1,076 graduate with a variety of degrees

By TODD GUILD
APRTO — Cabrillo College graduate Huong Bui was born in 1968, at the dawn of the Vietnam War.

After a childhood wracked by bombs and marked by fear during the 15-year war, her family was separated and her father was in prison. Bui's mother and 10 children survived by growing and selling flowers and vegetables on the streets.

Despite her difficulties, Bui graduated from high school but was unable to continue her education.

With hopes of finding a better life, she boarded a small boat headed overseas. After three days at sea, however, the boat was seized by a communist patrol vessel, and Bui was jailed for one year.

She married after her release and had three daughters. Her husband was an abusive man, however, and after she divorced him she worked two jobs to provide for herself and their children.

In August 2006, Bui was granted refugee status and was allowed to travel to the United States. She joined family members in Santa Cruz, where she studied English at Santa Cruz Adult School.

She said she studied everywhere she could — at libraries, at work, bookshops and parks in an academic routine that began when she left her home by bus at 7 a.m. and came home late, usually by 10 p.m.

Bui started at Cabrillo in fall 2008, where she studied early childhood education.

She said her first day at Cabrillo brought her to tears.

"I felt very happy," she said.

"That was a dream I had when I was in high school in Vietnam, but I didn't have good conditions."

The graduation was a gift not just for Bui, but for her father.

"But my father died just hours before she graduated, but she said she did get to see her in her cap and gown."

"It's my father's dream too," she said.

"During her time at Cabrillo, she was helped along the way by fellow students and teachers who gave her the "ambition, power, belief and love to make my life better.""

Now, she wants to work with homeless or disabled children, "to make their lives better."

In an effort to give back to her college, Bui has volunteered with Alpha Gamma Sigma, the American Red Cross Santa Cruz County chapter and the Cabrillo College Children's Center.

Her volunteer efforts earned her the Gold Award from the President's Volunteer Service Award, and she was named Outstanding Member of the AGS Club.

While at Cabrillo, Bui has become a grandmother of three.

"When I came to America, my dream came true," she said.

At the commencement ceremony, Bui joined 1,076 graduates ranging in age from 19-75.

The average age was 29.

With flowers in their hair, pins around their necks and their mortarboards festooned with all manner of spangles, the graduates paraded onto the field to the applause of their friends, family and fellow students.

Josh Bailey, 25, received his Associate's Degree in Landscape and Horticulture.

"I feel great and accomplished," he said. "I'm ready to hit the real world."

Bailey said he will start looking for a job now, and has plans to eventually return to school to study graphic arts.

Sarah Gray, 20, of Watsonville, received two Associates degrees, one in sociology and one in women's studies.

She will now attend UC Santa Cruz to study the same thing, but she now has her sights set on a PhD.

"I'm excited, so excited," she said. "I've been calling people and showing them the hours on Facebook."

Chavela Rios and her husband Rio Rios both decided to attend Cabrillo after their Watsonville businesses closed. The couple formerly owned the Nook Café and Burger Alley at Cabrillo Lane.

Now, with a certificate of achievements in digital publishing for her and culinary arts for him, the pair plan to stay in school.

Jessica Fitz, 26, got her Associates degree in culinary arts.

"I love cooking and I love making people happy with things I make with my hands," she said.

Fitz plans to go to San Jose State University to study recreation, tourism and hospitality management.

A cancer survivor, Fitz said she wants to work with children who are afflicted with the disease.

"I want to give back," she said.

John Masengill, 63, got a degree in construction energy management with an emphasis in green building. He said he was the first one in his family to graduate college.

"It's been an absolutely rewarding experience," he said.

"It's like they say, it's not where you're going, it's the journey."