

Celebrating our Similarities • Understanding our Differences

Colors NW

MAY

2007

m a g a z i n e

A worker, who did not want to be identified, with one of the apples she sorts at a Yakima plant.

LENDING A HAND

WOMEN IN
APPLE PACKING
SUFFER HAND
INJURIES FROM
STRENUOUS
WORK



SOY CLOTHING

Street wear brand hits Nordstrom

N*W*C

Provocative play explores race

TASTE BUDS

Kallaloo Caribbean Cuisine

Women work sorting apples in a Yakima apple packing plant. Sorting work causes intense strain on workers' hands, and many are reporting injuries related to their work. A note on the softballs in the photo: the forklift driver places them in the fruit to signify a change in fruit size, grade or even grower. When the softballs get to sorting table, the sorters know the fruit that follows reflects the change. They alert the line manager, who will have a number of adjustments to make to reflect the new fruit.



lending a hand

Latino women in Yakima sacrifice hands to packing work

by Julie Chinitz



Amrita Huja

On a Thursday evening, Gris Arias* deftly makes quesadillas for her children, then helps her 10-year-old daughter complete a jigsaw puzzle. A

couple of years ago, she would have found these activities almost impossible. Her hands and arms used to hurt so badly she imagined wrenching

them from her body – even though, as an apple sorter and packer in Washington’s Yakima Valley, she counts on them for her livelihood.

*Name changed to protect her identity



It's hard to imagine Arias so debilitated. Short but sturdy, with a firm gaze and a solid pair of arms, she can deploy the tone of a drill sergeant with her children if she sees the need. Still, when she was only 31, she suffered from wrist tendonitis and thoracic outlet syndrome, both upper extremity disorders associated with repetitive motion and other strains at work. Her condition was so severe that pain shot through her wrist just from squeezing a dishrag.

Arias has worked at the same packinghouse since 2002. When

she's sorting, apples pass by on a line of rollers that rotate the fruit, and she picks up one piece after another, pulling out the bad ones and those of a different grade. On the packing line, she does more sorting and positions the fruit in trays. Both jobs require constant use of her hands and arms, which as Arias learned, can exact a physical toll.

Apples constitute Washington state's No. 1 crop, accounting for well over half the fruit's production in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service, the value of the state's 2005 apple crop exceeded \$1.2 billion. When it comes to the global marketplace, Washington makes itself competitive not just with its high-tech and aerospace exports, but with apples, too.

But the fruit represents much more than just dollars flowing into the state economy. Thanks

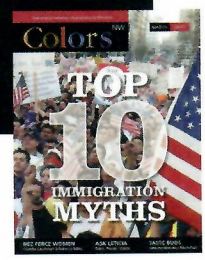
to a worldwide branding effort, apples have also come to symbolize Washington's agricultural abundance. Plus, the fruit signifies health – who can forget the proverbial apple-a-day? Yet, though it seems impossible to associate apples with pain, fruit packinghouse work is far from free of the risks that come with physical labor.

Arias' condition came on over a period of weeks. It started with tingling in her fingers, like ants crawling on her skin, followed by pain in her wrists. Then, after a few hours at work, her hands would feel numb. Finally, the pain started to radiate up to her shoulders. When her chest began feeling so tight that she had a hard time breathing, she went to the doctor. She started a regimen of physical and occupational therapy for tendonitis and thoracic outlet syndrome, both musculoskeletal conditions.

Even throughout her treatment, with her hands feeling like they had

COLORSNW SERIES
This story is part of a series of reports on immigration in the U.S.

The first installment was in March and focused on the Top 10 myths about immigration. For an archive version of this piece, go to colorsnw.com.



fallen asleep, she continued sorting and packing. How could she manage it?

"I just worked that way," she says, in Spanish.

Now, thanks to the therapy, the debilitating pain is gone. But its shadow still lingers. Tonight, after making quesadillas, her wrists are aching, so she wraps them tightly in supports before turning in for bed.

Would you rather be an assistant or have one?



Offering programs in business, education, communications, psychology, and computer systems.

If you've considered going back to finish your degree, it's time to get a move on. With City University's online program, you'll study on your own schedule to earn a bachelors or masters degree. It's the ideal way to ensure better career opportunities without missing a minute of work or, more importantly, quality time with your family and friends.

With locations from Bellevue to Bucharest to Beijing, CityU offers an education with a global perspective. And if you prefer actually going to school, you'll find convenient on-site classes. Many of our students blend online and on-site classes for a truly unique learning experience.

**LOCATIONS
WORLDWIDE**
and online



For more information visit us online at www.cityu.edu/GetStarted or call 1-888-41-CityU

Convenient

Flexible

Effective

CityUniversity
of Seattle

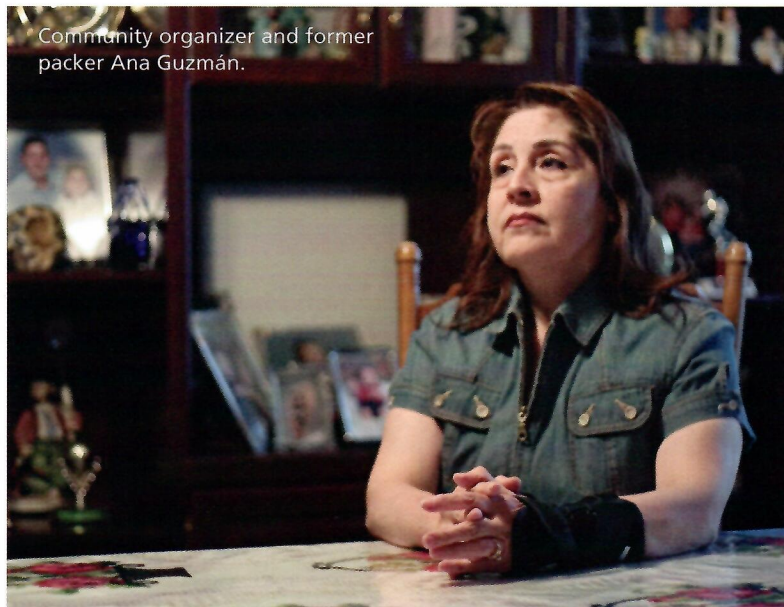
On the *Move*

City University is a not-for-profit and an Equal Opportunity institution accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

Anyone who has driven through Central Washington, from the moonscape vistas of the Okanogan Valley to the sagebrush hills surrounding Yakima, has seen the orchards blanketing vast tracts of land. Sometimes you also spy workers climbing up ladders and harvesting the state's apple riches. Most likely, these laborers will be immigrants from Mexico, upon whom the industry has long relied for its most physically tedious labor.

There is one aspect of the apple industry few have seen – packinghouses. Between the orchard and the supermarket lie hulking, cavernous structures that, despite their size, remain invisible to consumers.

Looking inside, one discovers a world of constant movement. Forklifts roll by. Empty boxes, ready to be filled, circulate overhead like meat on hooks. Enormous bins of



Community organizer and former packer Ana Guzmán.

fruit, weighing hundreds of pounds, descend into tanks of water. There the apples float out, beginning a journey that takes them through brushes, dryers, and sorting and sizing equipment, underneath labeling wheels, along conveyers, and into tubs or onto semi-automated packing lines. Packinghouses are also

noisy, with lots of humming, chugging and honking.

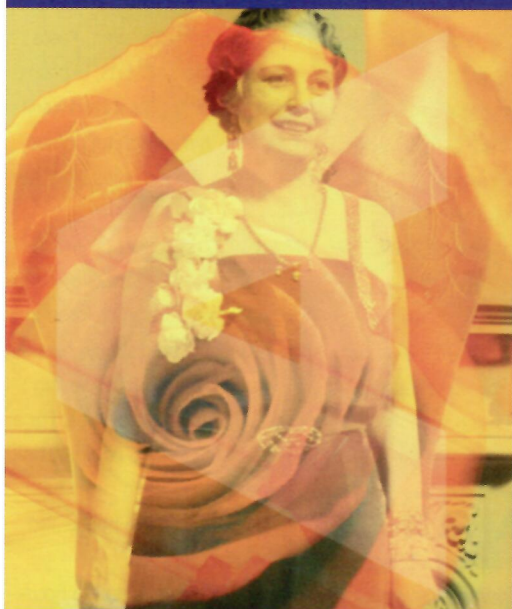
Despite apples' pastoral image, technology plays an important role in sorting and packing. At many packinghouses, fruit passes through computerized equipment that divides the fruit according to color, size, and in some cases, defects and

sweetness. But computers can't do all the sorting and packing, so human hands still play a critical role.

This is where workers like Arias fit in. Before the fruit reaches the computerized sorters, it moves on an automated line from sanitizing wash to boxes in which it will be packed. As the fruit travels along, sorters examine it for defects such as scald, bird bites, bruises, decay and wormholes, getting rid of the "culls" no customer would select from a supermarket bin. They may also separate out fruit of a different grade and place it on another belt.

At the end of the line, packers put the fruit in boxes or bags, or both, before it is sent off to customers. Manual packers reach for fruit from circular tubs and box or bag it. With semi-automated tray packing, apples roll from the conveyor onto trays, and packers spin

This season. Only at ACT – A Contemporary Theatre



SOUVENIR

by Stephen Temperley

Directed by R. Hamilton Wright

tickets

May 11 – June 10

(206) 292-7676, acttheatre.org

700 Union St, downtown Seattle

The Hansberry Project at ACT

A professional Black theatre company dedicated to the artistic exploration of African American life, history and culture, in residence at ACT – A Contemporary Theatre.

Upcoming Events:

JUNE 16 - JULY 8: World Premiere! *Etta Phifer's Testimonial Shoe* *Kismet* by Shontina Vernon, bears witness to the role of memories, hopes, dreams, and even disappointments, in shaping a life and a legacy.

JULY 20 - 21: *Mutambi and Lindstrom* by Dan Owens; workshop reading. The story of an African general and an American officer engaged in high-risk diplomacy where diamonds, gold and human lives are at stake.

Learn more:
acttheatre.org/Hansberry

In your life. In our name. And on our stage.

CREATE WORLDWIDE COMMUNITY

Safeco Insurance

FESTAL

A SERIES OF WORLD CULTURAL EVENTS

PRESENTED BY THE SEATTLE TIMES

EXPERIENCE THE WORLD IN 2007...
AND NEVER LEAVE SEATTLE CENTER.



SAFECO INSURANCE FESTAL 2007 PRESENTED BY THE SEATTLE TIMES IS A YEAR-LONG SERIES OF WORLD CULTURAL EVENTS THAT HONORS THE RICHNESS AND DIVERSITY OF OUR REGION. SAFECO INSURANCE FESTAL PLAYS A VITAL PART OF SEATTLE CENTER'S ROLE IN CONNECTING OUR DYNAMIC AND VARIED COMMUNITY.

JOIN US AT SEATTLE CENTER FOR:

ASIAN-PACIFIC ISLANDER
HERITAGE MONTH CELEBRATION
MAY 6

NORTHWEST FOLKLIFFESTIVAL
MAY 25 - 28

A GLIMPSE OF CHINA
CHINESE CULTURE AND ARTS FESTIVAL
JUNE 2

PAGDIRIWANG PHILIPPINE FESTIVAL
JUNE 9 - 10

JOIN CENTERFLASH TODAY! IT'S FREE!

VISIT WWW.SEATTLECENTER.COM AND SIGN UP FOR CENTERFLASH EMAIL ALERTS! YOU'LL BE ONE OF THE FIRST TO KNOW ABOUT UPCOMING SEATTLE CENTER EVENTS. EXCLUSIVE VIP OFFERS, CONTESTS AND MORE!

WWW.SEATTLECENTER.COM/FESTAL

Seattle Center's Community Partner
The Seattle Times



THE PAUL G. ALLEN
FAMILY FOUNDATION



Seattle Center
Fund



the fruit into place, keeping pace with the machinery. Then the trays are stacked in boxes, by the same packer or by another.

Sorting involves a work cycle that, according to observations by University of Washington researchers, can take as few as two seconds. Thousands of times each work shift, sorters carry out this cycle. Packing, too, involves repeating the same tasks again and again. For the semi-automatic packing cycle – from arranging the trays to filling the box – the UW researchers reported an average time ranging from 55 to 159 seconds.

Many, if not most, fruit packing-house workers in the Yakima Valley are immigrants from Mexico. Arias herself came to the area from the Mexican state of Colima. Like her, sorters and packers also tend to be women. For their efforts, they receive wages that hover just above the state's minimum wage. In 2006, wages for seasonal apple sorters, graders, and packers in Yakima and Kittitas counties averaged an estimated \$8.49 an hour. At this rate, a 40-hour a week worker would have brought home under \$18,000 that year – far from a living wage sufficient to cover such basics as food, shelter and utilities.

Packinghouse labor comes with documented risks. In 2001, researchers from the UW's Department of Environmental Health studied various apple packinghouse jobs and described the hazards they pose. They observed work cycles that included repetition, extended reaches, high force and "static loading" (tension without the benefit of restorative movement).

These factors, according to the researchers, "put workers in this industry at risk of developing work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSD)." WMSDs include conditions like carpal tunnel syndrome,

tendonitis of the hand and wrist, and lateral epicondylitis (tennis elbow).

Although these disorders can be debilitating, it's hard to separate the physical pain they cause from the distress that accompanies them. For Arias, the pain and numbness impaired her ability to scrub dishes and comb her hair. But the limitations got even more basic. "Two or three times, I felt like I couldn't even go to the bathroom, because I wouldn't be able to clean myself," she says.

The pain kept her up at night. Then there was the depression and worry about her financial future. She wondered how she was going to feed her children and manage the simplest activities.

She's not the only packinghouse worker to have agonized over these questions. Between 2005 and 2007, I interviewed 15 current and former sorters and packers (from seven companies) who suffered symptoms in their hands or arms. They described limitations, despair and anxiety similar to that experienced by Arias.

One former sorter, Joyce Flowers, stopped playing catch and avoided carrying her grandchildren. Paola Zambrano, who still sorts, explains that her hands feel as if nails have been driven through them. When she's writing the pen slips from her fingers.

Many workers report dropping pots, plates, pails or stacks of clothing. Often they rely on children or spouses to complete simple housework tasks like mopping, washing dishes or scrubbing bathtubs. For a time, María Anguiano couldn't hold a broom. Her husband helps by picking up around the house and preparing her lunches.

The inability to maintain a household is more than just a practical matter. It can leave packinghouse workers feeling inadequate and impotent as mothers and wives – or

as Arias says, utterly useless.

Even personal hygiene can become difficult: brushing hair, bathing, tying shoes or putting on makeup. And, as Blanca López explains, "You want to look good so you can feel good."

Ultimately, the pain raises troublesome questions about the future. Zambrano asks, "What awaits me the day I can't cook, wash clothing or do anything with my hands?" Anguiano says she knows older women whose hands are "all deformed" and wonders what this portends for her: "It's sad because a person dedicates her entire life to this job and that's the reward."

The mention of hand and arm pain prompts nods of recognition from packinghouse workers. Yet the full extent of musculoskeletal disorders among them remains unknown. The UW study is among a handful to examine the issue.

Ray Keller, the general manager of Apple King, where Arias works,

Workers at a Yakima sorting and packing plant.



does not recall recent workers' compensation claims for WMSDs. Although he did not have exact numbers readily available, he believes the incidence of such injuries has gone down. He attributes this decline to the introduction of semi-automatic packing, which requires less upper body twisting but still includes risks identified by the UW researchers.

Confounding the matter further is the issue of "work-relatedness." For

packinghouse employees who suffer hand and arm pain, to what extent is work to blame?

For his part, Keller points out that pain is part of the aging process, and packinghouse workers – and workers in general – are not the only people who endure disorders like carpal tunnel syndrome. Indeed, research on WMSDs also shows that individual factors, like age, bear an association to such conditions.

The Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) tracks workers' compensation claims. The statistics do not reveal exactly how many workers suffer from musculoskeletal disorders, but they do shed light on the question.

From 1990 through 1998, among all sectors, fruit and vegetable packing had the sixth-highest number of accepted claims of upper extremity WMSD. (This figure does not include claims among self-insured employers.) The industry's rate for

these claims was over double that of the overall rate.

From 1996 to 2004, the industry had the 15th-highest number of upper extremity WMSD claims – down from sixth. However, its accepted claims rate for these conditions remained almost twice that of industries across the board.

The risks appear greatest when it comes to workers' hands and wrists. From 1996 to 2004, the fruit and vegetable packing industry still had the sixth-highest number of accepted hand-wrist tendonitis claims and the 11th-highest number of hand-wrist claims generally. A fruit or vegetable packinghouse worker is three times as likely as all workers to file an accepted hand-wrist tendonitis claim.

Due to worker underreporting, L&I data likely does not capture the full magnitude of WMSDs. This holds true in apple packing, where many workers never seek treatment for their injuries or inform their employers.

Ana Guzmán, a community leader and former packinghouse employee, believes multiple reasons exist for workers' reluctance to report injuries.

"First, there's a lot of ignorance about our rights," she says. "Second, if we report it to the supervisor or employer, it's, 'No, maybe they'll fire me.'" Guzmán does not see this as an idle fear. She says she knows several workers

Reach Out.

A community gathering to honor the courage of those who reach out across traditional divides, advocate for freedom, and work for democracy and justice **FOR ALL.**

Artwork by Bryn Barnard

HATE FREE ZONE
Sixth Annual Awards Dinner & Celebration

Saturday, May 12, 2007
Washington State Convention & Trade Center
Doors open 5:30pm | Tickets \$75

Tickets on Sale Now!
www.hatefreezone.org | 206.723.2203 x210

The PACIFIC NORTHWEST'S

ASIAN
GROCERY & GIFT MARKET

OPEN DAILY

The Quality Asian Grocery & Gift Market

UWAJIMAYA

Seattle: 206.624.6248 | Bellevue: 425.747.9012 | Beaverton: 503.643.4512

who believe they were fired due to an injury. Furthermore, she explains, "there are also people who don't want to bother their boss with anything."

Guzmán, who's been through the L&I process more than once, knows from personal experience that a worker's compensation case can go on for months or years. Along the way, the agency needs to make several decisions – including whether to accept the claim, when to end health benefits because additional recovery is no longer expected, and at what point the worker can return to work, if she's had to stop working.

Arias encountered a few bumps in the road. Six months after filing her workers' compensation claim, it had not yet been accepted. By that time, she had run up thousands of dollars in medical bills – exactly what she had feared before finally seeking treatment. At the time, she was enrolled in the state's Basic Health program, but it doesn't cover physical therapy.

Before making a decision in her case, L&I flew her to Seattle for an independent medical examination. The examiners found no sign of a work-related disorder, and L&I denied her claim. Fortunately, her doctor intervened, advocating for reversal, and the agency changed its decision. Three months later, though, bills were still arriving and she had not sorted through getting them all paid.

L&I spokesman Robert Nelson points out that Washington's workers' compensation benefits rate very favorably to those provided by other states. "We think our system's pretty straightforward," he says. "We pride ourselves on getting people paid within 14 days of a claim." Furthermore, he reports that only 3 percent or 4 percent of workers' compensation claims involve representation by an attorney.

However, many apple packers and

sorters find the process daunting. Hand and arm pain forced Bertha Meza from her job at a Yakima Valley packinghouse. She began receiving L&I medical coverage and payments for lost work. When her claim was closed after an independent medical exam, she says, she hired a lawyer so she could continue receiving her medications. Yet she dreaded the attorney appointments.

"They would ask me questions, but when you're not used to these kinds of things, it's hard to talk to them. Sometimes my husband encouraged me," she says. "He gave me courage."

According to Meza, the attorney helped her recover some additional L&I payments – and then she returned to one of the only jobs she knows: apple sorting.

One way to address hand and arm injuries is to reduce the risks associated with them. In its study of apple packinghouse labor, the UW researchers made a number of recommendations to do just that. These included ergonomic changes like job rotation between sorting and packing, adjustment of equipment, foot rails, torso supports and micro-breaks. Nonetheless, the state does not have specific worker-safety standards for addressing the risks of repetitive motion and other musculoskeletal hazards.

The agency once attempted to introduce such a standard. After over a year of public comment, L&I adopted ergonomics regulations in 2000, requiring employers to assess jobs for a series of musculoskeletal risk factors and, in some cases, make adjustments. But the rule met stiff opposition from industry. In 2003, opponents funded a successful ballot initiative to repeal it.

Now, it's largely up to employers to determine whether they will make ergonomic adjustments in their workplaces. How many have done so – and the extent of those changes – remains an open question.



Safeco Insurance

Safeco Jackson Street Center
actively recruits employees and agents from the community, providing jobs and career development opportunities. We have insurance agents on site.

Come visit us for all your insurance needs.

Safeco Jackson Street Center
306 - 23rd Ave South, Suite 200
Seattle, WA 98144
206.925.1864

Safeco.com

REACHING OUT
INSURING OUR COMMUNITY

Miles Kohl, executive director of the Yakima Valley Growers-Shippers Association, reports that "most have instituted some type of ergonomics program." According to Kohl, "One (packinghouse) may have an elaborate plan versus one that may have made minor changes."

The Washington Growers League did not return messages requesting information.

Indeed, reports among packinghouses vary. Keller, of Apple King, is not aware of specific ergonomic adjustments made at that company. Daryl Matson, in charge of personnel at Matson Fruit, has expressed interest in job rotation but reports that the company has not yet implemented it. David Lawrence, president of C.M. Holtzinger Fruit Co., outlines a series of changes there, including the introduction of anti-fatigue mats, job rotation and

adjusting the height of counters. In 2005 John Cornell, of Larson Fruit, described a similar program. Representatives of Evans Fruit and Borton and Sons declined to provide information.

In the meantime, Washington apples arrive in the homes of shoppers around the world. Guzmán advises the workers who keep the industry humming to take matters into their own hands. She encourages them to seek care – and legal representation – whenever they need it.

"For our community, it's very important that we know our rights," she says, "not just as workers, but as injured workers, because we never know when we're going to get hurt. And we do have our rights." ■

PlazaBank

Your partner in business and personal banking.

**Plaza Bank
Commercial Banking
and
Administrative Office**

1420 Fifth Avenue
Suite 3700
Seattle, WA 98101
(206) 436-7600

FDIC 

www.plazabankwa.com

Washington State
Department of Ecology

Help us

**restore and protect
a healthy environment,
while supporting
a clean and vibrant
economy.**

We are looking for:

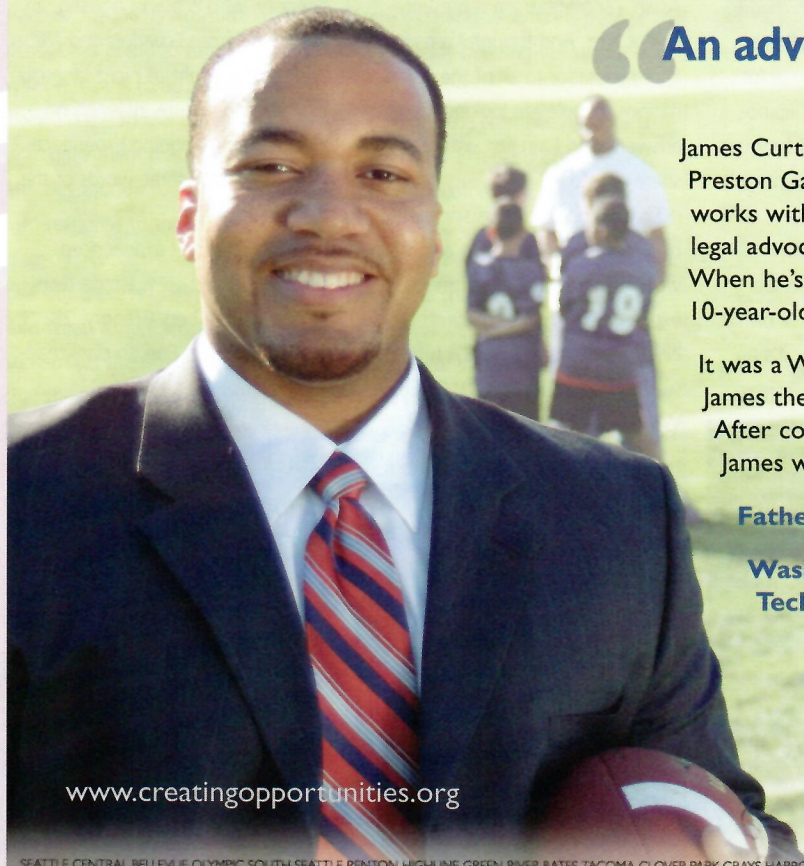
- Qualified individuals to join our employee team
- Businesses interested in contracting opportunities

Visit our Website
www.ecy.wa.gov
to learn more.

 WASHINGTON STATE
Department of Ecology
www.ecy.wa.gov

YOUR SOURCE FOR EDUCATION IN THE NORTHWEST

WHATCOM BELLINGHAM SKAGIT PENINSULA EVERETT EDMONDS CASCADIA SHORELINE COLUMBIA BASIN PIERCE FORT STEILACOOM SOUTH PUGET SOUND LOWER COLUMBIA LAKE WASHINGTON PIERCE PUYALLUP NORTH SEATTLE



“An advocate – in the courtroom and community”

James Curtis is an "impact player." He is on the team of Preston Gates & Ellis LLP, where he is an attorney. He also works with Columbia Legal Services as a hard-hitting civil legal advocate for Washington's economically disadvantaged. When he's not in the office, he's on the field coaching 10-year-olds.

It was a Washington state community college that offered James the education he needed to be competitive. After completing two years at a community college, James went on to earn a bachelor's and law degree.

Father, attorney, coach.

**Washington Community and
Technical College Graduate.**

www.creatingopportunities.org

 **CREATING
OPPORTUNITIES**
WASHINGTON COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES

SEATTLE CENTRAL BELLEVUE OLYMPIC SOUTH SEATTLE RENTON HIGHLINE GREEN RIVER BATES TACOMA CLOVER PARK GRAYS HARBOR CENTRALIA CLARK YAKIMA WENATCHEE BIG BEND WALLA WALLA SPOKANE SPOKANE FALLS