

## [Southwest Valley](#)

### Avondale Estrella Mountain Community College to recognize graduates Friday

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*Janet Traylor, Estrella Mountain Community College media relations manager, submitted this article.*

Estrella Mountain Community College will celebrate the academic accomplishments of the Class of 2011 at its commencement ceremony at 6:30 p.m. Friday at the Goodyear Ballpark, 1933 S. Ballpark Way.

The ceremony recognizes the students who will be receiving 631 degrees and 506 certificates in several disciplines.

The student-developed theme, "Believe, Achieve, Serve, Lead," honors the wide variety of EMCC students who believe in themselves, and, despite challenges work to achieve their goals by pursuing a higher education.

Students are empowered to learn, motivated to seek change, challenged to reach their goals, and ultimately achieve success because of their determination, hard work and focus.

EMCC students and those graduating from other Maricopa Community Colleges, leave prepared to transfer to a four-year university or to begin their careers with skills obtained through occupation-specific programs.

Friday's program will include comments by EMCC President Ernest Lara, graduating student Verta Tucker, Maricopa County Community College District Governing Board President Randolph Elias Lumm; and Pearl Boothe Williams, founding faculty and former division chair for developmental education at EMCC. The national anthem will be sung by student Natasha Hudson, and a musical interlude will be sung by student Andrea Sanchez.

EMCC, Thomas and Dysart Roads in Avondale, offers academic courses and occupational training to about 15,000 students annually. It is part of the Maricopa County Community College District.

Details: [estrellamountain.edu](http://estrellamountain.edu) or [www.maricopa.edu](http://www.maricopa.edu).

#### **Vy Huynh**

In Vietnam, more than 6,000 miles away from Arizona, Vy Huynh researched her options. From her Vietnamese high school, she had been accepted into pharmacy school. Yet her parents wanted her to get an education in the United States to widen her career options.

Huynh read online about Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale and decided that it might be a good place to start her new academic life.

After an 18-hour plane ride, Huynh landed in Arizona. She felt self-conscious. She didn't always understand, and often couldn't be understood. She often felt excluded because of the language barrier.

She talked to her instructors, asking for additional assignments and help. Others helped, too.

Huynh started as a business major, expecting to return to Vietnam to help her mother in her hotel business. But she continued to be drawn to the sciences. She switched from classes like economics, and focused on classes like organic chemistry and microbiology.

Two years after her arrival in Arizona, Huynh had amassed enough credits for two degrees, an Associate in Science (with highest distinction) and an Associate in Arts.

Her journey has gone beyond academics. Huynh became a peer mentor, and is helping new students. . "I want to be a role model, and help students connect with resources," said Huynh, 21.

As a member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society, various four-year institutions recruited her.

When she begins her studies at Virginia Tech in January, Huynh aims to earn a bachelor's degree in biochemistry and subsequently plans to go for a doctorate in pharmacology at Cornell University, where she wants to minor in agribusiness.

Vietnam is an agricultural country, and Huynh feels a kinship with the farmers, such as her grandparents, who worked hard to support her parents and to give them a better life.

"Farmers in Vietnam have a very hard life, with many challenges: hard work, poverty, devastating natural disasters," Huynh said.

Eventually, Huynh may decide to return to Vietnam to help those farmers have better lives.

### **Travis Santo**

Heart-transplant survivor Travis Santo will graduate with an Associate in Science degree Friday, and will enter the aeronautics program at the Ira A. Fulton School of Engineering at Arizona State University in the fall.

While a teenager, Santo had a heart transplant at University Medical Center in Tucson.

Since then, life has accelerated. Speed is part of the equation for Santo, whether it's launching hardware into space or launching his career.

This spring, Santo and three other EMCC math students learned that their scientific work had been selected for publication in the April edition of the *Journal for Double Star Observation*. (<http://www.jdso.org/>) The team's calculations involved the distance of separation between the stars and the angle at which they rotate.

The months leading up to graduation have been busy for Santo, 27. He joined a group of 80 students selected nationwide to participate in a three-day workshop run by NASA's Johnson Space Center. The workshop was held at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., at NASA's facility on the Cal Tech campus, home of the billion-dollar rover "Curiosity," which is being tested there. Santo worked all semester on the assignment that won him the privilege: the "Robotics Mission to Mars," which entailed planning an entire mission from timeline, budget and funding, to developing technical specifications, and finally, launch, landing and return dates.

"Teachers and faculty here are amazing, so as long as you apply yourself, you can use a community college as a stepping-stone to go anywhere," Santo said.

"Since the classes are small, you get a lot of close contact with the faculty, which means more individual attention and specific, one-on-one advice about how to apply theoretical knowledge to the real world," he added.

After finishing at ASU, Santo hopes to pursue higher education at Cal Tech, Stanford, or at Embry-Riddle in Florida, one of the best aeronautical schools. Eventually, he would like to be at NASA, designing satellites or rockets and sending them into space.

### **Verta Tucker**

After more than 40 years away from school, Verta Tucker was starting anew.

Since she began working in a government office at 14, Tucker has spent a lifetime helping people. She trained them how to apply for benefits and drug counseling in Ohio and adjudicated unemployment benefits for Nevada and Arizona State Employment Services.

Most recently, she drove a school bus for the Tolleson Unified High School district. When the kids acted up, she didn't walk away.

"I started talking to them, trying to understand them," she said. I asked our principal, "What's wrong with our children?"

She learned that if you were to follow them home, you might be more understanding. She started to realize they wanted someone to sit and listen to them, not to prejudge them.

Tucker - sibling to nine, mother to three, grandmother to nine and great-grandmother to two - exercised "tough love."

"I talked to them about how they used their time at school," she said. "I told them, it's not a fashion show; it's a place to get your education."

Tucker, 63, says she was passionate about this, having grown up in a time when children - particularly those of color - didn't get as many opportunities.

She credits those students and her desire to help them as her inspiration to pursue a teaching career.

Tucker arrived on the Estrella Mountain Community College campus in the summer of 2009 and will graduate with an Associate of Arts degree in Elementary Education on Friday.

She plans to move to Texas after graduation, to attend university and major in American history, then teach (possibly at the college level) and pursue a master's in education.

Tucker says EMCC improved her ability to think critically.

"It gave me the boost to want to accomplish more. It was a testing ground, because when you're 40-plus years out of school, a lot of how you do at this stage determines where else you can go, what you can achieve."

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