

'Real world' workers return to school

Nontraditional undergraduates diversify student body

BY BETHANY COURY
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Senior Susan Presley is 47 years old and counting down the days until her graduation: 16 and counting.

She first attended Truman in 1982, then Northeast Missouri State University, but got distracted from her studies by boys and booze, she said. Presley was "uninvited" to the University in 1983 and, for the time being, left her studies behind.

Presley came back to Truman to finish her undergraduate degree in the spring of 2007, contributing to the minority population of "nontraditional" students at Truman — students with decades of "real world" work experience on their résumés yet studying in a setting where the vast majority of students have yet to face the "real world."

"I grew up in a fundamentalist conservative — very, very conservative — tradition," Presley said. "It was very extreme: Girls couldn't wear pants, going to movies is bad, rock 'n' roll is certainly evil — sort of 'Footloose' gone bad."

So when Presley, the daughter of a Baptist preacher, moved on campus and first experienced independence, she went from one extreme to the other, which resulted in her suspension.

"In the between years, I came back to a normal place," Presley said. "Normal and more balanced, and sort of came to it on my own over the last 10 to 15 years."

She moved to Austin,

Texas, got married, had a baby and started a business — medical transcription — while working as a freelance journalist, giving her the opportunity to interview her idol Kevin Bacon, who saves the Baptist preacher's daughter in "Footloose."

When technology rendered medical transcription extinct, she decided to finish her undergraduate degree.

She now intends to finish her degree in public communication degree and continue on to the seminary to become a preacher in either a hospital or a prison.

Presley said many people are afraid of prison and that it is therefore ignored by ministers. She said she's not afraid, however, because she's been there — for nearly three weeks in 1992.

"[The prisoners] are stuck — they can't go anywhere, and they can't do anything to, for the time being, to improve their outward situation," Presley said. "But what they can do is work on their inward situation, and I feel like it's a population that a lot of people have forgotten about, and are afraid to go to. A lot of people are afraid."

Presley said the support she's received from students and professors has been "phenomenal," with minimal discrimination along the way.

"Did you know a lot of students think I'm a townie that worked at McDonald's all my life?" Presley said. "That's the rumor. Yeah, isn't that awesome? No, I owned a successful business and decided to come back to college."



Joyce Wong/Index
While checking her e-mail and working on her statistics homework, senior Susan Presley talks about her plans to attend the seminary in her hometown of Austin, Texas. She has 16 more days until graduation.

Carlyn Wall, Nurse

Junior Carlyn Wall, 40, also has a respectable résumé, having worked as a dental assistant and real estate agent, but always has wanted to be a nurse and decided it was now or never.

"In my early 20s, I worked in an emergency room for awhile, and I really loved it," Wall said. "And I probably would have gone to school then, but a dentist I knew was having issues in his office, so he asked me to come work for him. The money was good and I learned how to be a dental assistant, and so I kept putting it off, putting it off. So it took me a long time to get back."

Wall started taking classes when she was 33 years old, at Northwest Arkansas Community College, but took time off to have kids a son, 5, and a daughter, 3.

Each weekday, Wall goes to school, studies in the afternoon, picks up her children, makes dinner, gets her children ready in bed and then studies.

"I feel like I just have to juggle my time a little bit," Wall said. "I don't have as

much free time, and on the weekends I can't study as much because of the kids, so I have to really make sure to study when I don't have class or during the evenings — just really manage time."

Her husband works full time for Kraft Foods, but she said he's really embraced the role of "Mr. Mom." She said they both work hard at making it work, knowing it will help provide for a better life for their family. Wall said it's hectic at times, but that overall she loves being in school.

"I am a little out of place because I am older, but the classes have really been warm, friendly," Wall said. "Last year I felt out of place, this year I feel part of the gang. ... They're awesome, I'm sure I've made some friends I'll have forever."

Frank Vorhees, Sustainability director

Sophomore Frank Vorhees, 37, got into plenty of trouble his freshman at Moberly High School, causing them to kick him out. He said he went to work full time at a cow ranch in Huntsville, Mo., considering education to be inconsequential.

He began building a resume in sustainability experience, from designing and setting up environmental systems to grounding and building recycling facilities. However, he said the workforce changed somewhere along the way.

"Before, your experience was good [enough], but now experience doesn't mean much," Vorhees said. "In the last five years, 10 years, you've gotta have a degree. Even if that degree doesn't pertain to what you're doing, you've gotta have that degree and you've gotta have that upper hand."

That wasn't the only reason Vorhees returned, however. He has two sons, a high school freshman and a sixth grader, whom he is also looking out for.

"You just seem like a hypocrite saying, 'You've gotta go to school, you've gotta go to college,' and I didn't even have a GED," Vorhees said. "So, I just went and got my GED, in [2009]. And I thought there was no reason not to go to college, so I took the ACT and got accepted."

He is now studying en-

vironmental science and hoping to become a sustainability director, whether for a big corporation or even on campus, as many universities already have sustainability directors.

Right now he's grading the University's levels of sustainability through the Sustainability, Tracking, Assessment and Rating System research with another student, through the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education.

"I think after doing the STARS research, and seeing where Truman is lacking and where it needs to improve and where things need to be implemented, I really think working as a sustainability director would be interesting," Vorhees said.

He said balancing school, work and family has been a challenge, and that although he sometimes might feel out of place — his peers could be his children — in a way, his family has put him at an advantage.

"If your family's supporting you and behind you, it makes it really easy," Vorhees said.

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