



Office of Public Affairs
Division of University Advancement

News Release

Media Contact: Uyen Mai
(909) 869-5331, utmai@csupomona.edu
Release No: 0708-103

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 10, 2008

Cal Poly Pomona Students Overcome Obstacles to Achieve Degrees University Shares Two Stories of Personal Triumph

POMONA, Calif. — June 10, 2008 — Among the 3,700 students expected at Cal Poly Pomona's commencement exercises are those with inspiring stories of emotional, mental and physical perseverance to earn a college degree.

A Newport Beach resident was two quarters from a degree when a car accident put her in a coma, and her academic ambitions were put aside as she relearned how to walk and talk. Then there's a mother of two from Placentia who decided to return to school to achieve her dream of becoming a dietician and the first person in her family to earn a college degree.

Pamela Riungu, 28, of Corona del Mar/Newport Beach

It took 10 years, more than a dozen surgeries and relearning how to walk and talk so business administration student Pamela Riungu could attend her graduation.

In late 2002, the Kenya-born marketing student was preparing for her final two quarters at Cal Poly Pomona when she flew to New Jersey to visit her cousin. Riungu, her cousin and a friend had left a New Year's Eve party at the same time a drunken driver was on the road. The drunken driver swerved out of his lane and crashed head-on into Riungu's vehicle, causing his death and injuring Riungu, her cousin and friend.

Riungu suffered the most critical injuries with a coma, a broken back and severe internal injuries. When she awoke from her coma two-and-a-half months later, she was relieved to learn that her friends had survived the crash but she wasn't prepared for what the doctors told her. They said Riungu would never walk or talk again.

Riungu had to drop out of school to receive intensive physical, occupation and speech therapy. Where she once spent her days studying product analysis, she instead had to focus on holding a pen and

- more -

writing a word, both of which she had done effortlessly before. She also had to use all her mental and physical strength to stand for 40 seconds at a time.

“You want to walk but your body doesn’t want to move,” Riungu said. “It’s a very painful and humbling experience.”

Still, she never forgot about Cal Poly Pomona and her goal of earning a bachelor’s degree. After years of treatment, Riungu was able to walk and talk again. By the summer of 2007, Riungu was back at Cal Poly Pomona to finish her degree.

“It has always been a priority for me to finish my education,” Riungu said. “I am so blessed to have finished my classes and be able to walk in my graduation.”

Cindy R. Allison, 46, of Placentia

College students aren’t always wide-eyed youths. Cindy Allison will be 46 years old when she becomes the first person in her family to earn a college degree. Ten years ago, the mother of two decided to return to school to become a registered dietician. She started at Fullerton College and transferred to Cal Poly Pomona five years ago.

Getting her diploma required a balancing act. Aside from rigorous coursework, Allison took pains to stay involved with her children, who were only 2 and 6 when she returned to school. In addition, she worked part time as a Weight Watchers leader.

“When I took my first of three chemistry classes I really began to understand how hard this journey would be,” she said. “It brings tears to my eyes to know that I have finally made it. I am accomplishing something so important for myself and serving as a role model for my children. This is worth every exam, every paper, every minute spent studying.”

Cal Poly Pomona’s 52nd annual commencement ceremonies will be June 13-15 in the University Quad. The university holds eight different ceremonies representing each of its colleges and school over the three-day span. For more information, visit the Commencement 2008 web site at <http://www.csupomona.edu/~commencement/> or call the Visitor’s Center at (909) 869-3529. Cal Poly Pomona is located at 3801 W. Temple Ave. in Pomona.