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All-USA spotlight: After a decade of trauma, hope through education

By *Morgan Baskin, George Washington University* April 20, 2015 9:40 am

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Editor's Note: This profile is part of series highlighting students from the [2015 All-USA Community College Academic Team](#), presented by the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society.

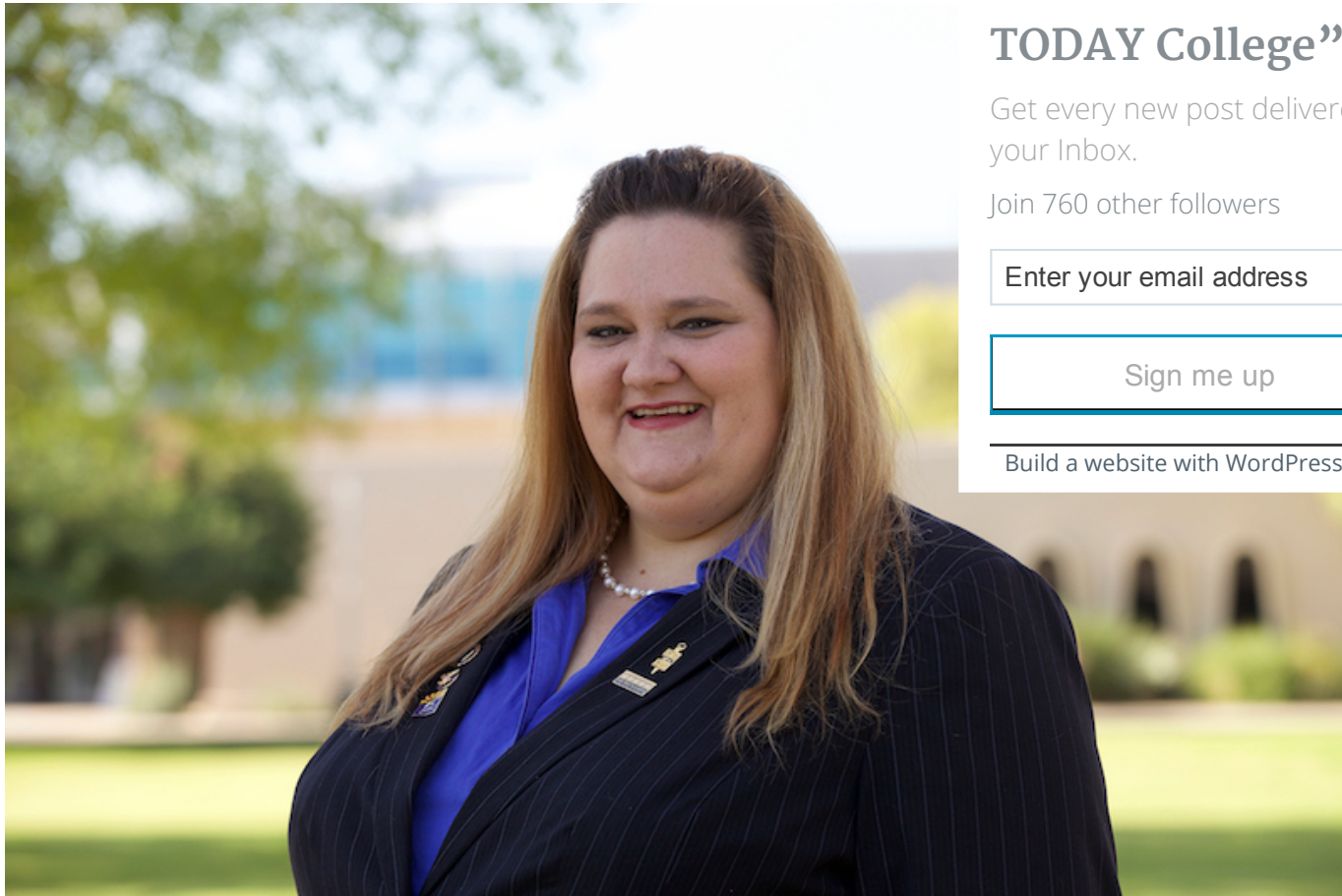
Valerie Le Grande says raising her nine-year-old son is tricky — he's at an age where he wants to establish his independence and prove he doesn't need his mom.

"They think they are the boss! And he's a boy. Having a boy is a whole other thing. We had girls in my family," Le Grande said.

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Valerie Le Grande (photo courtesy of Phi Theta Kappa)

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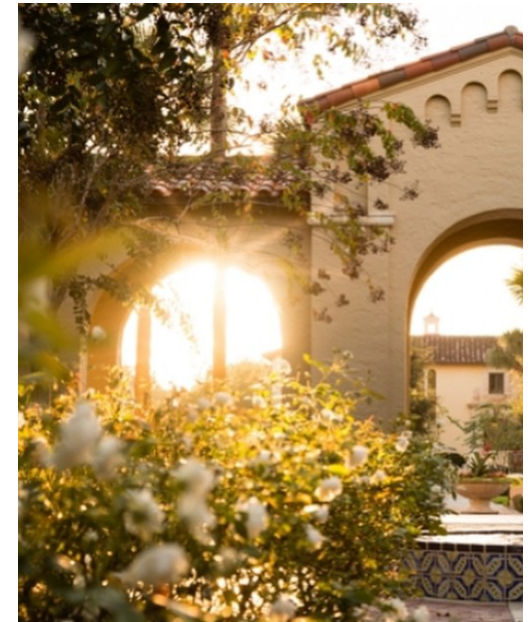
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There was a point in time Le Grande didn't have custody of her son. For years, she battled with Child Protective Services over her sobriety.

The addiction was a way to cope with the traumas she experienced over the better part of a decade: sex trafficking, homelessness, drug addiction and, eventually, recovery.

The 34-year-old mom and full-time student at Mesa Community College (MCC) in Arizona is now two years away from completing her Bachelor's degree. She's also the Membership and Recruitment Officer in Phi Theta Kappa, an international honors society for community college

students.

She said the organization has been one of “the best things she’s ever done in college.” More than just scholarship money to cover her college tuition, the organization gave her a real support system that helped her learn how to manage and work with a team, including time management skills. All of the staff knows her personally.

“All of the things you need to know as an adult but that I was never taught,” she said.

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As a nontraditional student and among the oldest in her classes, Le Grande says she has to work “double hard” to succeed with her colleagues.

“I think one of the hardest challenges is being a mom and having to worry about daycare — and when the kid gets sick. My brain doesn’t retain as much information as some of the younger students! The older we get the more we forget. So I have to study harder, study longer,” Le Grande said.

But she already knows what she wants to do after she graduates: pursue a Master’s degree in social work, and then found her own nonprofit to facilitate the recovery of young, homeless, drug-addicted women.

She says learning about the role of social workers in a required class for her major was a revelation: she immediately fell in love with the professor and her perspective on social justice.

“I realized that every single aspect of what a social worker deals with, I’ve been through in my life. So I thought, what better way to come back than to be able to help the people that are dealing with the same issues that I overcame?” Le Grande said.

After Le Grande completes her Master’s degree, she will apply for grants to fund the first part of



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her nonprofit: housing for homeless women, which she believes is the most important step in allowing women to become independent without having to spend time fending for basic needs like food, water and shelter.

She's drawing on her own experiences to make the foundation as effective as possible. Le Grande knows, for example, that pets are a huge source of comfort for some homeless people, but that many shelters don't allow animals. Others refuse entrance to current drug users, which leaves a [very slim margin or women](#) qualified for shelter.

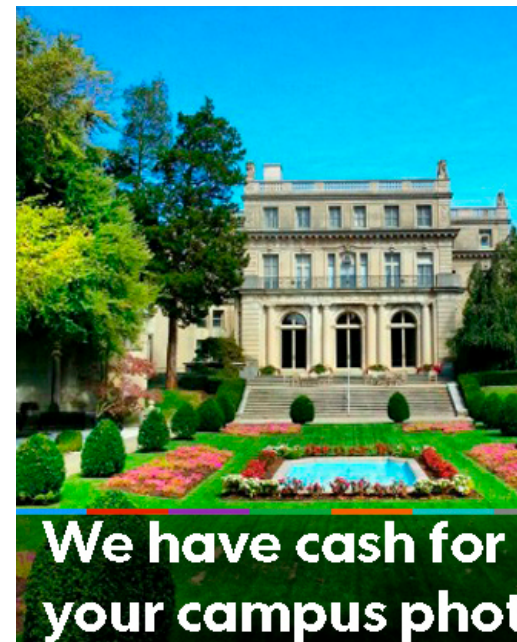
"A lot won't accept you if you're dirty, basically. If you've been using drugs. And initially that may be the only thing [homeless women] know how to do until they learn something different," Le Grande said.

Importantly, Le Grande said one of the most effective ways to reduce the number of traumas is emotional support, like rebuilding self-esteem through therapy and education. That's why she plans on using a second round of funding to create a trauma therapy center through her organization.

Drug rehabilitation is another key to Le Grande's plan: she believes that many young women don't know how to cope with the traumas they have endured, so they turn to drugs and alcohol. She calls addiction a "mask" for personal pain.

"I'm looking to teach them basically how to be women. Some of them don't have mothers in their life that taught them basic social skills," Le Grande said. "The community itself needs to pull together to help women. Just people who have been beaten down, who have suffered trauma, they really need support. Once they get that support, I really think they can recover."

Morgan Baskin is a student at George Washington University and a spring 2015 USA TODAY Collegiate Correspondent.



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