ABOVE: Alan Smith (right) of the Cabrillo College Governing Board congratulates Nelson Hernandez of Watsonville Friday at the Cabrillo College graduation ceremony. BELOW: KaCee Kasper, with a dental hygiene degree cemented, shows her delight upon receiving her diploma.

Cabrillo celebrates largest class in years

By TODD GUILD

APTOS — Nelson Hernandez and Saul Valadez, both 21-year-old Watsonville residents and members of that city’s Police Cadet program, received associate degrees in criminal justice from Cabrillo College Friday.

Both are headed to Fresno State University, where they will further their studies in hopes of one day becoming Watsonville Police officers.

Hernandez and Valadez, both Aptos High School graduates, were among 1,213 students who graduated from Cabrillo, the college’s largest graduating class in six years.

The class was comprised of graduates ranging in age from 17 to 86 years, with an average age of 28.

“It’s a good place,” Hernandez said of Cabrillo.

Valadez agreed.

“I met a lot of good people and made a lot of good friends,” he said.

Julie Cantu and her sister Susie Cantu, also Watsonville residents, were both laid off from a Freedom dental clinic in 2009. They eventually attended Cabrillo’s Fast Track to Work program, and on Friday both received degrees, Julie in medical assisting and Susie in accounting.

Both already have jobs in their chosen fields.

“I’m so happy it happened,” Julie Cantu said of her layout.

“I love Cabrillo. I didn’t know it had so much to offer. I should have done this 10 years ago,”

Both sisters were the first in their families to graduate from college.

Graduate Maria Rodrigo, 20, was born in Jalisco, Mexico, and lived there until she was 11.

When her father was killed in a fishing accident, she moved with her family to Buena Vista, where she said she worked hard to learn English and overcome the culture shock.

“...I was going to have to start from the beginning,” she stated in a written biography.

“At first I felt very frustrated; I would sit in class and not understand a single word the teacher said.”

When she was in the fifth grade, Rodrigo’s family moved to Watsonville, where the rest of her family was living.

When she started school, her principal told her that her still-developing English skills would likely hinder her when she went to middle school, but she nevertheless continued to study throughout middle school despite classmates who teased her for being a nerd for her attention to her studies.

“I still kept on doing my best so that I could learn the language perfectly and succeed in this country,” she said.

Meanwhile, her mother was working picking strawberries, exhausting work that left her exhausted at the end of every day.

Rodriguez started at Pajaro Valley High School, where she earned As in every class. She said she loved showing her report card to her mother and seeing her look of pride.

“That was the best prize I could get,” she said.

One day, her mother asked

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CABRILLO

AS in computer applications business, and along the way she obtained several certificates in administrative support, computer skills for the office and professional computer applications, among others.

She hopes to transfer to a four-year university to complete a BA in business and a human resources-related field.

Eventually she hopes to work for Driscoll’s Berries, one of the companies that once employed her mother as a strawberry picker.

“I had some doubts that I would achieve my goal because at times it was very difficult for me to stay on top of my schoolwork while working at the strawberry fields right next to my mother,” she said.