

BC3 student, a mother of 6 with 18-hour days, sole Pennsylvanian to receive international organization scholarship

Mom “amazing,” 13-year-old daughter says

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Vanessa Eberle, 35, a married mother of six and full-time Butler County Community College student who has received a \$500 “Finish What I Started Scholarship,” is shown with her family near their home in Butler on Saturday, Jan. 5, 2019. From left, Naomi, 13; Vanessa’s husband Ethan, 40, holding Zipporah, 3; Caleb, sporting a taped-on moustache, 10; Vanessa, holding Ruby, 5; Phebe, 9; and Victor, 14.

(Butler, PA) A 35-year-old married mother of six who as a full-time Butler County Community College student has days exceeding 18 hours is the only Pennsylvanian to be awarded a \$500 scholarship from the regional chapter of an international academic honor society.

Vanessa Eberle’s “Finish What I Started” essay, stressing the importance of completing a community college certificate or associate degree, was among 117 from Pennsylvania

community college students to be judged by five advisory board members of Phi Theta Kappa's Middle States Region and its Alumni Association, said Pattie VanAtter, the regional coordinator.

Eberle, of Butler, re-enrolled at BC3 in January 2018 after attending the college for three semesters following her 2001 graduation from Butler Area Senior High School. She intends to graduate May 15 from BC3 with an associate of arts degree in psychology – as does her husband, Ethan, a 40-year-old BC3 student who works 40 hours per week with intellectually disabled adults.

The Eberles, who celebrate their 16th wedding anniversary in February, have children ranging in age from 14 to 3.

Eberle's "is just a stunning story," VanAtter said.

"The question is, 'Do you sleep?'" Morgan Rizzardi, BC3's associate director of admissions and the primary adviser to the college's Rho Phi chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, wondered about Eberle. "That is the question."

"Sometimes," Eberle said, "I take naps in the afternoon."

If possible, that would be sometime between 5:45 a.m., when Eberle awakens, and 11:30 p.m., when she retires for the day.

"I really don't fall asleep," she said, "until about 12:30."

Parents expect to graduate from BC3 debt-free

There is no nap time available when she is picking up son Victor, 14, from his after-school Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps activities or spring musical rehearsals. Making sure daughter Naomi, 13, eats her supper. Tucking in son Caleb, 10, at the same time every night. Helping daughter Phebe, 9, with her homework. Reading Scripture and praying with daughter Ruby, 5, at her bedtime. Changing diapers worn by daughter Zipporah, 3. Buying groceries and paying bills and studying for the childhood psychology, abnormal psychology, statistics and painting classes she needs this spring to complete the associate degree that she began to pursue in fall 2001 as a BC3 general studies student.

"I started this so long ago and I did really badly at it," Eberle said. "You graduate from high school and everybody tells you that you are supposed to go to college. That is what you are supposed to do. But I didn't have an idea of what I actually wanted to do. I didn't take things very seriously because I really didn't have a goal per se."

Eberle's goal today is to complete her associate degree and with Ethan join the 75 percent of BC3 graduates who are debt-free.

“We live on a very tight budget,” she said, “and being able to graduate debt-free from BC3 was part of my decision to return to school. I can get a degree that will help me earn money later, and I will not have to continue paying for it down the road.”

The Eberles are among the 10 percent of BC3 students who as of the fall 2018 semester were age 35 or older, according to Sharla Anke, BC3’s assistant dean of institutional research. Nearly 25 percent of BC3 students were at least 25 years of age in the fall 2018 semester, Anke said.



Vanessa Eberle, 35, a married mother of six and full-time Butler County Community College student who has received a \$500 “Finish What I Started Scholarship,” is shown near her home in Butler on Saturday, Jan. 5, 2019.

“When I am working with returning adult students,” Rizzardi said, “often I will hear them say, ‘I went to work right after high school,’ or ‘I came to BC3 right after high school because that is what I was expected to do. And I really didn’t know what I wanted to do. But life experience has helped me to figure out this is something that I need to do for myself.’”

Eberle agreed.

Achieving an associate degree “will be better for my emotional well-being, to be able to help support the family after all my children are in school,” she said. “Also, if something were to happen to my husband, I would be on my own. So having that security that I am capable of supporting my family will be a great benefit to me.”

Mom wanted to “prove” she could complete degree

Community college graduates earn \$423,000 more over a lifetime than those holding only a high school diploma, according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. BC3 has the highest ratio of graduates’ salaries 10 years after commencement for every dollar a student pays to attend BC3 when compared with 41 other regional colleges and universities, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Eberle, among the 60 percent of women who attend one of Pennsylvania’s 14 community colleges, according to the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, said she has achieved grades of A’s, and only one B, since resuming her education on BC3’s main campus in Butler Township.

“I want to prove to myself that I am capable of achieving a degree,” Eberle wrote in her 487-word essay, submitted in October as part of the state’s fourth Pennsylvania Community College

Completion Challenge Week, during which Phi Theta Kappa members encourage their classmates to complete their certificate or associate degree before transferring to a senior institution or entering the workforce.

BC3's Classes of 2017 and 2018 were its largest this century, with 585 and 578 graduates, respectively.

Forty-eight percent of BC3 graduates in 2018 received degrees in career programs that allow students to develop skills needed to enter the workforce immediately after graduation; and 52 percent, in transfer programs – including the associate of arts degree in history completed by an 80-year-old Saxonburg man who began his studies in France in the late 1950s while serving in the Air Force.

“We definitely see that persistence and perseverance among our students here,” Rizzardi said. “Sometimes life does get in the way. And people have to stop and re-evaluate.”

13-year-old daughter to be “super proud” at BC3 commencement

Like Don Thomas, the 80-year-old who resumed in 2010 his education at BC3 after a 50-year break to become BC3's most senior graduate, Eberle plans to walk across the stage in BC3's Field House during commencement exercises and search the crowd for her family – for Ethan, Victor, Naomi, Caleb, Phebe, Ruby and Zipporah – and receive the associate degree she abandoned after “three half-hearted semesters” beginning in 2001.

Said Ethan: “I will be very pleased. She works harder than I do. I put in 40 hours a week at work, but she doesn't have on-time and off-time. She is at school and being an active parent raising the kids and making sure the household is taken care of. I joke that I just provide funding and transportation. And she takes care of everything else. It really is amazing how many things she can do.”

And Victor: “It will show that age doesn't really stop you. You can still accomplish great things even if you are older than you once were.”

And Naomi: “I am going to be super proud because it is my mom. She is amazing.”

Vanessa and Ethan, a 1996 graduate of Seneca Valley High School who enrolled at BC3 in the summer of 2017, will transfer this fall to Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, where each will pursue a bachelor's degree in psychology.

“This has done incredible things for my confidence,” Eberle said. “I can learn. I can achieve. I can change my life.”

Phi Theta Kappa's Middle States Region received an additional 286 essays from students in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Washington, D.C. It awarded one scholarship to a student from each state.

The scholarships were available to all students, regardless of membership in Phi Theta Kappa, VanAtter said. Ethan Eberle is a member of Phi Theta Kappa; Vanessa is not.

Phi Theta Kappa has 3.5 million student members who carry grade-point averages of 3.5 or higher at two-year colleges in 10 countries from the South Pacific to Eastern Europe.

BC3 also awarded 80 certificates to graduates during its 2018 commencement.