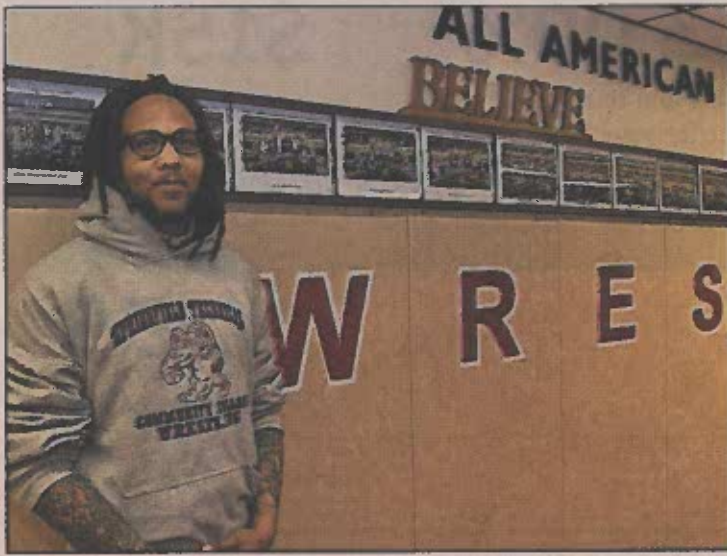


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SPRINGFIELD

'If you want to do it, just make it happen'

Non-traditional student earns All-American status



Mike Clark followed his passion for wrestling from Louisville, Ky, to Springfield Technical Community College. After a rough start where he considered quitting, Clark was named All-American and earned All-Academic team honors for having a 3.25 grade point average or higher this past season. (SPRINGFIELD TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

A passion for wrestling brought Mike Clark from Louisville, Kentucky, to Springfield Technical Community College.

In Kentucky, Clark was coaching high school and college wrestling. He already had gone through college and earned an associate and bachelor's degrees. While he did some wrestling when he was in college, he felt he never lived up to his potential. He loved coaching, but still dreamed about training and winning a championship.

Learning he was still eligible to compete, Clark researched affordable colleges with top wrestling programs and found STCC. He called the college and spoke with Asnage Castelly, an as-

sistant wrestling coach and admissions counselor. Springfield was a long way from home, but Castelly encouraged Clark to consider STCC.

"Coach Castelly said the simplest thing: If you want to do it, just make it happen," Clark said.

Clark made it happen. He bought and renovated a van, which would become his home as well as his mode of transportation. He drove 900 miles to Springfield, where he enrolled at STCC as a part-time student. He started general studies classes last fall and began practicing with the wrestling team and making friends.

In March, at the end of the season with the STCC Rams, Clark and his

teammates went to Allen, Texas, and competed in the 2019 National Collegiate Wrestling Association championships. STCC placed fifth out of 77 colleges.

At 27 years old, Clark was named All-American for capturing seventh place. He also earned All-Academic team honors for having a 3.25 grade point average or higher.

"Academics is an important part of our program," said wrestling coach Alberto Nieves. "We talked to him about working on a degree. He stuck to it, and he's academic all American this year."

But it wasn't an easy path for Clark. Early in the season, he felt he wasn't improving as a wrestler. He had two wins and eight losses.

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Student

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What's more, Clark was struggling to keep up financially as he worked part-time jobs while going to school. "I thought maybe I had done too much," Clark said.

Thoughts of quitting entered his mind. Maybe he would drive the van back to Kentucky, he thought. But his coaches encouraged him not to give up and to keep following his dream.

"Coach Castelly and I knew he had dreams - and he had goals behind those dreams," Nieves said. "In January, he said, 'Hey, coach, I'm going to quit.' I said, 'I'm not going to accept that.'"

Instead of quitting, Clark agreed to take two weeks off to think about his future. When he returned, he was stronger than ever. By the time of the national tournament, Clark had won 17 matches in a row.

"I won a conference title. I went on to nationals," Clark

"Academics is an important part of our program. We talked to him about working on a degree. He stuck to it, and he's academic all American this year."

Alberto Nieves

said. "I felt really good about it. I thought, there's no point in stopping after all this work you put in. You're going to regret it and you don't want to regret anything."

Clark doesn't want to give up wrestling after he leaves STCC. In fact, he hopes to one day become a full-time coach, mentoring students and sharing his story of persistence.

"We're proud of him, because he stuck with it," Nieves said. "We told him, 'If you want to be a mentor later on, if you want to be a coach, this

is a story you can use: Stick with it, don't quit, have faith in yourself.

"He's been through a lot of struggles," Nieves added. "To do what he did is really amazing. You've got to give him a lot of credit."