During the pursuit of her GED diploma at Whatcom Community College, Cecilia DeLeon battled stomach cancer and raised two children on her own. She had been the victim of sexual assault and then become an advocate against it while also serving members of her community as a translator and resource. She has truly demonstrated leadership while overcoming the most difficult of circumstances.

“I have known Cecilia for over a decade and I feel like the word resilience does not even touch the strength she has shown,” said Dawn Kroontje, a teacher with the Washington State Board & Technical Colleges.

Despite setbacks, Cecilia made the phrase “Never give up” her anthem. In November 2019, twelve years after embarking on her journey, she earned her GED diploma. Every day, she fights a personal past that she says leaves her “feeling dirty, ugly, and invaded.” Miraculously though, she is neither fragile nor broken.

Cecilia has taken that profound, agonizing pain and directed her sights toward those without a voice who cannot defend themselves. She works with Community to Community, a local organization devoted to social justice for farm workers. In 2017, she actively stood against the Department of Licensing’s record-sharing agreement with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement that impeded on the rights of immigrant families. In 2018, Cecilia lobbied against sexual misconduct among immigrant agricultural workers. That same year, Cecilia was honored with the Seeds of Justice Award for her tireless work in the community.

With her high school diploma in hand, Cecilia is now ready to transition into a full-time college student. She plans to study law advocacy and to continue to “leave my fingerprint on this world.”

“I have never seen a woman rise from the ashes like Cecilia. She never gave up; she has survived in a way that can’t be quantified apart from the inspiration it gives others,” said Dawn Kroontje. “Cecilia doesn’t just represent the best our school has to offer, but the best our nation has to offer.”