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The Zukowski Family: "We Are EIU!"

May-06-2011

At noon on Saturday, May 7, three members of the Walter Zukowski family from Peru, Ill., will participate together during a Spring 2011 commencement ceremony at Eastern Illinois University. Nancy, the mother, and daughter Abigail, 27, both are set to receive their bachelor of arts in general studies degrees, while son Will, 23, will receive his degree in mathematics.

The family's successful association with Eastern Illinois University began with another daughter, Emily, who earlier found her niche at the Charleston campus, who earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and her master's degree in counseling at EIU, and who is now working as a full-time high school counselor, department chair and track coach in Washington, Ill.

When asked if she would recommend her students to EIU, she responded, "Oh, gosh, yes!"

If Bill Addison hadn't answered the departmental phone when it rang, things might have turned out very differently for the Zukowski family.

"I was looking for a place to transfer - a school closer to home and family," said psychology major Emily Zukowski, an Illinois resident then attending the University of Hawaii.

"I started making some calls and it must have been pushing about 5 at night when I called Eastern (Illinois University). All the office staff had already gone home, and Dr. Addison (former chair of the psychology department) was the one who answered the phone.

"He was so passionate in his responses. He sold me on the program."

Emily began her studies at Eastern and happily finished her undergraduate degree two years later. Although admitted to the Graduate School with thoughts of getting her master's degree in counseling and student development, she decided, instead, to attend law school.

"I did it mostly for my dad, who's an attorney," she said. "I think he wanted someone to carry on the business and I was the only one (of the family's four children) who was even slightly interested."

But after one semester, Emily was back at Eastern. "Law school just wasn't for me," she said.

To supplement her income, Emily applied, and was accepted, for a graduate assistantship with Eastern's School of Continuing Education. She began working specifically for Kaye Woodward and the Bachelor of Arts in General Studies Degree Program, a program designed for nontraditional working adults.

Emily's job duties included phone calls to people who had earlier inquired about the BGS program, but who had never followed up. And as she talked to these people - many of which who, due to life's circumstances, had given up their dreams for a bachelor's degree - one individual near and dear to Emily's heart came to mind.

"I knew Mom wanted her degree," Emily said.



Shown, from left to right, front row, are Abigail and Emily Zukowski; second row, Will, Nancy, Walter, Wally, Amy and Lucas Zukowski.

Years before, Nancy Zukowski had received her associate's degree in secretarial science, as well as some advanced secretarial training. Like many other wives, however, she willingly gave up her dream for a bachelor's degree and began working as her husband, Walter, attended law school. Today, she works for him at his own practice in Peru.

"Emily called me up one day and said, Hey, Mom, what do you think?" Nancy recalled. "She knew I had never finished my bachelor's degree, even though I was always pushing the kids to get theirs."

Nancy, who's in her fifties, submitted her application to the BGS program, but didn't tell her husband. "I guess I was afraid of rejection, of failure," she said. "I didn't want to tell him until I knew for sure."

So when she received notification of her acceptance, "I was speechless. It was overwhelming," she added. And Walter's reaction was a pleasant one.

"He was surprised and, I think, proud that I had done something like this on my own."

Nancy began her online classes, taking mandatory courses in mathematics, sciences and the humanities. She chose her courses carefully. When expecting her first grandchild, for example, she enrolled in a child psychology course that examined children's development from birth through age 12.

A course on the history of Chicago allowed her a different take on the city she frequently visits, and while learning about the Illinois/Michigan Canal, Nancy said, she and Walter actually went to some of the sites she was learning about, e.g., the Lockport Dam.

"My husband and I have gone on some incredible dates as a result of all of this," Nancy said excitedly. "And I've certainly learned to look at things in a different dimension."

Abigail Zukowski, Emily's twin sister, had attended classes at Florida Gulf University and the University of Kentucky with a focus on business. But the time came, she said, when "making money became more important than getting her degree."

And currently dividing her time between Illinois and Louisville, Ky., where she works for a woman who raises horses and writes children's books, Abigail was reluctant to commit to semesters on a college campus.

"But I wanted to get my bachelor's degree," she added. "And I got so much positive feedback from Mom about the BGS program. I decided to go for it."

Abigail wasn't sure what online learning would entail, but found she really enjoyed taking courses via her computer. Like her mother, she received her textbooks via mail, and the time she's actually had to spend on and traveling to the EIU campus has been minimal.

Both Abigail and Nancy say they could not have completed their journeys without the support of family. "They were so concerned about me," Nancy said. "This has pulled us all closer."

Son Will, a mathematics major, even mentored his mother as she struggled through some of her math classes - an experience he laughingly describes as positive and "at times, frustrating."

As for his own educational experience at EIU, he has only positive things to say.

"I checked out Eastern on my father's recommendation, which was based on my sister's (Emily) experience here," Will said.

"I had already attended two junior colleges, been to California and back, and was attending the University of Illinois. Compared to the other places I had been, I no longer felt like a number; I felt like I was part of a neighborhood. Professors asked us to call them by their first names. We were given their direct phone numbers.

"And when I arrived in the spring of 2009, I had no problem at all with the transfer of my credits," he added.

He is now working as a mathematics teacher at University High School in Normal. He actually finished his degree work in December, but opted to wait until the spring ceremonies so that the family could walk across the commencement stage together.

Will said graduation day will be known as a day for a Zukowski family celebration. And perhaps none will be celebrating as enthusiastically as the family's patriarch, Walter, who went to bed alone many nights while Nancy stayed up to study.

"He's had to endure so many changes," Will said, chuckling. "We've all changed our minds so many times."

Emily agreed. "Dad's always been really supportive of education. But above and beyond that, he's been so wonderfully supportive and interested in what we kids do.

"I know that when he was young, he did a study abroad in England himself. I guess he realizes moving around can be a pretty cool part about being young."