his educational goal, utilizing the specialized counseling services offered by the school along the way.

Earning his GED had been a long-time goal for Lopez-Cruz. Before enrolling at CVACE, he had looked into several other local programs, but found them too expensive. While researching his options, he found CVACE's positive reviews and reached out to them to learn more. He found the process easy to navigate and the staff was quick to respond to his questions.

"I was able to get into Castro Valley and I had a great experience there," said Lopez-Cruz. "There was a lot of opportunities

that were offered to me. While I was in Castro Valley, I got a few job opportunities and one of those was for Google. I was not hired at Google, but I ended up being hired as a supervisor with a construction company."

Arriving in the United States in 2006 at the age of 15, Lopez-Cruz's educational opportunities were limited. Having only finished middle school courses, he was determined to build a better future for himself through education. Lopez-Cruz enrolled at CVACE in 2021 to pursue a GED and said this was the springboard to help obtain better work opportunities that he received while in school.

Lopez-Cruz emphasized the pivotal role of CVACE's counseling services played in his academic journey and credits this help as a key factor to completing his courses.

"I would advise anyone in a similar situation as mine to go to Castro Valley

because they are an amazing group," he said. "They helped me a lot mentally and emotionally. I didn't take advantage of the counseling services until I was in the middle of the program and if I had to do it again, I would not hesitate to enroll and would have started taking advantage of those services sooner."

Lopez-Cruz plans to continue his education with CVACE to improve and expand his English grammar. He says that he still has a lot to learn, but enrolling at CVACE was a great beginning and motivation to continue his education goals.



To learn more about about the education offerings, job training opportunities and other benefits of enrolling at CVACE, visit [cvadult.org](http://cvadult.org).

# Supporting Students as they Strive for Change: CVACE give students the tools to advance their careers

by Whip Villarreal



Castro Valley Adult Career and Education gives students like Iris Lim the tools to advance their careers. Photo by George E. Baker Jr.

Iris Lim has been working to change careers from the dental industry to the medical field and is a step closer to achieving that goal thanks to the education she received at Castro Valley Adult Career and Education (CVACE). She completed the clinical course at CVACE in November 2023, which included a 160-hour externship with Kaiser Permanente.

“I wanted a job that is more fulfilling because my mom was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer and I was the one taking her to the hospital and supporting her during her chemo therapy,” Lim said. “I saw what nurses were doing and I like helping people. Seeing what those nurses were doing inspired me to want to join healthcare. So I told myself it is now or never.”

Thankfully today her mother’s health has improved and she’s doing well. Lim, however, still faced challenges. She was a few classes shy of earning her high school diploma – a necessity to go into the health care field – but was determined to do what whatever it took to achieve her

career goals. That’s when she discovered CVACE as a viable way to obtain her high school diploma and education for the career she was striving for.

“My experience at Castro Valley has been great,” she said. “Their program is affordable and classes are flexible where I can still maintain my job and work around my school schedule and that was really helpful. That is why I plan to take more classes at the medical school this year.”

Lim said that she plans to enroll in phlebotomy, EKG tech and medical billing and coding courses. She aims to secure employment in the medical field shortly after completing the additional courses. Although she is planning to get into the medical field by becoming a clinical medical assistant, her ultimate goal is to one day become a registered nurse.

Currently, Lim is actively pursuing job opportunities while working on completing the additional courses at CVACE to strengthen her qualifications. She credits CVACE for providing valuable resources and support, including job

postings on their website and letters of recommendation from program coordinators. Additionally, the school also provides many other benefits such as counseling support, online class options and caring and supportive teaching staff and administrators.

Lim’s journey to reach her educational and professional goals is yet another example of the transformative power of education and CVACE’s commitment to empowering people at all stages of their education to pursue their career aspirations despite obstacles they may face. As Lim continues with her studies at CVACE, her journey is an example to others who are seeking to begin their own path to a new career and further their education.



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