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Once-Broken Student Finds Hope, Opportunity through Cerritos College

James Coleman Returned from Alcoholism to Earn Well-Paid Machinist Job in L.A.

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NORWALK, CA – June 2, 2006 – James Coleman came to Southern California in 2002 in search of himself. What he found was sobriety, skills and a new lease on life.

Originally from Shiprock, New Mexico, Coleman is Diné, a Native American tribe, more commonly known as Navajo. He is of the Bit'ahnii clan (Folded Arms Clan), born for Tl'izi' Láni (Many Coats clan). His Chei is Tl'aahchi'i (Red Autumn clan) and his Náli is Tsin Sikaadnii (Clumped Tree clan).

Just before he came to California, Coleman had hit rock bottom as an alcoholic. For a majority of his life, Coleman says, he would wake up in the morning and reach for a drink to relieve his hangover. "That became my medication every morning," he says.

He lived on the streets. He was hospitalized more times than he can count after sleeping outside in the sub-freezing New Mexico desert and suffering hypothermia.

Today, Coleman proudly celebrates three years of sobriety.

So much has changed since his days in Shiprock that Coleman says his family and friends back home hardly recognize him. When he made the dean's list at Cerritos College in fall 2005, it took an article placed by his sister in the local Navajo Times newspaper to convince people that Coleman had really changed; some still can't believe it.

Coleman came to Long Beach and checked into a special program for overcoming alcoholism. He completed a 6-month recovery program, but wasn't sure what to do afterward.

"I was thinking, 'What should I do?' he says, "and then I thought I'd go back to school because I thought it could enhance my sobriety."



“I had always been good at math and good with my hands—the machine tool tech program at Cerritos College appealed to me, and so I enrolled.”

In January 2004, with help from Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS), a state program that provides financial aid and assistance to disadvantaged students, Coleman began a certificate of achievement program in machine tool technology at Cerritos College. He carried 13.5 credits his first semester—and got all As.

“I didn’t even have time to work part time,” he says. “My beadwork kept my mind at ease. I was able to meditate to relieve stress during that time.”

Coleman is an artisan who creates intricately beaded jewelry and garments. He used his bead work to ease the stress of school work and to make extra money by selling it at local pow-wows.

“I figured the way to study wasn’t to cram the night before,” Coleman explains. “I figured if I listened in class, asked questions and did the homework, it would begin to come easier. From then on, that’s what I did. And I just understood the information.”

Coleman finished the certificate program in December 2005. Now, he’s a computer numerical operator at Secom International, a company located near Los Angeles International Airport. The company makes parts for parking meters. Coleman started the job in late 2005 before he completed school.

“My supervisor had hired some people from Cerritos College in the past,” he said. “They were happy with the people they’d hired from the college, so they hired me.”

“It was rocky at first, learning a new job,” he says. “It’s still rocky. They’re patient with me. It’s a different world to go from books to real life. But I’m doing good. I make mistakes, but that’s just a part of being new.”

Coleman credits Cerritos College’s machine tool program and instructors for providing him with the concepts and tools he needed for his job. “Cerritos College opened the door for me and taught me the basics,” he says. “Now, I’m applying those skills.”

“I’ve been really fortunate,” he says. “My family, my relatives find it hard to believe—me, a drunk from the streets getting on the dean’s list is a real shock to them. It’s just a list, I know, I got a certificate that says “dean’s list” – and where I was headed, nobody back home would have guessed it.”

Coleman’s focus now is to gain experience and to eventually move back closer to home, where he has kids, grandkids, friends and family.

“I’m very traditional,” he says. “I feel best when I’m near our four sacred mountains. I’m entry-level now, and in the machine industry, machinists tend to move around.

Specifically, Coleman is skilled in computer numerical control (CNC) operations. He uses a CNC lathe, and also a mechanical lathe. He will look for future opportunities for machine skills in grinding, surfacing and die-cutting.

“I’m getting ahead—but I learned in the beginning; it’s not good to rush. It’s hard to go back and do things over again due to a mistake—you spend more time if you don’t do it right the first time, and in

the machine tool industry, time is money,” he says. “Even a 5-thousandth of an inch makes a difference. They say carpenters work with inches and feet; we deal with thousandths of an inch.”

Since he began his job, Coleman has readily earned his employer’s trust.

“I really enjoy work; I get there early,” he says. “My supervisor knows he can trust me.”

Coleman chooses to work 10 hours a day every day for overtime pay. He says there’s so much work that he can also get time Saturdays. Eventually, he says, he may want to get into the aerospace industry.

“I’d like to be involved in an industry where lives depend on how good a job you do,” he says.

Coleman came to Southern California to find himself, and he says he’s done just that.

“I’m reborn,” he says. “It got to the point where I didn’t have the desire to drink.”

When he’s not working, Coleman likes to give time and effort back to the community that helped him find his new life. He says the staff and friends he met through the alcoholism recovery program are still a great support to him and serve as his “sobriety family” by offering him encouragement and love.

“I’d like to give back what was given to me,” Coleman says. “I’d like to encourage Native American men and women to maintain their sobriety. But they have to want it—otherwise, they’re just wasting time.”

“There isn’t an excuse; you have to do it for yourself and believe in yourself. That’s the foundation for life. Believe me, I’ve been through it.”