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Dedicated mom earns degree after 20 years

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

One of the proudest moments parents have is when their child receives a college degree. Sandi Powell of Waterford was especially proud last year when all three of her daughters graduated from college. Powell recently experienced this feeling from the other side as one of 1,900 graduates at Oakland University's commencement exercises on May 1.

Twenty years after she took her first college course, Powell received her B.A. in general studies.

"After I turned in my last paper this semester, I felt really excited to finally finish (my degree)," Powell said. "Commencement provided a nice sense of closure for me. After being in school for 20 years, there was no way I'd miss my graduation ceremony."

The years of study also represent two decades of sacrifice for Powell, who got her children through high school as a single parent.

"I remarried six years ago, so for the most part, I was a single mom while I raised my kids and I tried to set a good example for them," Powell said. "I made sure they got through school first. I sent them to Christian schools where I felt they'd be in a safe spot and get a good education. They've all done very well."

Heather, 25, graduated from Oakland last year with an English degree; Heidi, 23, double majored in Spanish and psychology at Eastern Michigan; and Michelle, 21, studied biology at Grace College and Seminary in Indiana.

"They finished college first, but that's okay," said Powell, 45. "Heidi is traveling through Europe to see more of the world before she starts her master's degree, and she sent me a postcard congratulating me and thanking me for sacrificing all these years. My husband and kids have provided a lot of support."

In 1984, Powell began taking secretarial and word processing classes on a part-time basis at Oakland Community College. A series of job layoffs accelerated her studies and made her even more determined to obtain a bachelor's degree.

"I worked as a police officer in West Bloomfield for a short time in the late 1980s. Then I did some event planning for a nonprofit corporation, but was laid off. Then I did accounting work for a McDonald's franchisee for six years before being laid off again," Powell said. "I thought that maybe this was telling me I needed to go back to school and finish my degree."

Powell earned an associates degree in general studies at OCC in 2001, then decided to transfer to OU based on her daughter's positive experiences.

"I chose Oakland University because I saw how it really helped Heather learn to focus on her studies, and it's also really close to home," Powell said. "Oakland reviewed my academic background and worked with me to transfer a lot of my credits. And if I decided to pursue a master's degree, I could make a smooth transition into it there."

Though some non-traditional students might not feel comfortable taking classes with students the same age as their children, Powell welcomed the experience.

"I wasn't really apprehensive about taking classes with younger students. I just plunged into it without thinking about it," Powell said. "One of the things I really enjoy is hearing ideas from students of that age. It helps keep me fresh with current ideas. I found, too, that I often wasn't the oldest student in the class. It was fun, and I really enjoyed the learning process."

"I've been very pleased with Oakland's professors and how much they really care for the students. Most have treated their students with great respect and have been good role models. Most of all, what I take away from Oakland is the reminder that life is all about valuing people and passing that along to others."

Powell didn't take classes with her daughter while she was at Oakland, though they occasionally met for lunch in the Oakland Center.

"Not all mothers and daughters can take classes together," Powell said. "Heather said I wasn't allowed to take an English class until after she graduated. She kept school and home life very separate, which was her way of being independent. I did take tennis, self-defense and art history courses with Heidi while we were at OCC together. It was fun, actually."

Like many nontraditional students, Powell continued to dedicate a lot of time to her family while studying, writing papers and preparing for exams.

"My mom got cancer and because of the online course option at Oakland, I was able to take my class from New Jersey while I was with her," Powell said. "I felt free enough to travel back and forth from Michigan and still take my class. It was a health sciences class and it turned out to be a lot of work, but it also allowed me to be with my mom."

Thankfully, Powell's mother is getting better and her cancer is in remission. This also allowed Powell more time to become involved in campus activities. She volunteered her time to work with the **Center for Student Activities** to help develop Commuter Appreciation Week and the Lunch and Learn series. She became a member of the Human Resource Development Student Association and **Golden Key International Honour Society**.

"I have a great passion for nontraditional and commuter students," Powell said. "I noticed several parents in my classes who have young kids, and I give them a lot of credit for continuing their education. I thought about that a lot and realize that by finishing my degree, I've beaten the odds. When I see other single moms in school, I always encourage them and tell them that it is possible to raise your kids and earn a college degree."

Currently, Powell is working with OU's **Career Services** on finding employment. She also has applied for enrollment in Oakland's master's program in training and development in the **Department of Human Resource Development**.

"I really want to get involved in the human resource field and a master's degree is a way for me to specialize in that." Powell said. "I'm an advocate for continuing education. Even if I don't take the master's courses, I want to continue taking a class per year to stay fresh and see what current students are thinking."

"I would never want to stop learning. It keeps things fun and interesting and keeps you young."

SUMMARY

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