

# All in the family

Some students must ask: Should I call you professor or Mom?

BY JOHN O'BRIEN  
Staff Reporter

Summer passes, classes draw near and students pack up and head to school, leaving family and home behind. For most students at Truman, this is the case.

For others, attending college at Truman has brought them in closer to their parents. While many students will be referring to those teaching their classes as "professor," a few students see them as "mom" or "dad."

Parent-child relationships are no rarity at Truman's campus as the children of several professors attend or have attended Truman. One such family is the Rybkowskis. Ronnie Rybkowski, a senior rounding out his fifth year, is the son of professor of theatre Ron Rybkowski. While having the same name is their most obvious similarity, it is not the only thing connecting them. Ronnie, a theatre major, has been working with his father in the theatre department, in and out of class, for the past five years.

However, this is not the first time Rybkowski has worked closely with one of his children. His daughter, Heather, who also was a theatre major, graduated in 2005 and is now working with Kirksville Parks and Recreation, putting on drama classes and productions. Both Ronnie and Heather have found ways to set themselves apart from their father and create names for themselves in the theatre department.

"I think that both of them, being involved with theatre, still held their own," Rybkowski said. "I think we're small enough and my colleagues really have great respect for me and the kids and we're able to treat them just as regular students." However, this respect and



Sophomore Daniel Gillette talks with his dad, economics professor David Gillette, in his office Tuesday. Daniel and his dad eat lunch together every Thursday.

self-identity did not come without work. Since his freshmen year, Ronnie has worked on both main-stage and student-driven productions to show his dedication and create a place for himself in the theatre.

"I do enough work around the theatre that people can see that I've earned what I do instead of just saying 'Oh, he's the professor's son. Of course he's here,'" Ronnie said. "I feel like I have to live up to a higher standard, so they feel like I deserve to be here and deserve what I'm doing."

From working on productions together, to being in class, to living in the same house, the Rybkowskis do not find bonding and togetherness in short supply. The constant interaction through home life and theatre has established three major relationships for them: a father-son relationship, a professor-student relationship and a

director-designer relationship. However, both place priority on what they consider the most important relationship, father and son.

"I'd show my set designs to him and say 'Oh, look what I did!'" Ronnie said. "That was kind of me being the son in the moment, like 'Oh, look what I did, Dad! It's so cool! I'm showing my professor, who's my dad, the work that I'm doing and it happens to be in his class. But, we are very good at keeping it separated, so in that moment he is not teacher, he is just father saying 'Oh, that's really cool!'"

The Rybkowskis are not the only family to find closeness through working together on campus.

"We just feel like we're a Truman family," psychology professor Sherri Palmer said. "It's kept us closer because we physically see each other all the time.

There's that whole Truman family feel. This university runs through all of us."

Palmer's on-campus family interaction is constant and involves more than one member. Palmer has a husband, two children and a son-in-law on campus with her. Both Sherri Palmer and her husband, Terry, work in the psychology department as professors. Sherri's son, Zak Palmer, is a junior on campus and her daughter, Jill Graves, a 2000 graduate of Truman, currently is serving as associate director of recruitment in the Office of Admissions.

The family tree on campus does not stop branching out there. Graves' husband, Kasey Graves, who works for the Information Technological Services, and her sister-in-law, working in the Grants Office, are on campus.

With Sherri and Terry Palmer working as faculty, Jill and Kasey Graves work-

ing as staff and Zak as a student, the family finds itself rooted in every aspect of Truman.

"What happens at the University affects every one of us," Sherri Palmer said. "Faculty, staff and student, we've got all three represented. It all feeds together, so every little thing that happens at Truman affects all of us and ripples through the whole family."

With that separation of duties and roles being played out on campus, a separation and difference of opinions exists among the family.

"It's interesting because there is a big difference between our job responsibilities at the University between being on the staff side versus the faculty side," Jill Graves said. "So family dinners can get very interesting because I have a very staff-oriented opinion of administrative decisions where my family has the faculty side opinions."

Despite having different campus interests and opinions, the family remains extremely close. With a weekly family dinner and several mid-day visits with each other, the family members enjoy and appreciate their time together.

While there is still a year and a half to go, the Palmers already are preparing for Zak's departure from Kirksville. Because Jill immediately began working in the Office of Admissions upon graduation in 2000, Zak's graduation from Truman will mark the first major separation from the immediate family.

"I'm going pretty far away from Kirksville for graduate school, hopefully," Zak Palmer said. "I'm definitely not going to school in Missouri. I'm definitely ready to get out of here. I went preschool to college here."

Although eager to experience a new environment and attend graduate school to study sociology, Zak also appreciates his time at Truman with his family.

"There's a lot of Truman loyalty," Zak said. "I feel like there's a lot more connection with the school because my whole family works here. It's a big part of my life. A lot of my memories are on campus. My life has been really revolved around Truman."

With major changes in store, the Palmer-Graves family is appreciating the time they have together at the school they've grown up at, known and loved.

"It's such a comfortable and kind of 'family' atmosphere," Jill Graves said. "It's a family friendly environment and the Truman community I really see as a family, so it seems to kind of fit. We all know each other and we care about each other and we watch out for each other. It's just an extended family, so it doesn't feel weird to me that my real family is in the mix of that."

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