

'Truck camping' to a college degree

CMC student survives winter nights with help from staff, programs

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By Mike McKibbin

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

With help from Colorado Mountain College Leadville staff and programs, Thomas Schoonover stayed the course. He will receive 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 had worked in the law enforcement field along the Front Range.

Schoonover chose CMC Leadville for the natural resource management program and smaller class sizes.

"I went to (the University of Colorado Boulder) 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 resources 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 it had serious structural problems and had to be abandoned.

"So I was just truck camping for a while," Schoonover said. "This was in the winter, too, when it was 12 below and 16 below zero."

Dean of Student Affairs Skip Lee and Natural Resource Management Program Director Katy Warner learned he was basically homeless. Warner said she been Schoonover's advisor 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, she and Lee talked to him and obtained a residential scholarship for Schoonover so he could live in the Leadville residence hall on campus. They also arranged for other help, such as mental health counseling to help him deal with increased stress caused by his living situation.

"They really helped me be able to hang in there and keep my grades up," Schoonover said. "I never had coworkers or colleagues before that were so supportive" as CMC staff.

"When you're in a tough situation like I was, it's easy to get down on yourself, you feel there's a stigma about your situation and you can wallow in self-pity," Schoonover added. "But the atmosphere at CMC was always great and supportive and they kept me on track."

After graduation, Schoonover planned 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 resources management somewhere in Colorado or Wyoming.

"We're going to be 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 added.