

Essay of BC3 single mom, 38, is 1 of 2 in state rewarded with scholarship

“I had kids. I was afraid to go back to school. I thought I was too old”

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Crystal Recklaw, 38, of New Castle, is shown at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle on Tuesday, Jan. 16, 2018. Recklaw, a single mother of two boys and a social work major at Butler County Community College’s off-campus location in New Castle, is one of only two Pennsylvanians to receive a \$500 “Finish What I Started Scholarship” awarded from the regional chapter of an international academic honor society.

(New Castle, PA) Crystal Recklaw, a 38-year-old BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing student and among the one in five female community college students nationally who are single mothers, is one of only two Pennsylvanians to receive a \$500 “Finish What I Started Scholarship” awarded from the regional chapter of an international academic honor society.

Recklaw, of New Castle, is the mother of boys ages 12 and 10 and a social work major at Butler County Community College’s off-campus location. She wrote her scholarship-winning essay as part of the state’s third Pennsylvania Community College Completion Corps Week, held Oct. 16-20 and promoted by Phi Theta Kappa, which has 3.2 million members of two-year colleges in nine nations.

“I started feeling accomplished,” Recklaw said.

Her essay, along with that of a student from Reading Area Community College, was chosen to be awarded with a scholarship from among 32 applications in Pennsylvania, according to Pattie VanAtter, regional coordinator of a PTK Middle States Region that also encompasses Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Washington, D.C.

“I am finishing this time”

Recklaw had dropped out of Garfield High in Akron, Ohio, in her sophomore year, and from an associate degree program in medical assisting at Akron Institute in 2005, when she became pregnant with her first son, Kaedon, now 12. Hunter, now 10, would follow.

“I felt horrible,” said Recklaw, who earned a High School Equivalency Diploma in 1998. “I wanted to finish my degree. I made a promise to myself that I would go back to college one day. I felt unaccomplished.”

Twenty-one percent of women in community colleges are single mothers, the American Association of Community Colleges reported in October. While the number of single mothers attending college has more than doubled since 1999, to more than 2 million in 2012, the report also stated that 40 percent of the single mothers said they are likely or very likely to drop out because of obligations related to the care of their dependents.

Not Recklaw. Not this time, despite her initial apprehension of enrolling at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing.

“I had kids. I was afraid to go back to school,” she said. “I thought I was too old. But I am not. It took a few people telling me that. My aunt is 54 years old and back in school going for her master’s degree. And so I said, ‘OK I am doing it. I am doing it and I am finishing this time.’”

The “Finish What I Started Scholarship,” sponsored by PTK’s Middle States Region and its Alumni Association, was available to all students, regardless of membership in the organization, VanAtter said.

“That was the reason behind the completion initiative,” she said, “getting all students to understand that completion is important. In Pennsylvania, that message starts with the community college presidents and works down. It is important to the presidents. It is important that students know where to get those services they may need to not drop out.”

Those services could include information on financial aid, counseling or academic advice, VanAtter said.

“It could be all of those things,” she said. “It could be, ‘How do I take public transportation because I do not have a ride?’”

“We know what it is like to struggle”

Essays of up to 500 words explaining why a student would finish his or her community college degree were judged by five members of PTK’s advisory board for the Middle States Region and its Alumni Association, VanAtter said. Nearly 190 students applied across the region, VanAtter said.

“Completing my degree is important to me because, as a single mother of two wonderful boys, we know what it is like to struggle, from moving time and time again, to not being able to have our basic needs met, let alone our wants,” Recklaw wrote. “As a mom, I want to be a good example to my children and show them what hard work and dedication looks like.

“As a mother, it is my job to make sure my children grow up to be loving, understanding, educated, determined and driven. It’s also my job to push them to their maximum potential and make sure they graduate from high school and move on to college. How can I expect all of this from them if I myself was a high school dropout?”

Helping students from all walks of life and at different stages in their lives “is one of the many great things about working at BC3,” said Sean Carroll, BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing director.

“While the majority of our students are of the traditional age of 18 to 24, it is tremendously gratifying to see students a little further along in life who may have had some detours along the way but come to us determined to make their lives better. When these students succeed, it is inspirational not only to those who work at BC3, but often to their fellow students.”

As it was to Kaedon and Hunter, who were excited to learn their mother had been awarded the scholarship.

Recklaw told her sons, “I wrote down everything I went through to get to this point.

“They would love for me to stay home from school some times, and I say, ‘Nope.’ I say, ‘I am going to be going to school for a long time, so you better get used to it.’ They want me. I don’t need to be rich. I don’t need to have a job that pays \$50 an hour. I just want to be content and take care of my children.”

Pennsylvania has 14 community colleges that, with 12 branch campuses and 83 instructional sites and centers, serve students in each of the state’s 67 counties. Those community colleges, the largest providers of undergraduate education in the commonwealth, in 2015 enrolled nearly 314,000 students, according to the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges.

“Later in life, I will be able to say, ‘I did my best’”

As part of Pennsylvania's Community College Completion Corps Week, BC3's chapter of PTK, Rho Phi, held events to encourage classmates to complete their certificate or associate degree.

Those efforts included "Coffee for Completion," an event in which students could get a free cup of coffee in a bright green travel mug for talking with their academic adviser, meeting with a financial aid representative or signing the "Commit to Complete" banner and pledge card, according to Morgan Rizzardi, the primary adviser of Rho Phi.

Rizzardi, also BC3's associate director of admissions, alerted BC3 students to the availability of the first "Finish What I Started Scholarship."

The opportunity caught Recklaw's attention, and she began to write her essay.

"Two years ago, I decided to change my life for the better by attending college and bettering my future with a rewarding career," Recklaw wrote. "It's not always a walk in the park but it's a challenge that I am determined to achieve. Later in life, I will be able to say, 'I did my best' and that's all that matters to me. I will succeed and excel in my career and help others along the way."

Recklaw plans to graduate from BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in May and finish her bachelor's degree in social work at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania.

BC3's 324 outgoing transfer agreements with Pennsylvania institutions are the second-most among the state's 14 community colleges, trailing only Harrisburg Area Community College with its 339. Dr. Joshua Novak, BC3's dean of student development, said in October, when BC3 was named the No. 1 community college in Pennsylvania in back-to-back rankings by Schools.com.

"I love this school," Recklaw said of BC3. "I am trying to figure out what additional credits (toward a bachelor's degree) I can actually take at BC3, because obviously BC3 is less expensive, less expensive than Slippery Rock."

BC3's tuition was the least expensive compared with 24 Western Pennsylvania colleges and universities, the Pittsburgh Business Times reported in January 2017. Seventy-five percent of BC3's students graduate debt-free.

"I like BC3 because they are so personable," Recklaw said. "You know everybody, everybody in the office. They help you whenever you need help. At a bigger college you don't get that one-on-one that you need. But you definitely get it here."

Recklaw was recently laid off from her position as a home health-care aide. She said she may use the funds from the scholarship, her first, to purchase a laptop computer, which she does not have and that will assist her in her studies.

"I had a few online classes that I literally would have to go into school after I dropped my sons off," Recklaw said. "I would have to go to BC3 for three, four or five hours on days when I

didn't have classes because I don't have a laptop at home. It's hard when you don't have one. It will make a big difference."

"If I can do it, anybody can do it"

BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing offers two-year associate-degree career programs in business management, emergency services-police services option, human resource management and technical trades-cosmetology management option. It also offers transfer programs in business administration, criminology, early childhood education (pre-K), general studies, history, physical education-sport management option, pre-nursing, psychology, secondary education and social work.

"It may seem impossible at times, and there may be some tough spots, and sometimes it is harder than it is easy, but it is definitely worth it," Recklaw said of pursuing a degree as a single mother. "If I can do it, anybody can do it."

BC3's off-campus site in New Castle also offers one-year certificate programs in medical assistant, and in medical coding and billing specialist.