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CENTRAL NY NEWS

OCC student, once homeless, graduates with path toward tech career: 'Amazing victory for me'

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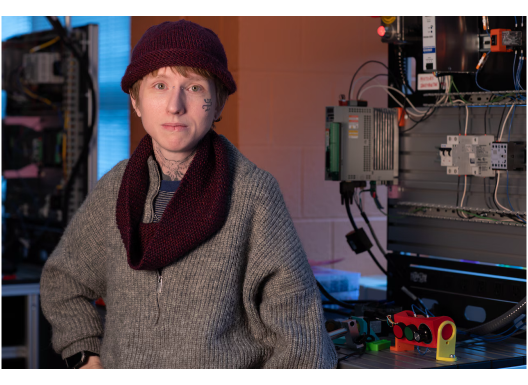

Dio Brown, a soon-to-be graduate of Onondaga Community College, stands for a portrait on April 21 on the OCC campus. Brown hopes to take their skills and apply them to engineering and computer science. (Arthur Maiorella | Contributing Photographer) (Arthur Maiorella | Contributing Photographer)

By Ryann Phillips | Contributing Writer

Onondaga, N.Y. -- Dio Brown leaned over a computer in the corner of an Onondaga Community College lab, rewriting code to fix a system that could monitor the material levels inside tanks at industrial sites.

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Brown pushed the stop button, in essence shutting down the mock machine. But the larger problem – making sure the levels were measured at the right time – lay ahead.

Brown, 35, wearing a SpaceX hat and boots, settled in. Eyes fixed on the computer, they stayed in the lab for hours while snow fell outside.

Just a few years ago, Brown struggled to make it through the day. They dropped out of college twice and became a member of the Occupy Syracuse movement. They also became homeless, playing violin for cash in Armory Square, squatting in abandoned houses in Syracuse, and using alcohol and heroin.

Inside those houses, Brown found other people's memories and trash. Old prison letters, family pictures, and moldy toys. Outside, they'd see kids playing, a reminder of another side of life where people had shelter, jobs and families.

Brown chose that other side.

"I said I've got to do it this time," said Brown, who changed their name around 2018 and uses they/them pronouns. "As soon as I got clean, I started to want it."

In 2021, Brown got completely sober, and a year later, took their first technology class at OCC.

Brown found a home at the community college. They started a robotics club, helped build out the electromechanical technology program through work study and joined the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society.

Brown will be one of a dozen students at OCC who will graduate Saturday with their associate's degree in electromechanical technology, a new program meant to help train future workers for tech-industry jobs. They'll walk with 659 other students at the ceremony at 11 a.m. in the SRC Arena.

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Brown's coursework has taught them the electrical, mechanical, and programming skills that are often needed at industrial sites. After completing the program, they'll have the training they need to work in the semiconductor industry at companies like Micron Technology.

This summer, they'll intern at New York Creates, a program that provides housing and paid, hands-on experience in the semiconductor industry at the Albany Nanotech Complex.

But Brown wants to continue their education.

After graduation, Brown plans to attend Syracuse University as a Cooke Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship recipient. The program provides money for community college students to finish their bachelor's degree at a four-year school.

Brown is one of 90 students nationwide who received the scholarship. They will receive up to $55,000 per year for up to three years. It's another life-changing opportunity for Brown.

"Now that I know that I have scholarship money behind me, I'm hopeful that I could maybe design my own degree," Brown said.

They want to focus on computer science and engineering with a long-term goal of opening a developmental robotics company in Syracuse.

"Now that I have a dream, now I'm scared of not getting there," Brown said.

"There's a whole different kind of pressures," they added. "But I keep reminding myself that's a good pressure."

First two college tries don't work

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Brown loved science since they were a kid, reading Isaac Asimov sci-fi books. But they didn't think their brain worked like a scientist. Growing up, they played violin, piano and participated in the Syracuse Symphony Youth Orchestra.

When they graduated from Fayetteville-Manlius High School in 2007, they went to SUNY Geneseo. Like many kids, they were ready to experience life away from their parents.

"I always thought if I left home, everything would be solved. But that's not the truth," Brown said. "The world ate me up and spat me out."

The first night at college, Brown drank half a bottle of vodka and took many pills. First responders had to resuscitate them. It was a pattern of abuse that would continue for years.

Brown didn't return to their parents' house once they moved away for college. Instead, they stayed with their boyfriend's family and tried to build their own life in Syracuse.

In 2011, Brown became involved in the Occupy Syracuse movement because advocating was important to them. They would spend time at the camp and offer a listening ear to the homeless community. Brown worked at the Worker's Center of CNY, helping undocumented workers for about a year. It became too much, they said. Brown quit in 2015.

"Every minute was difficult sometimes," Brown said. "I had a public persona, and I had a private life."

Brown tried to pursue schooling at OCC that year, but the mix of drugs, alcohol and school didn't work, they said.

On Oct. 3, 2018, Brown tried to get clean for the first time. Brown remembers this date, because they repeated it over and over again. It was a reminder.

Around this time, they changed their name from Laura to Dio, short for the Greek figure Dionysus, who represents the duality of light and dark. Brown said the name represented the contradictions in their life.

Brown continued using drugs and abusing alcohol until the COVID-19 pandemic, when Brown decided to get sober again.

Life became clearer when Brown met their best friend, Dylan Ursino. They would videochat, sit by the water tower in Westcott, and spend time together. They could finish each other's sentences, Brown said.

Ursino loved his friends and family so much that it taught Brown to love themself again.

"From the moment that I met him, I felt like I got him," Brown said.

Brown decided to try sobriety again. In the midst of that, Ursino died unexpectedly in the summer of 2022.

Although Brown was already sober by this time, Ursino's death marked the moment that Brown knew they wanted a different future. Brown says their cravings stopped.

"I've never been more done in my life," Brown said.

Trying college and OCC, again

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Brown's transition to OCC in 2022 was still challenging. The bad memories from the first time they tried to pursue school haunted them.

They recalled a phrase often used in recovery that speaks to the time and commitment needed to stay sober. Take baby steps to rebuild their new life.

"The distance that you walked into the woods, you have to walk all that distance out," Brown said.

Their first technology class, Network Fundamentals, gave Brown proof that they could keep going. Brown learned how computer systems communicated with each other. Even though it was hard, their interest in science and technology kept them going. They earned an A.

Brown emerged as a leader when they joined the ELM program in the spring of 2024. Many of the students were just entering college for the first time, so Brown helped them get used to the school.

Brown's professor, Michael Grieb, described Brown as "the standout student" when it came to encouraging others and building a team environment.

Brown also did a federal work-study program with Grieb, where they set up new equipment and helped prepare for labs.

"They were ready to dive into whatever task I kind of came up with for them," Grieb said. "They kept really focused…on their coursework and just the love of learning new things."

That's the focus Brown brought into the lab on that snowy Wednesday.

Brown worked with their classmate Kate Adler, who Brown called their "OCC mom," for three hours on the project. The two have become close.

"They're the smartest person in our class," Adler said.

Brown focused on the small details in the code, while Adler helped understand the big picture of the system, pausing only to eat a sandwich. They keyed in the codes on the computer until finally the system could measure the tank levels properly.

It was one of Brown's last projects before they graduate on May 17.

"It feels like a whole new part of my life is starting," Brown said, adding they wish the change had happened sooner, and without so many struggles.

"It's not exactly ideal, right?" they said. "But because of that, it's an amazing moment, amazing victory for me."

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