

## **Saddleback College: More Than Just a Community College**

Saddleback College was established in 1968, has been a cornerstone of higher education in South Orange County, California. Over the decades, it has garnered a reputation for academic excellence, offering a diverse array of programs and serving as a launching pad for countless students' careers. The college offers over 270 associate degrees, certificates, and occupational skills awards across 190 program areas. These programs are taught by a faculty renowned for their expertise, experience, and commitment to student success. Saddleback's rich academic traditions and strong reputation make it an ideal place for students seeking associate degrees and certificates, transferring to four-year institutions, preparing for the workforce, or pursuing lifelong learning opportunities.

### **Transfer Success**

Saddleback College has a strong track record of facilitating student transfers to four-year universities. It ranks 8th among California Community Colleges in transfers to the University of California system and 17th in transfers to the California State University system. Notably, it holds top positions in transfers to institutions such as UC Santa Barbara, UC Santa Cruz, San Diego State University, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, USC, and ASU.

### **Notable Alumni**

- Mark Grace: Former professional baseball player known for his tenure with the Chicago Cubs and Arizona Diamondbacks.
- Nick Punto: Professional baseball infielder with a career spanning multiple Major League Baseball teams.
- Colt Brennan: Former professional football quarterback who played for the Oakland Raiders.
- Anthony Carter: Professional basketball player who played as a point guard for the Denver Nuggets.
- Barbara Edwards: Playboy Playmate of the Month for September 1983 and Playmate of the Year for 1984.
- Kevin Fagan: Creator of the "Drabble" comic strip.

## **The Graphic Express Years**

After high school, I finally made my way back to California, ready for a fresh start. The plan was simple: find an apartment for me, my best friend Sean, and my girlfriend Jolynn. But life had a way of throwing unexpected opportunities at me.

### **From After-Hours Hobbyist to Key Player**

I landed a job at a sticker shop, working alongside my old high school friends. It was more than just a paycheck—it was a creative playground. Back when I was a travel agent, I had been moonlighting as a graphic designer, but what I really wanted was to dive headfirst into computer-based graphic design.

At the time, digital graphics were in their infancy. We didn't have the luxury of modern design software. Instead, we relied on overhead projectors to blow up designs on the wall before turning them into large-format decals. It was hands-on, meticulous work—part art, part precision engineering.

I was obsessed with learning how to use the shop's cutting-edge (for the time) computers. These computers didn't even have monitors, only red LED indicators! I'd stay late, playing around with the machines, making rock-and-roll band logos for my car windows. It was my unofficial education in digital design.

One day, the shop's computer guy got sick, leaving us short-handed in the middle of several major projects. The boss, Bill, was in a full-blown panic. The entire shop was scrambling to figure out what to do.

I casually mentioned that I could run the machines.

Bill looked shocked. I had spent weeks learning the equipment, and he had seen me working late at night. Yet somehow, it hadn't crossed his mind that I could step in.

With no other options, he let me take over.

I carved out my niche as the Computer Department Manager—a title I created and earned. I had two or three guys under me, and together, we pushed the equipment beyond its supposed capabilities. I became a renowned sticker-maker—people loved my work, and I took pride in it. On the side, I freelanced as a graphic designer, running projects through the shop or even through my coworkers. I was hustling, constantly moving forward.

## College: First in the Family

While working at the sticker shop, I enrolled at Saddleback College, making me the first person in my family to attend a college. Saddleback was no ordinary community college—it was one of the highest-rated schools in the country and it was huge. It felt like the perfect place to hone my skills and set a foundation for the future.

I signed up for every business and graphic design class I could fit into my schedule, most of them at night after work. The combination of hands-on experience at the shop and formal education at Saddleback was perfect.

## Graphic Express: My First Design Business

As my skills improved, I decided to launch my own freelance graphic design business: Graphic Express.

With each project, I gained real-world experience—designing logos, making decals, and working directly with clients. It was exhilarating to be my own boss while still learning and growing in school.

## **The Harsh Reality of College Credits**

I enrolled in various business and graphic design classes, attending most sessions at night after work. This period was transformative, allowing me to transition from traditional graphic design methods—like using Xerox machines and X-acto knives—to embracing emerging computer technologies. The hands-on experience at the sticker shop, combined with my coursework, culminated in the establishment of my freelance graphic design business.

## **A Love Lost and Lessons Learned**

Jolynn was my first real love, and for a long time, I thought she was the one. But youth has a way of rewriting our plans. While I was envisioning a future together, she was busy enjoying the here and now—flirting with the party scene and seemingly with a few too many boyfriends. When I realized I wasn't the only one in her life, it stung. It was a gut-punch kind of heartbreak, the kind that makes you question everything.

Despite that, the attraction never fully faded. She visited me a couple of times, and I made sure to take full advantage. Call it closure, call it nostalgia, or just two young people making the most of the end of a passionate romance. Ironically, I had inadvertently fueled her wild phase by making her a fake ID so we could hit the clubs together. We never actually made it to a club, but she sure put it to good use afterward—stretching her underage clubbing career an extra three years.

Not long after we split, she had a child—a son born just ten and a half months after our breakup. I dodged another bullet in the fatherhood department. Between Gina, Kim, Jennifer, and Denise, I had a pretty consistent track record of near-misses when it came to unexpected parenthood. Jolynn eventually settled down, got married, and had more kids. Recently, her youngest daughter turned seventeen—the same age Jolynn was when we met. Seeing pictures of her, the resemblance is uncanny, and it stirs up some weird emotions. Life has a funny way of coming full circle.

## **Sean ("Tardo") – A True Brother-in-Arms**

Sean and I remained inseparable for years. We never officially lived together, but we might as well have. When we lived near each other, we were practically roommates—crashing at each other's places, sharing late-night talks, and always scheming up ways to make money or improve our lives.

Sean was one of the few people who got to witness my greatest love, Donna. He absolutely adored her. When Donna and I eventually made our way back to California together, Sean was there to witness that chapter too.

When it came to work, I wanted to help Sean secure his future. I secretly trained him on how to run the sticker shop without anyone knowing. I let him take credit for a lot of my ideas that improved the shop's efficiency and output. I didn't care about getting recognition—I was always confident that I was going to do big things. I just wanted to make sure my best friend was set up

for success. This plan worked. Sean was credited with much of the shop's success and growth and he stayed there for the next thirty years until his death. He never bought a house, he never got married, he never called to apologize, we never saw each other after the last few times I reached-out to him. The company matched his 401k contributions and when he died, he had \$800k in the bank. Ready to start a life, but out of time. It was a debilitating disease that took his life.

### **My First Big Client: A Love Story**

Saddleback College was more than just an academic institution for me—it was where I started putting my skills to the test in the real world. That became crystal clear when I met Liz. She was 23, beautiful, confident, and starting her own poster and framing shop in Temecula. When I caught her eye in business management class, I thought, This is it—hot older girlfriend, here I come.

After class, she approached me. My heart raced. But instead of getting a date, I got a job offer. She wanted me to design her logo, signage, letterhead, and shirts—basically the entire brand identity for her new shop. I didn't get the girl, but I landed my first real, high-paying client. It was a turning point—I wasn't just a guy who knew how to make cool graphics. I was officially in business.

That said, Liz wasn't all business. She took me out on her town to Southern California Wine Country, where we drank, partied, saw live bands, and had an all-around amazing time. She even brought along a friend, so I looked like some kind of young hotshot designer rolling around Temecula with two gorgeous older women. Not bad for an 18-year-old.

### **More College**

Saddleback was a crucial stepping stone for me and for many of my friends. Most of my California crew went there straight out of high school, while I arrived about a year behind them. It was a fantastic school, well-regarded not just for academics but for its strong transfer programs to UC and CSU schools. It had a reputation for excellence in business, graphic design, and vocational training, and it provided the foundation for a lot of success stories—mine included.

I spent nearly two years at Saddleback, balancing work, school, and my side business. Then, I hit a roadblock.

I realized that if I wanted to earn an AA degree or transfer to a university, I'd need another two full years of classes. At that point, life got in the way, and I had to put college on hold.

### **A Family Legacy at Saddleback**

Though I didn't graduate from Saddleback, my mom did—and she didn't just graduate; she earned multiple degrees from Saddleback a few years later. She officially beat me to the finish line, proving that education can be a lifelong journey.

## Final Thoughts

Saddleback College was an important chapter in my life. It was where I:

- Took my first business and design classes
- Started my freelance business
- Balanced work, school, and creative passion
- Became the first in my family to attend college

Even though I didn't complete my degree back then, my time at Saddleback gave me the confidence and skills that would shape the rest of my career.

And to this day, I still think about how different things would have been if Bill had realized sooner that I already knew how to run those damn machines.

## Personal Reflections

Returning to California and enrolling at Saddleback College marked a significant chapter in my life. As the first person in my family to attend college, I was eager to immerse myself in the educational opportunities available. The campus, renowned as one of the best schools in the country, provided a nurturing environment for academic and personal growth.

Although I attended Saddleback for nearly two years, life circumstances led me to pause my formal education. I realized that achieving an Associate of Arts degree or meeting transfer requirements would necessitate an additional two years of classes. Interestingly, my mother later graduated from Saddleback with multiple degrees, highlighting the college's profound impact on our family's educational journey.

Saddleback College's commitment to excellence and its supportive community have left an indelible mark on many, including myself. Its rich history and dedication to student success continue to inspire and shape the futures of countless individuals.