As far as I’m concerned I’m not really supposed to be alive. I never thought I’d be here.

— Adrianna Mee
 Cabrillo College graduate

A nurse, a counselor, a sociologist

By TODD GUILD
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

APTON — Six years after serving a four-month sentence in Santa Cruz County Jail for a drug crime, Robbie DeMarco walked across the stage at Cabrillo College May 23 to receive his associate’s degree, boasting a 3.7 grade point average.

With plans to go to UC Berkeley in the fall to study human services, DeMarco has hopes to someday counsel people coming out of jail and prison. His accomplishment brought him full-circle from needing such services to someday being qualified to provide them.

DeMarco, now 45, said he suffered from a learning disability and didn’t finish high school, thanks in part to drug addiction.

After he was released from jail, he said he was homeless for two years as he lived in the Salvation Army shelter in Watsonville.

“I didn’t have any direction in my life,” he said, “I didn’t have any idea what I wanted to do.”

It was there he began to get involved in his community, performing in the church choir and helping out around the place.

He also heard about Cabrillo’s ACE program, which is designed to help students in his position enter college.

DeMarco excelled academically and for the past two years has been working as a student intern at the Cabrillo Learning Communities Center where he has helped at-risk students who want to go to college.

During his time at Cabrillo, DeMarco won the Martin Luther King Essay and completed an internship at the Salvation Army shelter in Watsonville.

He has been drug-free for five years.

“I feel great,” he said. “My life has turned around.”

DeMarco was one of 1,287 students who participated in the graduation ceremony at Carl Connelly Stadium, with 835 A.A. degrees, 433 A.S. degrees, 149 certificates of achievement, and 251 skills certificates. The graduates ranged from 18 to 73 with an average age of 30.

Female graduates exceeded the males, making up 61 percent of the class.

Adrianna Mee, 21, also struggled with drug use before getting clean. She graduated with an associate’s degree in sociology.

“I’m shocked but I’m grateful, very grateful,” she said. “As far as I’m concerned I’m not really supposed to be alive. I never thought I’d be here.”

She has been sober for nearly four years. She will attend UC Berkeley in the fall to study sociology.

Asked her advice for people going through similar struggles, Mee’s advice was simple: seek help from trusted people.

“You don’t need to carry your burden alone,” she said. “Whatever it is — mine was addiction — no matter what it is there are people who can help you. What helped me was that I had a team of people at Cabrillo who helped point me in the right direction.”

Ananari Guzman migrated to the U.S. from Michoacan, Mexico with her parents and six siblings.

Taken out of school to work in the fields at 11, she never attended middle or high school.

Inspired when her mother decided to attend adult school, Guzman joined her, a step that helped her learn English.

But she also discovered a love for learning.

She was married in 1998 and enrolled in Cabrillo’s Center for Employment Training.

She took office skills classes and earned her GED, had two children and began working. That’s where a mentor encouraged her to go back to school. She started at Cabrillo in 2002 taking one class per semester, and she graduated with an associate’s in liberal arts.

She is scheduled to start the Nursing Program in Spring 2015.

Melanie Field is fired up as she enters Carl Connelly Stadium for the Cabrillo College commencement ceremony.

Anthony Little prepares to graduate in Culinary Arts.

Family members and friends put on a colorful display during the ceremony.