San Luis Obispo - Cal Poly's graduating class of 2003 is full of students who would make excellent feature stories, including the following students. To set up interviews with these grads-to-be, call or e-mail Teresa Hendrix in the Public Affairs Office at (805) 756-7266 or thendrix@calpoly.edu for their contact information.

Cal Poly's spring commencement ceremony is June 14. The Honored Speaker is baseball great Ozzie Smith.

Some Good Grad Profile Subjects:

Raneika Brooks-McClain will graduate with a degree in city and regional planning. She's already on the job as a planning technician for the city of Malibu. But to get there and complete her degree at Cal Poly, she had to deal with several obstacles, including single motherhood, domestic violence and stalking. She was honored with Cal Poly's "Bright Light" award last year, and struggled with the idea of sharing her domestic violence story, but friends convinced her that her story could be an inspiration to others. She is happy to talk to media, and faculty members are also happy to talk about what an excellent student and person she is.

Juan Manual Ortiz will graduate with a degree in liberal studies three years after he underwent a complete heart and lung transplant. Ortiz was born in Mexico with a congenital heart and lung defect. His family couldn't get the medical care he needed until moving to San Luis Obispo in 1995, when Ortiz was 18. He was on a transplant list for two years, had finished his general education at Cuesta College, and had already started at Cal Poly as a transfer student when a new lung and heart became available in 2000. After the surgery, he came back to the university - but a lung infection sent him back to the hospital six months later. "I had trouble in some of my classes that year," Ortiz says, but he persevered.

After graduation, Ortiz will begin work on his teaching credential, and hopes to become a third- or fourth-grade teacher. He's already volunteering in local elementary schools and tutoring; he's wanted to be a teacher since he was a young boy. "I always looked up to my teachers in Mexico, and the teachers I've had here," he says. Ortiz won't be the first in his family to get a college degree; one of his older brothers has already earned a master's degree in psychology at Cal Poly, and another older brother is also a Cal Poly undergrad student.

Chris Thomas was an English major who left Cal Poly just before his senior year to go to work - as a pro football player. Thomas, from Ventura, was a wide receiver for the Cal Poly Mustangs football team in

Now retired and living in Ventura with his wife, three-year-old son and baby girl, Thomas is setting up a training facility for pro athletes. But a year ago he decided something was missing: his English degree. "I felt like it was just unfinished business. It's always been something that bothered me: that I didn't finish school. So when I retired, literally my first goal was to come back and finish school. And I wanted my degree to say 'Cal Poly' - it's important to me." So Thomas came back in 2001 to take senior-level literature courses to finish out his English degree, tackling British Romanticism and Kirkegaard's existentialism instead of football players. (His favorite book: "Heart of Darkness," by Joseph Conrad.)

"It was tough; I hadn't written a term-paper in eight years," Thomas said. "But the professors were great, and the materials were great." He doesn't think a novel-reading wide receiver is unusual. "I was never someone who was just about football. I think that's something I'm trying to do with my training facility too: I'm trying to produce well-rounded, multi-dimensional people, not just excellent athletes."

Serena Faruque is Cal Poly's youngest grad at 18. Faruque began taking courses at Cal Poly when she was 13, and left San Luis Obispo High School to attend Cal Poly full time. She will graduate with a double major in Electrical Engineering and Physics and a 3.98 GPA. She's been on the Dean's Honor List every quarter she's been a student at Cal Poly, and she is also the college-wide winner for Academic Excellence in the College of Mathematics and Science AND the College of Engineering Academic Excellence (as well as the top student in Physics). She's taken graduate-level electrical engineering courses while at Cal Poly. Her Electrical Engineering senior project advisor David Braun says of Faruque, "With a student of this caliber, instructors like me wonder if we are assisting or slowing down her education."

Kristen O'Halloran also mixed athletics and academics while at Cal Poly. She'll graduate with a degree in general engineering and is a Universitywide Academic Excellence Award winner. She's finishing her engineering degree in four years, an accomplishment in itself, but she's also been a member of Cal Poly's Division I Women's Volleyball team all four years too. She's a team standout, a four-year starter, and was named Cal Poly's Female Scholar Athlete of the Year for 2002-03. She also managed to find time to be a founding member of Cal Poly's Biomedical Engineering Society, a member of the Society of Women Engineers and the General Engineering club. She'll graduate with a 3.98 GPA and has been on the Dean's List since 2000. A standout in the classroom, she did so well in a Cal Poly biomedical engineering class that a corporate biomed recruiter came to Cal Poly just to see her and ask her to consider a job with a the company right after graduation.

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