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Previous Story
Next Story

Larry LaRue: Her long-deferred degree comes from online university

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Sandra Braedt, shown in her office in the Human Resources Department at Pierce College, Lakewood, will graduate from Western Governors University, an online institution.

PETER HALEY /STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The music to "Pomp and Circumstance" makes her cry, so Sandra Braedt is about to have a weepy month.

Oldest daughter Kyra — born the year Braedt turned 17 — will graduate from Seattle Central Community College in June with an associate degree.

Mom will wear a cap and gown a month ahead of her.

"It took me six years to get my two-year degree from Pierce College, and I didn't walk in the ceremony," Braedt said. "This time, I'm walking."

This time, at age 39, she will march to "Pomp and Circumstance" at a rented hall in Seattle to accept her bachelor's degree in business from Western Governors University Washington (WGU) on Saturday.

The chancellor of the university said Braedt is a prototypical WGU student, and will be one of more than 1,000 grads this year.

"If I had to characterize our students, they'd be people who started their education and then had life intervene," said Chancellor Jean Floten. "We're a good choice for the self-motivated, midcareer adult that has had some education experience and is comfortable with online technology."

That fit Braedt. An online-only university was the only way she was going to squeeze school into what has always been a chaotic life.

"When I started, I had two daughters at home and a full-time job at Pierce College," the Graham resident said. "Most colleges force you to choose between school and your job. WGU let me do the work nights, weekends."

Braedt was a junior at Mount Tahoma High School in Tacoma when she got pregnant with Kyra. Finishing high school wasn't easy, but she did it.

Four years later, daughter Jordan was born while Braedt was attending Pierce College. She and the father of both girls had been together since high school and married the year after Jordan was born.

Over the years, her husband started a plumbing business aimed at new construction, and did well. Braedt worked at Russell Investments. They bought a big home, and life was good — until 2009.

"That year, I was laid off because of the economy," she said. "My husband's business went under. We had to sell the house. We declared bankruptcy. We divorced."

Braedt found a townhouse in Graham so the kids could stay at Graham-Kapowsin High School. She got a job as an executive assistant to the vice president of human resources and administration at Pierce College.

And there, a co-worker told her about WGU Washington, which opened in April 2011 offering degrees in business, education, health care and information technology.

What appealed most to Braedt?

"The tuition," she said with a laugh. "It's \$3,000 every six months. I bought my books used at Amazon.com and got my degree in two years for about \$12,000."

WGU's curriculum is competency-based, meaning a student who can prove he or she knows the material can test, pass a course and move on to the next one. Sandra's experience in business, for instance, had given her more than a basic knowledge of the field.

"I think I passed one class in two days," she said. "That was rare, but if you know the subject and pass the competency tests, you don't spend time in basic classes covering what you already know."

Floten has seen the WGU program in Washington explode.

"We had 850 students when we began in 2011 and we have nearly 6,000 today," Floten said. "Each student is assigned a mentor that can help them make that deep dive into resources, handle what questions come up and talk to the student each week throughout their time here."

"They're not quite available 24/7 — but it's close."

That mentoring system was a difference-maker for Braedt.

"I had a paper to write that really intimidated me, and I kept putting it off. One week my mentor said, 'Forget that for now. Focus on another class,'" she said. "So I did, and when I went back to the paper, it wasn't that big a deal."

This month's march to "Pomp and Circumstance" may not be enough for Braedt.

"I'm trying to decide now whether to go for my master's or try law school."

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