



Class of 2012

John Hiers
Associate in Arts Degree
in Liberal Arts / English
Graduates with Highest Honors

Valedictorian of the Class of 2012 **Phi Theta Kappa**

50-Year Old Valedictorian Embarks On Yet Another Career Adventure

John Hiers gives new meaning to the term “career path.” For the 50-year-old valedictorian of the Class of 2012, the journey has been more of a grand tour and the path a pilgrimage to self-discovery.

“I have many interests,” said Hiers who already has several careers behind him. This week, the married father of two teenagers graduates from PCCC with a 4.0 grade point average and receives his Associate in Arts Degree in Liberal Arts/English.

Hiers enrolled at PCCC 2010 to pursue his lifelong dream to be a writer. “My wife and I both thought the best tactic would be to first take some English courses,” he explained.

He chose to start at a community college, because “It had been a long time, since I was in college, and I didn’t know what to expect. In time, he found himself enjoying not only academic studies, but also an education in life itself.

“PCCC is so diverse,” said Hiers, who admits that like many of his generation, he had little exposure in his youth to people who were culturally different. “It’s been an eye-opening experience here,” he said. “The students are so talented, smart, and dedicated. I saw that we’re all people...different in ways, but also alike.”

Left College Years Ago to Pursue Multiple Careers

Born in the Midwest, Hiers grew up in California where he graduated from El Modena High School in Orange County. An academic star, he went on to the University of California in Irvine, as a pre-med student, but discovered the timing wasn't right for him.

"I wasn't prepared for the quantum leap of responsibility involved in going to college," Hiers said. "Besides, I wanted to start right away on a career where I'd make money."

Over the years, the multi-talented man has worked successfully as a stockbroker, a salesman, and the captain of high-end restaurants in New York. At one point, he aimed for a career in professional golf, and while attending PCCC full-time, he worked on the side as a handyman.

PCCC and His Wife Gave Him New Inspiration

But Hiers always wanted to write, especially opinion pieces similar to those he enjoys reading in the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. "I had reached the point where I wanted out of the restaurant business," he explained. "It was time to try what I really wanted to do."

A strong writer, Hiers enrolled in several writing intensive courses at PCCC. "I wanted the writer's boot camp experience," he said, praising professors like Raymond Torres (political science) for their "tough love" approach. "The faculty at PCCC is fantastically talented," Hiers commented. "One professor was better than the next."

His wife, Denyce, a financial analyst, had encouraged her husband to follow his heart, but as she watched him at work, she wondered if he was on the right track. "Denyce told me she couldn't picture me correcting grammar, crossing t's and dotting i's," said Hiers. "You're a storyteller," she told him. "You should be a history teacher." It wasn't the first time she suggested that he teach, but this time, something clicked.

"In high school, I had a history teacher who was so dedicated he was on fire," Hiers recalled. That teacher changed his attitude about history, and now he wants to do the same for other students.

With a Glass Half-Full, Looking to the Future

The Totowa resident said his son Alec, 18, and daughter Morgan 16 think their dad's decision to become a teacher is "a little weird," but they agree with their mother that he'd be a good one.

Accepted at both Rutgers University and Montclair State University, Hiers plans to continue his education at one of those schools in the Fall and probably will pursue both writing and teaching.

For now, he is applying his writing skills to the valedictory address he will make at PCCC's 40th commencement ceremony. Hinting about the content of the speech, Hiers said, "The real heroes in the graduating class aren't people like me. They're the ESL students who come to this country unable to speak the language, work hard to adjust, and manage to go to college where they take classes and write papers in their new language. That's amazing to me."

As one who has lived a full life already and looks forward with excitement to the next phase, Hiers had this advice for his younger classmates and future generations of students, "When you're young, time is your friend. Take advantage of it, and make the most of it."