Graduate Success Story

By Shannon Gottke,

Career Services Coordinator, Daymar College

Donna A. Wood grew up as one of nine children of parents who had not finished eighth grade. To say that conditions were harsh would be an understatement. Throughout her formative years, housing was always too crowded and water came from a bucket instead of a faucet. Some aspects of her childhood were so traumatic that she was diagnosed with PTSD and still suffers from nightmares as a result.

Because of the conditions at home, she learned early in life to associate school with safety and being cared for. She did very well in that environment, made good grades and was encouraged to attend college. Unfortunately, she had nobody to help her pursue that dream. She was an intelligent girl but without resources or guidance, she turned to what was available and, sadly, what was familiar – a factory job and marriage to an abusive man. She felt weak because she saw no way out and felt that independence was beyond her reach.

Life was a struggle for years until the day she had had enough. She packed up her children and walked away from it, determined to figure out how to start the life she wanted. She worked odd jobs, sometimes two at a time, to support herself and her children. She worked as a bartender, cleaned houses, anything to make ends meet.  When her youngest children (twins!) were five years old, they started school and, that same week, Donna called Daymar College and enrolled in classes! It had been seventeen years since she had been in a classroom but her goal was to “walk away with a GPA of 4.0 and a degree” that she would use as a launchpad to a better life for herself and her girls.

Though it would be nice to say that everything fell into place and she lived happily ever after, it would be awhile before her road smoothed out completely. There were still some trials to be faced but with the support of her family and her school, she found her niche and went on to earn an Associate degree in Business Administration with a GPA of – you guessed it – 4.0!

During her time in school, her employer was less than supportive and nothing changed once she graduated. Rather than offering congratulations or a raise, her boss became even more demanding, demeaning and condescending until Donna felt she had no choice but to quit her job. She was once again, to her dismay, struggling. Life with a degree was not what she had expected and she began to get discouraged.

She contacted Career Services at Daymar College and began a search for a job that would give her the satisfaction she was sure should come with a degree. She applied to several places and soon received a call from the law firm where she would finally find that fresh start. She expressed her feelings in an email:

*“I wanted you to know that I am totally loving my job and it is going so well. I am responsible every day for approving all the trust and cost checks for all of our offices in Kentucky, Tennessee, and New Mexico. I have deadlines every day as well as endless calls from the attorneys and legal aides so I am always busy. It was a wonderful feeling to hear them say I was the first one they called, the first one they interviewed and their first choice for hire. I just wanted to again say thank you for all the encouragement, ideas and suggestions. It's a great feeling to be excited to go to work every day and work for a terrific company. I miss school but I feel like I finally got the grown up job I have been waiting for :)”*

A little over a year later, Donna sent this update:

*“I just wanted to check in with you.  I am always inspired to let you know when I have hit a milestone in my career, because I appreciate the time that was taken with me to put me on the right path to accomplish my goals.  I have been at my job for a little over 13 months now, and it is going so well for me.  I was in the accounting department for six months, and even though I did not want to push numbers all day I wanted to work hard and show them that even though I was "Entry Level" I was certainly able to do much more.  I moved upstairs to the Mass Torts Department in November to be a legal assistant. There are six legal assistants besides myself and a full-time attorney. I work directly with the head of the company daily learning the ins and outs.   It is a five million dollar a year department and it's very fast paced and exciting.  I will take over next week as the Department Manager! I have been given so many opportunities to prove myself here at this company and they have been amazing to me.  Even though I know that it's not all about the money, I did have big dreams in mind when I decided to go back to school.  I got an amazing raise and my paycheck this week will be more than I have made all this year combined.  College changed that for me and I will always give credit where credit is due.  Thank you!”*

These celebratory emails were always shared throughout Daymar because this is, after all, exactly what we hope and strive for – for every graduate. Soon there was more news. Less than two years passed before Donna was moving up again:

*“I have put in my resignation and I am relocating to Richmond, Virginia. I have an amazing job offer with a successful law firm there. I will get to travel and will have an executive position with crazy good perks and benefits. They are paying all expenses to move my family there, providing housing and all necessary expenses. They doubled my salary and I am now packing to head up there tomorrow to sign my contract. I appreciate all Daymar has done for me!!”*

Donna has achieved much – some of it surprising! Her 2015 highlight reel included a company trip to Las Vegas, Nevada where she attended a VIP party with none other than *Elton John!* Some rewards are harder to anticipate than others but by far the most rewarding result of Donna’s journey to date was summed up best in her own words:

*“I hope you and all of my special Daymar family are doing well! I just wanted to share that we got the word yesterday that my daughter, Jayla, has been accepted into the Program For the Exceptionally Gifted at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia. She will get to skip her last two years of high school and go directly into college.  I wanted to share with you because I knew you would appreciate and understand how huge this is for her and for me.  I am the child of two parents with less than an 8th grade education and nine kids…and not only am I the only college graduate, I have also raised a college student as well.  I will be packing my 15 year old up next month and sending her on her way to change the world!  I am terribly proud and excited and thankful for my Daymar journey that put me on this path.  Education makes such a difference!!!!!!”*

On the five-year anniversary of Donna’s graduation from Daymar College, she embarked on another adventure and was gracious enough to share it with us:

*“Today is the anniversary of my graduation from Daymar five years ago. And today, so ironically, I dropped my daughter off at college so she could start her college career as well. I think today was literally the proudest day of my entire life. Look at the smile on this kid. I reflected today as I drove back from Stauntan on just learning to believe in myself, thanks to school. Do you remember the day we had mock interviews and I was able to have mine with Dr. G.? I left that interview a different person. I believed him when he said I had something special to offer the world. The smile you see on my girl in this picture? I taught her the same thing and that's where that smile comes from.  I hope you are doing wonderful. I so appreciate being able to stay in contact with you. When I came to Daymar I felt like you were part of my support system and I always like to check in because it's important to remember that you make such a positive difference in people's lives!”*

From hardship case to VIP to role model for an exceptionally gifted, 2nd generation college student, Donna has shown that hard work, dedication and education can make dreams come true. We at Daymar College are so proud of her for her achievements and very happy to have been part of her journey. We know she will continue to achieve and look forward to more of her story.

*Donna A. Wood is a 2013 graduate of Daymar College, Bowling Green, KY. She earned an Associate degree in Business Administration with a GPA of 4.0.*