

The Dickson Family

“Family Affair Series” - September 2014

John Dickson first attended SIU during the mid-1980s but did not finish his degree, switching from a biology major to undecided, and then to dietitian. He got married and worked as an assistant manager at several restaurants until he had the opportunity to buy into a self-owned equipment sales job with Hostess/Wonder Bread Corp. For 20 years he worked for them, with excellent pay and benefits ideal for raising a family. But as consumer tastes and economic times changed, the company closed its doors and laid off more than 8,000 workers. Dickson started receiving unemployment benefits, and he looked into what it would take to go back to SIU to finish his degree. With the help of employment agency Man-Tra-Con Corp., he received assistance with tuition and other school expenses.

When a judge in the bankruptcy case of Wonder Bread determined that foreign competition had been a key reason for the company’s failure, Dickson also received federal trade realignment adjustment benefits available to him as long as he finished school in a certain time frame and with good grades. This fall, Dickson entered his senior year studying hospitality and restaurant management through the College of Agriculture. Dickson says, “It took a series of random events happening at the same time for me to fully realize the opportunity that was now in front of me ... to get a second chance to finish my academic education and receive a degree.”

Being a non-traditional student was not the easiest adjustment. Taking English 101, English 102 and speech was a huge hurdle, but the support of my family – and, most of all, the teachers and many of the students – really made it possible. There were a few individuals in particular that made this transition more comfortable, and their openness and expectance of me as a student is really what got me through those first two semesters – and to them I am forever grateful. The teaching methods have changed a bit in 30 years, but most striking was the fact that, in my first semester back, I believe only one of my instructors had yet to be born the last time I attended SIU.



Photo (L to R): Austin, Brittany, and John Dickson
in front of the SIU Student Services Building

The relevance of an education to me, personally, is what has changed the most in those years. I listen to a lecture and wonder what I was thinking when I was a teenager in this same spot, and how differently I see the world today. If only every student could see the importance of an education as I do now. My advice to others starting or thinking about returning to college as a non-traditional student is to seek out the advice and support of family and friends, and to use the available resources out there. If you have been in the workforce for many years, the transition can be a bit of a shock. Just keep in mind what the

alternatives are – which may, in turn, make going back to school more appealing. Many of the classes I have taken surprisingly fit into the puzzle of what an education means. Whether it has been accounting, computing, business administration, statistics, logic, marketing or organizational psychology, they all make more sense as a non-traditional student.

I live in Marion and have commuted to SIU with my two oldest children. My oldest daughter, Brittany, commuted with me the first semester. She completed her bachelor's degree, graduated cum laude, and now is in her final year of her master's program in educational psychology. She was a teacher's assistant for a basic psychology class my first semester, and I kidded her that my son and I were going to take her class and section so she could be our teacher. She found no humor in this – and, in fact, I had already taken this course years ago. She now has a graduate assistant position that helps pay for her school and works full time at other times to make ends meet.

I now commute with my son, Austin, who is in his third year here at SIU. He splits his time with school and coaching high school football, and track, at Marion. I often wonder who this is hardest on, me or my family. They were used to seeing me work 60 hours/six days a week, and now they see me as a student just like them. My wife and youngest daughter have been very supportive. In fact, my wife would like to go back and finish her degree next, and my youngest is eagerly planning her education, possibly away from home. Both of my parents had attended graduate school and are very supportive and happy to see me continue my education, as is the support of my brother who attended SIU before me and was one of the reasons I first attended SIU. He now pilots international flights for U.S. Air/American and has been through corporate bankruptcies, buyouts, pay cuts and employee concessions just like I have, although his ultimately had a better outcome. He has also recently taken graduate school classes as a non-traditional student, and it helps to talk and laugh with someone who knows exactly what I have gone through.

I took several online classes this summer, not realizing I would also have to undergo complete knee replacement surgery, as this is not what I had envisioned almost 30 years ago as a freshmen living on the fifth floor of Neely Hall. Now I look back to moving my son in that same fifth floor of Neely as a freshmen on the football team here at SIU, or as I marched in the SIU marching band for several years so long ago, or coached my son in the championship games at MacAndrew Stadium when he was in seventh- and eighth-grade youth league, or watching him play his senior all-star football game as a first team all-state selection, or sitting in the parents' section of the new football stadium. I find it amazing to see my youngest march on the SIU football field for band competitions, or enjoy watching a SIU basketball game and saying to my kids every game, "You know, I used to play in that pep band, and I remember playing "Anchors Aweigh" when David Robinson was shooting free throws for Navy."

Just remember: It is never too late to make your dreams come true. Just do it!

John Dickson is a senior studying Hospitality and Tourism Administration. His daughter, Brittany, is pursuing a master's degree in Educational Psychology. His son, Austin, is a junior studying sport administration.