

The Barnett Family

“Family Affair Series” - September 2014

As coordinator of SIU’s Non-Traditional Student Services, my story is also part of the “family affair” trend. I entered college just out of high school but did not finish. In my mid-30s I decided to finish what I started and went back to school to complete my bachelor’s degree. Like many of you, I juggled classes with full-time employment, family and other “adult responsibilities.” As a non-traditional student, I was much more focused and really enjoyed learning.

Following the completion of my bachelor’s degree, I enrolled at SIU in 2009 to start my master’s degree program, graduated in 2010 and then moved on to earn my doctoral degree, which I will complete this fall (2014). My son, Travis, transferred to SIU in fall 2013 and will complete his bachelor’s degree in geography and environmental resources in May 2015. It has been rewarding to watch Travis grow and to develop a passion for his area of study. Although Travis and I have our own unique college experiences, we are able to share conversations about experiences we DO have in common, such as how a new class is going or an upcoming research paper topic. We have encouraged each other along the way, and I know he will be cheering me on at the December commencement as I cheer him on in May!



Photo (L to R): Mike, Travis, and Deborah Barnett celebrating Travis' college start in 2011.

I am a first-generation student and hope that my own experiences have set an example for Travis as to the importance of higher education. He and my husband, Mike, have been my biggest cheerleaders as I studied for exams, prepared for class presentations, took the GRE for graduate school and, most recently, spent hours and hours (and hours and hours) writing my doctoral dissertation. I so enjoy when Travis asks me how my dissertation is going and I get to share the process with him. This has also opened his eyes to the possibility of graduate school, something he might not have considered before. I love hearing about what he is learning in class and how his views and perspectives on certain issues, particularly environmental issues, are evolving and changing. As his mom, I encourage him and challenge him at the same time.

As part of my work at SIU, I have the unique privilege to encourage other non-traditional students as they pursue their educational goals. Although each student’s story is unique, I understand what it’s like to return to college and add school to other obligations. I understand what it’s like to walk into a classroom, having been away for many years, and wonder if I have what it takes to succeed. But I also understand the sense of accomplishment that comes with persevering and coming to the realization that “Yes, I can do this!”

I’ll leave you with the same message I tell my son: If I can do it, so can you! I encourage you to establish a support system, reach out for help when you need it, and stay focused on your goal! **YOU CAN DO IT!**

Deborah Barnett is pursuing a Ph.D. in workforce education and development. She also serves as SIU's coordinator of Non-Traditional Student Services. Her son, Travis, is a senior studying geography and environmental resources.