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Mother, Daughters to Graduate Together During EIU Commencement

May-08-2009

It's the perfect combination Commencement/Mother's Day story. One mother. Two daughters with sons of their own. And one son/brother and three supportive husbands who helped their loved ones achieve their education goals.

From the bottom of the stairs up: Ralph Phillips; Jessie Phillips, with Gauge Phillips in lap; Jacob McDonald; Susan McDonald and Jon McDonald. Standing next to stairs: Roxanne Clodfelter with Rhett Clodfelter in arms, and Steven Clodfelter.

The story's beginning, however, was not so happy, as it began with a near-fatal motorcycle accident.

Forty-two-year-old Susan McDonald of St. Francisville, Ill., married young, putting her education on hold to raise a family, home school her children and live the life of a dutiful Marine Corps wife. She managed to get her associate's degree through nearby Wabash Valley College, but what she really wanted was a bachelor's degree in psychology -- for a couple of reasons.

First, plain and simple, she wanted to be the first family member of her generation to earn a bachelor's degree.

But more importantly, she wanted to advance her career. Serving as bookkeeper for the family-owned wireless Internet company was okay, but what she really wanted to do was marriage and adolescent counseling.

Then the unthinkable happened. In 2007, her husband, Jon, nearly died as the result of a motorcycle crash.

"I realized that I needed to get that degree so that I would be able to support myself and my family should anything happen to Jon and he was no longer around to support us," McDonald said.

Coincidentally, at about that same time, McDonald met up with Audrey Bachelder, an academic adviser with Eastern Illinois University's School of Continuing Education, who was at Wabash Valley College on a recruitment visit. When McDonald heard how she could achieve a bachelor's degree via mostly online and weekend classes, she applied and was accepted into EIU's Bachelor of Arts in General Studies program.

(The BGS program is designed to meet the educational needs of mature adults in a format and structure compatible with adult responsibilities. The program is well-suited to serve the education needs of adults who cannot access university coursework in a traditional manner.)

Meanwhile, Jon and Susan McDonald's 23-year-old daughter, Roxanne Clodfelter, who was attending Southern Illinois University-Carbondale and taking classes in the design program there, decided to put her own education on hold. She moved back home in order to help her mother and high school-aged brother care for their injured father and run the family business. And have her first child.

"I was pregnant and my father was in that accident -- it just seemed like the right thing to do," she said. "And when I saw what Mom was doing and that I could take classes from home, I joined the B.A. in General Studies program, too."

That was in January 2008.

The McDonalds' youngest daughter, Jesse Phillips, was also experiencing her own set of challenges.

"I had just gotten married and was enrolled in the social work program at the University of Southern Indiana," Phillips said. "I got my associate's degree from Wabash Valley College, but I was having trouble with the university. They didn't seem to care about their students and I was having trouble with financial aid."

Then her father was injured. And she, too, discovered she was pregnant.

"But everything fell into place once I moved back (to St. Francisville)," Phillips, age 20, said. "Since I was so young, I had to get special approval to get into Eastern's program. But I saw how it was working for Mom and Roxanne, and it all worked out for me, too."

Yes, somehow it did work out. And all three women -- a mother and two daughters -- will reap the rewards for their hard work on Saturday, May 9, as they cross the EIU Commencement stage. They'll be celebrating; however, they'll also be remembering the challenges they've faced -- together -- during the past couple of years.

"I know personally I could not have done it without my mother and my sister," Clodfelter said. "We'd all come to Mom's house and while two people were upstairs, working on class assignments, the third would be downstairs taking care of babies. Or we'd all be in the living room with three laptops and the two babies. We were in this together."

In addition to running the family business and caring for their own growing families, both Clodfelter and Phillips also continued to work at a Vincennes, Ind., restaurant as part-time waitresses. Their brother, Jacob, who is now finishing up high school classes while taking additional courses at Wabash Valley College, persisted in helping out with both the business and as a babysitter for his two nephews. Husbands, too, stepped in when they could -- especially the recovering Jon McDonald.

He often accompanied the three women on their "Girls' Weekend Out," where they attended weekend courses -- usually consisting of Friday evening and all-day Saturday sessions -- at various on- and off-campus locations, including Effingham and Champaign. While his wife and daughters attended class, Mr. McDonald would stay in the hotel and babysit, Clodfelter said.