

Spring 2025 ACA Scholarship Winner Essays

Contents

Spring 2025 ACA Scholarship Winner Essays.....	1
Britssey Cabrera	1
Cassandra Huber.....	2
Martha Gonzalez	4
Isaiah Mauzoul	5
Marcus Tharge.....	6
Taksh Patel	8
Man Thanh Phung.....	9

Britssey Cabrera

As provided by our wonderful staff at Central Piedmont Community College: “Being resilient (the ability to recover quickly from difficult conditions) is a life skill that we often do not recognize.” I have been challenged to reflect on how I’ve demonstrated resilience in my journey as a community college student and to describe what that journey has looked like. This opportunity is an honor because community college has transformed me—my life, my mindset. Resilience isn’t just enduring pain or struggle; it’s balance, dedication, and bravery. From the beginning of my journey to now, nearly at the end, I’ve shown resilience in waves. Allow me to tell you my story, (or what I can tell, in less than 750 words- that is.)

My name is Britssey Isabel Cabrera. I’m 19 and a graduate of an alternative high school. I left traditional public school because my dreams, like graduating early, weren’t supported. I nearly gave up, but before I did, I fought for another path. My counselor suggested

alternative school, but everyone warned me against it: “It’s for bad kids, don’t do it.” I shut out the noise, followed my heart, and took the chance. At this school, I thrived. I graduated over a year early, supported by an incredible staff who asked, “What’s next?” I assumed university was my only option, but they introduced me to community college and its benefits. My mind was made up. CPCC’s transfer path was my next step.

After graduation, I won a scholarship and registered for classes. That August, I also landed my first full-time job as a manager. For the first time, I had freedom - my own money, my own time. However, balancing work, school, volunteerism (over 200 hours), and a rocky home life became overwhelming. I struggled in classes, so I took a hiatus. That year, I built skills through work and volunteering, opening doors I never expected. There was beauty in what I created from my mistake. This school year, I took another risk. I got a job I never thought possible due to my volunteer experience and drive. I became the first teenage employee at Stewart Creek High School. Knowing it was time to refocus, I took a chance on credit overload to catch up. It was dangerous: a 7-4 job, volunteering, pageantry, coaching cheer, family time, and night classes.

Regardless, the risk paid off. I excelled in fall and winter, and I’m powering through spring. My GPA rose, my responsibility grew, and most importantly, I’m happy. I got into my dream school and others.

I’m proud of where I am, and community college taught me to celebrate every victory, big or small. So, back to resilience. My journey required difficult choices : juggling real life while staying true to my dreams. Many dismiss community college, asking, Why not the “college experience”? Will it look bad to employers? When they say these things they don’t see the courage, passion, and drive of students who pursue their goals despite financial, mental, and life obstacles. I recognize my resilience in this journey, and I thank community college for helping me discover that part of me.

With that, I end my story. Putting down my pen only to pick up a new one and write my next chapter. Thank you, CPCC, for equipping me with the tools I needed in the journey that was writing the first chapters of my higher education.

Cassandra Huber

Resilience

In February of 2024, I would move to North Carolina from my home state of Illinois with a 12 hour notice. I didn’t know it then, but while I rang in the new year with my then

boyfriend, I was 3 weeks pregnant with our daughter. Tensions reached an all time high after I took that test, just a week after he cheated on me. I came home after telling my mother the news, the morning before our first ultrasound. He had obviously been drinking, and when I met him in our bedroom, things took a turn for the worst. My then partner began to shout at me, close the distance between us, and put his hands on me. He got increasingly more violent, and while he punched me, he screamed that he'd never forgive me for not terminating the pregnancy. At this point, he put his hands around my throat and squeezed. After what felt like forever, while I was getting dots in my vision and losing all air in my lungs, I kicked him off of me and regained my footing. I left the apartment quietly, with him throwing things and shattering our lives on the ground next to me. I felt like I was floating as I made my way to the landing on our apartment stairs and stared out the window, watching the red and blue lights flood the hallways of our home and distort it into a world I didn't recognize. It didn't feel real that the man I loved was capable of attempting to take a life. Even more, it felt unreal that it would happen to me. The cops came and went, collecting my story and telling me to just come get my stuff in the morning; yes, he had attempted to kill me, but no, they wouldn't do anything. Unless I wanted to press charges and stay living in our county for the next year while the courts saw it through, nothing could be done. The next morning, I shoveled all of my belongings into jumbo garbage bags, rented a U-Haul, and drove the 14 hours from my home to Charlotte.

I couldn't leave my bed for a month after I moved here. All I could do was cry, eat, sleep, and run to the bathroom to satisfy the constant urge to throw up. Morning sickness was brutal and I felt like I had a hole in me that could never be filled. Each day I inched closer to the edge of the bed until one day, I was at the edge. Then the next day, I was at my desk. Then my door, then the living room, and before I knew it, I was at the door with my car keys in hand. I spent days applying for just the right job, and finally settled on a daycare. The months seemed to fly by, and soon, I got promoted to my current role as a teacher in a classroom for twelve to eighteen months old. It gave me a reason to keep from becoming stagnant and get out of bed each day. I got closer to delivering, and in a few short months, I delivered a healthy baby girl. That healthy baby girl is now crawling, sitting, and starting to talk. Ironically, her first word was "dada".

Since that night in that apartment, I have given birth, changed 12,096 diapers, taken 19 college credits, stayed overnight in the hospital one time, battled 5 ear infections for my little girl, and worked roughly 2,180 hours while simultaneously taking classes to further my education and provide for my daughter. If you had asked me 2 years ago what resilience meant to me, I would've told you it was about the overcoming of any obstacle that comes your way. Today, I have found a new definition for it. To me, resilience is now finding joy in

each day. Being able to see a future for myself outside of dying in my old, cheap apartment is a radical act. Resilience finds me during every diaper change, pediatrician visit, and during every sleepless night. If I had to give advice to anyone in my situation, I'd tell them to accept the good and the bad. Change is the only constant we get in life, and part of resilience is rolling with it.

Martha Gonzalez

Resilience has defined my journey. As the oldest daughter of immigrant parents and a first-generation college student, I've had to build my path from the ground up. Often without a map. From the moment I realized college wouldn't be a straight shot after high school, I've learned to pivot, persist, and keep going, even when everything feels uncertain.

I remember sitting in the auditorium of my dream university, holding back tears. I had imagined that seat as mine since freshman year. But I wasn't there for me, I was there for my younger sister. I supported her through college tours and orientations. Wishing I had someone who had done the same for me. I didn't. I had to figure it all out on my own. Right after high school, reality set in for me; I couldn't afford to attend college like my peers. I had to work to support myself and help my family. I knew I wanted to become a Cosmetic Nurse, but I couldn't follow that path immediately. So I became a full-time secretary at an accounting office and saved every penny I could. I used my savings to attend esthetics school, finishing with no money left, but with a drive that never faded. I kept pushing. I worked full-time and used all my free time to take on clients and build my small beauty business. I promoted myself relentlessly, knowing that if I didn't show up for myself, no one else would. While my sister settled into college, I worked behind the scenes, extremely proud of her, but yearning for my own chance.

Eventually, I took a leap of faith and left the accounting office to go all-in on my business. It was terrifying. Security was everything in my family, and stepping away from that came with risk and fear. I struggled during this time. I lost my car. I maxed out my credit cards. I didn't always know how I'd afford food. But still, I kept going. Then, things shifted for me. My business began to grow. I built a loyal clientele, a sense of community, and most importantly, the confidence that I could do hard things. Once my business felt stable, I knew it was time to return to the dream I had put on hold. I enrolled at CPCC, and that's where my community college journey began.

Balancing school and a small business has been a challenge. I hadn't even realized I had zero days off until a client pointed it out. But I've pushed through because I refuse to let

fear, or fatigue, be what holds me back. And recently, I was accepted into CPCC's Associate Degree in Nursing program, starting Fall 2025. I cried when I got that letter. It feels like everything I have been working so hard for is finally unfolding. I am often told that it seems like I have it all figured out, but the truth is that I don't. But I've learned to pivot when life calls for it. I've learned to show up scared. And I've learned that growth lives in the unknown.

This scholarship would give me the support I need to keep moving forward. I've come this far with sheer determination. However, with financial help I can focus more on my education and less on survival. Not only am I working towards a degree, I am also trying to change the trajectory of my life and those around me. That is the power of resilience, and that is what my journey through community college is all about.

Isaiah Mauzoul

Every morning, the first thing I try to do is pray to God and thank him for another day to look forward to. Not everyone is fortunate enough to even be in the situation I'm in, so I try my hardest every day to be thankful for everything, and a part of this is being resilient. In my own words, being resilient means you're able to overcome any challenge that comes your way in an effective, quick, and respectable manner. Moving to North Carolina and experiencing being a college student for the first time in my life came with a bunch of new challenges and situations I would have to learn to adapt to. Some of my hardships include adapting to a partially online environment, setting aside time to study, and the expense of commuting to school every other day. Being resilient isn't necessarily always something that is considered difficult. It can be as simple as getting no sleep the previous day and still showing up to class when the odds are against you. For me, resilience is one of my guiding forces accompanying my journey through community college.

When I first moved to North Carolina, I wasn't sure if I'd even be able to attend my first day of classes at Harris Campus because I didn't have my own transportation. Thankfully, that situation was resolved the weekend before the first semester, and I was able to begin my college journey at CPCC with my first in-person class: Public Speaking. Initially, I was terrified. The idea of presenting my own work in front of a full room of strangers was difficult, especially because I had zero experience with anything about public speaking in general. I also thought my fellow classmates would look down upon me for not having good communication skills. On our first day, we had to go up to the front of the class and give a brief introduction on ourselves. When it was my turn to go up, I was unbelievably nervous.

In my own mind, I believed that everyone would be judging me for my shaky voice and my lack of eye contact.

After this, a massive weight was lifted off my shoulders once I realized that everyone in this class was going through the same things as me, and as the class progressed, my presentation skills got remarkably better. I even made a friend in that class that played a major role in my growth. He encouraged me after every presentation and reminded me that I did well, and I would do the same for him. With consistent studying, encouragement, and believing in my public speaking abilities, I was able to overcome my initial fear of public speaking. I am no longer afraid to present a work of mine in front of a group of people, something I thought I would never be able to say.

Through it all, overcoming my fear of public speaking became a major turning point, and not just for that one class, but for my entire college journey as well. Once I was able to prove to myself that I could overcome an uncomfortable situation and come out stronger and more knowledgeable, I started incorporating this exact mindset into every course I have taken so far. The skills I developed like discipline, self-confidence, and preparation, began to appear in more aspects of my academic life. I learned how to study more effectively, set clear goals that I would want for myself, and managed my time more wisely. I also improved on other habits, like waking up on time, setting time aside to improve on a subject, and learning to stay consistent with my work. While procrastination is still something I am working to improve on, I've built the resilience to always finish my assignments on time no matter what.

I have been able to maintain a GPA of 4.00 and was inducted into the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. These accomplishments are more than just milestones to me because they represent growth that came from staying resilient and not giving up. Resilience isn't just a last-ditch effort you use in academic emergencies; it's a daily choice for any situation. It's also your commitment to keep showing up and doing your best no matter how difficult your situation may appear to be. This mindset will not only benefit me in college but will also guide me through any challenge I face in life.

Marcus Tharge

Resilience in My Community College Journey

Resilience is a life skill hidden from the surface, often overlooked until we face adversity and realize how we've recovered. At 37, my path as a community college student has been



anything but straight. I started strong at 18, veered off course in my 20s, and now reclaim my education with purpose. From Kalamazoo, MI to Charlotte, NC, through academic highs and lows, resilience has steadily pushed me forward, shaping a journey of setbacks, lessons, and a fierce determination to finish what I started.

I began at Kalamazoo Valley Community College in 2006, right out of high school, eager to succeed. At 18, I excelled. I attended classes faithfully and earned top grades in 95% of them. It felt like a launching pad to a future that I envisioned. In 2008, I moved to Charlotte, NC, and enrolled at Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC). My first semester there mirrored that early success, but then my priorities shifted. I dove, head first, into the service industry, bartending and managing a bar/restaurant, where the money I was making felt like a fortune, far more immediate than a degree. Education faded to the background, and over six or seven semesters from 2008 to 2015, I enrolled in classes but lost my drive. I skipped sessions, ignored assignments, and let my GPA drop below 2.0. A final, careless semester in 2019 sealed that slide. I wasn't failing from inability. I was failing because I'd stopped valuing the goal.

That decade drifting from my goals tested a resilience I didn't see then. Balancing a demanding job with sporadic coursework, I faced financial pressures and the lure of quick rewards over long-term plans. Each time I signed up for a class, even halfheartedly, was a small act of persistence, a refusal to fully quit despite my indifference. Moving to a new city, adapting to its pace, and juggling work while still blindly attempting to pursue education showed a tenacity I didn't acknowledge. Resilience wasn't dramatic. It was in those quiet, flawed efforts to stick with a plan I didn't want to forget.

Looking past my last semester in 2019, a career switch from the service industry, to event rental sales, and finally to medical device sales changed everything. Selling to VA hospitals in North Carolina, I rediscovered education's worth, not just for a degree, but for the knowledge to thrive in a field improving veterans' lives. In 2025, I returned to CPCC, enrolled in 3 classes this Spring, and finished one of those with a 4.0. That wasn't a fluke. It was resilience shining brightly. I'd bounced back from a sub-2.0 GPA, years of apathy and self-doubt, setting a bold, yet achievable goal in mind: a 4.0 in every remaining course at CPCC, and soon to be UNCC, to earn my bachelor's in business. My journey is now refocused on what it initially was. Each class is a deliberate step to crush my educational path, driven by a clarity I had and didn't hold on to. This resilience shows in how I've turned failure into fuel. Looking back, those wasted semesters taught me the true value of what an education can give to you. Maybe it was the experience in the workforce that opened my eyes. The service industry hustle sharpened my time management and opened my eyes to

what I knew I didn't want. At 37, I'm not the eager 18-year-old excelling in coursework without distraction, or the distracted 20-something skipping them. I'm a blend of both, with seasoned focus. Daily, I engage my community, professional friends, veterans, and VA providers, bringing a transformed view. My sales role connects me to diverse healthcare professionals, from psychiatrists to facility coordinators, honing my adaptability across backgrounds. My journey isn't a straight line. It may not be the "quick" turnaround you're looking for in this initial question. It's a cycle of stumbles and recoveries over a slightly extended time frame. Resilience let me reclaim education after a decade adrift, transforming a scattered past into a launchpad for success. Now, with a clear target and relentless determination, I'm not just rebounding. I'm excelling, proving that the ability to recover, or be resilient, is the skill that defines my story.

Taksh Patel

Oftentimes people assume being resilient can be traced back to singular moment in one's life, happening at the climax of the story, where the hero finally gets the sword that can vanquish the beast. As the river of time has slowly winded by me, I have come to the realization that being resilient is anything but singular. Instead is a constant chipping away at a goal or responsibility, like a sculptor to a block of marble. In this essay I will attempt to describe, to the best of my ability, the worst of my person. In this story about being raised in the south as a person of color, overcoming poverty, and battling addiction, I hope you will see just how much I have chiseled away, and how much I intend to continue to do so. A shift occurred when entering grade school which continued to be the norm up until college, and that was one of being noticed as a brown person. Girls I liked in school saw right through me as if I were just a faint aura of curry wafting around from classroom to classroom, though I did use cologne. The teasing and comments on my skin tone through school did turn me into a recluse to an extent. After school activities for me were limited to going home and watching movies, forgetting about my life and inability to fit in with the "norm" here in the south. This is just one of many aspects that race has proved to be a difficult point in my life, but this one hurt most of all as it felt I would never find love. Young me who had been chastised by girls, called "icky", and even "sand n*****", would be shocked to learn that current me has a wonderful woman now. As a child of immigrants, I've heard the classic tale of my parents walking to school in India, barefoot, through streams of water and jagged rocks. I have nothing but respect for their work ethic and it has certainly been a driving point within my own life. But this meant that here in America, we didn't start off with much. The house was a four bedroom, its occupants counted fourteen. Being perfectly honest, while life was hectic and there was not much to go

around, I remember my childhood fondly more than anything. The bond provided by poverty is one that you can not buy at the store. Through this lifestyle we learned to make the most out of the least. My eldest cousin would create full scale games for all use kids to play using nothing but a ball and playing cards. My parents worked the same job but opposite shifts to ensure someone was always with the my brother and I. Through the efforts of the adults in my life my cousins, brother, and I were all able to go to college. Their unyielding work ethic lives on in us, tackling any obstacle that stands in our path. The final, and most difficult to admit, example of resilience is when I was at the worst point in my life. Many know of the hardships of addiction, either through personal experience or through a loved one, but I can guarantee it is a real one. Through homelessness, dropping out of college, losing my job, and losing my family; I really had no reason to beat the monster that had taken a hold of me. As one year turned into three, I began seeing people around go far in life. I saw them getting jobs, making money I never thought possible, meanwhile I wondered where my next meal would be coming from. Luckily, that monster had not met the true me, the one that saw all that possible progress and firmly decided to kick it to the curb and begin my relentless climb to the top. I sit here writing this 4 years later, at a corporate job, back in school, and a great relationship with my family. Therein lies my sturdy tripod of resilience. Through love, money, and addiction I have prevailed over the years. I admit, however, this journey was not one trekked alone. I've had the blessings of many a hands upon my head help me get to the point that I am at, and their contributions should be heavily noted. To sum up my ode to resilience in 750 words is a task befitting Sisyphus, it will never be enough. Still, I try.

Man Thanh Phung

Nguyen Ngoc Tu, an author from my hometown once wrote, "Life is a duty that heaven thrust into our hands, holding it brings suffering, but abandoning it leaves us with regret." Indeed, life presents countless challenges, disappointments, and moments that drain all our power. Life weaves obstacles into every thread of our existence. To live is to endure, and that enduring requires the resilience to push through hardship.

Resilience is truly a crucial characteristic that everyone should cultivate to survive and grow in life. Resilience refers to the ability to rise from adversity, adapt to difficult circumstances and thrive from that. Resilience does not mean growing without any setback or avoiding mistakes as much as possible. Resilience is about how you embrace your weakness and learn to get up every time we fall. This crucial and commendable trait not only helps us to persist through challenging times but also promotes a mindset of turning failure into

steppingstone. Another reason this trait matters is because it facilitates emotional strength. At some points, life will be overwhelming and unpredictable, and resilient people will be able to light up a flicker of hope, remain stable and navigate through the storm of life. Living in an ever-changing world, which people usually expect quick results, resilience teaches us the value of being patient and persevere, as well as allows us to adjust to constantly shifting circumstances, whether the changing coming from global affairs, technology, or personal factors.

Like a bouncing ball, I have learned to rise every time life pushes me down. My journey at Central Piedmont Community College both in the role of a first-year student and a mom of a four-year-old has been shaped by resilience, by the ability to adapt and overcome unexpected hurdles. This path has not been full of throne, but every obstacle I faced gave me an opportunity to become the better, stronger version of myself. Relocating in the United States two years ago, with limited English skills and a kid to raise, I was torn in two choices: entering the manual work market, which opens to individuals with minimal English ability, or continuing my education. Being surrounded by those people who object to the importance of knowledge, I was not supported to pursue my learning. However, thanks to the inner resilience in my soul, which sometimes is labeled as stubborn and delusion, I determined to throw myself wholeheartedly into learning English.

After months of relentless self-learning and ignoring the criticizer's harsh remarks, I was able to accomplish my first goal: being accepted into college. For some, it may not be a remarkable achievement, but that milestone plays a vital role in my learning process, is an encouragement when I stand my ground in the storm of disapproval from my in-law family.

However, life is not a bed of roses. After only two weeks from the Spring semester's starting date, I suffered from a terrible car accident, which caused total loss of my only vehicle. Like a thunderstorm out of nowhere, the accident knocked the strength out of me. Because it happened when I was on the way to school, I faced criticism that urged me to drop out of school and totally focus on taking care of my kid. At that moment, I thought I would surrender completely, and I saw no way forward, but with the shattered piece of courage in my trembling heart, I sought out help. I was comforted with the mental consulting service provided by CPCC, and the consultant really reignited the flame of resilience in me. Being accompanied by the kind support of my professor and classmate, I came back to class, put all the effort to catch up on learning. I did not allow the gaps in my knowledge to hold me back. Instead, I choose to admit it and ask for explanation. Now, standing near the end of the semester, I look into my effort, my grades, and feel the reward of resilience.



As Steve Maraboli had said, “Life doesn’t get easier or more forgiving; we get stronger and more resilient.” My college journey has not been smooth, but it has been powerful. In the end, it wasn’t the barriers that defined my path, but how I chose to keep moving forward, with grit and hope as a guiding light.