

'Truck camping' to a college degree

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By Mike McKibbin

LEADVILLE — Earning a college degree is tough, but doing so while enduring subzero winter temperatures at more than 10,000 feet of elevation in a pickup truck might be enough to discourage many people.

Photo of Thomas Schoonover

Colorado Mountain College graduate Thomas Schoonover, right, hugs Rachel Pokrandt, vice president and campus dean of CMC Leadville and Chaffee County, as Schoonover receives his associate degree in natural resource management during the campus's May 4 commencement ceremonies at the Climax Molybdenum Leadership Center at the Leadville campus. Photo Andy Colwell

With help from Colorado Mountain College Leadville staff and programs, Thomas Schoonover stayed the course. He received his associate degree in natural resource management on Friday, May 4.

Schoonover, 29, enrolled in CMC classes in the fall of 2016 to make a career change. He chose CMC Leadville for the natural resource management program and smaller class sizes.

"I went to (the University of Colorado Denver) about 10 years ago in 2007 and didn't like the large class sizes," Schoonover said. "And I read about the hands-on experience you get in the natural resource management program, which really appealed to me."

Schoonover found an apartment in Leadville for his first year but had some family health issues that put a pinch on his personal finances. He moved into a trailer for a couple months last fall, but that plan didn't work well in the winter. "So I was just truck camping for a while," he said.

'So supportive'

Skip Lee, dean of student affairs at CMC Leadville, and Katy Warner, director of the college's natural resource management program, learned he needed a better housing solution for the winter. Warner said she had been Schoonover's supervisor for about a year and had always found him to be "someone who, in everything he does, gives his best effort."

When Schoonover missed some classes, Warner and Lee talked to him and obtained a residential scholarship so the student could live in the residence hall on campus. They also arranged for other resources to help him be successful during his last semester.

"They really helped me be able to hang in there and keep my grades up," Schoonover said. "I never had co-workers or colleagues before that were so supportive. When you're in a tough situation like I was, it's easy to get down on yourself. But the atmosphere at CMC was always great and they kept me on track."

After graduation, Schoonover plans to work for the natural resource management program's field institute over the summer. The institute provides paid internship opportunities. Student employees work on environmental projects, interact with environmental professionals and get relevant field and laboratory experience to help prepare them for future education and employment.

Schoonover said he will likely pursue a bachelor's or master's degree in natural resource management somewhere in Colorado or Wyoming.

"We're really excited to see him walk in graduation and we're all really proud of him and all other students that have to overcome whatever obstacles and adversity they face," Warner said several days before graduation.

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