College Student Takes One Step At A Time To Earn Degree

Denise Spada-Bargo will earn her degree at the University of Bridgeport after 12 years of attending college.

Photo Credit: Contributed Photo

FAIRFIELD COUNTY, Conn. – Denise Spada-Bargo looks frequently at a picture her professor at the University of Bridgeport asked her to take when she started classes 12 years ago. It has continued to motivate her every step of the way.

“We had to take a picture of us in a cap and gown,” said Spada-Bargo, who plans to finish work toward a degree in General Studies with a Business concentration in December. “I’ve kept that picture in my folder. After classes are over, I’m going to send that professor the old picture along with my real graduation picture with a thank you note saying it helped me stay motivated and kept me looking forward.”

Spada-Bargo’s journey through the IDEAL Program at Bridgeport took an unusual length of time because she took one class at a time. She also enjoys traveling, works full-time and has raised two children.

“Education is a hobby of mine,” said Spada-Bargo, who also works at the university as the Assistant to the Dean of Students. “I absorb the one class that I’m enrolled in at the time. I try to get the most out of it. That’s the best way that I can manage.”

When Spada-Bargo looks at the picture of her in a cap and gown, she sees growth. “I believe I have changed professionally and as a person,” she said. “I’ve had some turmoil in life. Thank goodness I’ve always had support. Somebody was always there to help and support me with my mission to attend school. I’m thankful for that. I think I’m more mature now and can appreciate education more.”

Spada-Bargo struggled with the work-life-school balance when her children were young. Her son, now 24, daughter, 18, and husband supported her long journey though. “Sometimes I’ll go home and lock myself in a tiny home office and pretend that I’m at school,” she said. “Now my children are older and I have a lot more flexibility to come and go. It’s very manageable now.”

Spada-Bargo, who lives in Stratford, likes the convenience of the IDEAL program. She also enjoys the classrooms, where the students are adult learners, most of whom are juggling multiple responsibilities.

“We all have life experience and work experience,” she said. “Sometimes we’ll have younger students in the class and they appreciate being in an adult environment. We have students from a wide cross-section of age groups. I really like the variety.”

Her educational journey even extends beyond her time at UB. She spent two years in business school, worked full-time, and attended two other colleges. “This has taken me 27 years,” she said. She considered trying to move the process along more quickly, but found the one-class at a time approach was what worked best for her personally.

Spada-Bargo walked with the graduating class of 2014 in a ceremony in May with Summa Cum Laude and as a member of Phi Kappa Phi, and is planning to attend graduate school. She hopes she and her daughter, who also attends UB, can complete their master degrees within the next five years.

It has been a long journey for Spada-Bargo, but it has been a rewarding one which she knows she has been an inspiration to her children, and the students and staff with whom she works.

“I think my kids and my family are just so proud,” she said. “It comes back to the individual. You have to be determined. When I walked across that stage, it was very rewarding. It wasn’t easy. I’m proud of myself.”

by Tom Renner
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