

When parents and children are students together

By JILL JENKINS
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“Do you have any homework tonight?” is no longer a question reserved just for parents.

At least not in the homes of Cindy DeYoung, Gail Matesich and Bill Gustavson, just three of the many adults — with families — who choose to go back to school.

“My guess is that the percentage of students with dependent children is probably in a 40 to 45 percent range,” said Marguerite Cotto, director of the University Center at Northwestern Michigan College in Traverse City.

They’re parents who regularly face the challenges of trying to balance family life with an often-heavy class load and a full-time job — not an easy task, even for those best at time management.

“You just take one day at a time and you hope that you get it right,” said DeYoung, a mother of two who has spent the last six years working full-time as a teaching assistant in a special education classroom at Interlochen.

For DeYoung, who will soon complete a bachelor’s in elementary education through Central Michigan University, getting it right means not compromising on spending time with her children. “One of the things I won’t compromise on is I insist I have to go home (after work) and see my kids before class,” said DeYoung, whose children, Robyn and Tim, are 15 and 12. “And when my classes start at 5 o’clock, that sometimes gets tricky.”

DeYoung uses that time to catch up with the kids’ days and make sure everyone knows the evening’s schedule. She also does last-minute coordinating with Jay, her husband of 22 years, to make sure they’re on the same page.

“We’ve done a lot of child relays sometimes,” DeYoung said. “It’d be much easier if our kids were couch potatoes, but they have busy lives of their own.”

Every parent can relate to at least one aspect of their children’s busy lives: homework. But these parents try to finish homework away from their kids. That way, when they’re with their kids, they can focus wholly on what the children are doing, whether it is schoolwork or not.

“I try not to do it if they’re home because I want to be more into what they’re doing,” DeYoung said. “I’ve burned a lot of midnight oil.”

Gustavson approaches his homework by studying directly after work; when he does need to study at home, he has an open-door policy with children Melissa, 21, Jake,

17, Philip, 16, and Tory, 16. “They can come up anytime to talk to me, and I’ll stop,” he said. Gustavson, who will complete a bachelor’s in business administration in May through Ferris State University, added he schedules homework time around what activities his family has planned for a particular day.

“I will prioritize (my family) first,” he said. “I schedule my study time around (them). If I have to get up at 5 in the morning to do my studying, then that’s what I’ll do.”

For Matesich, the best time to finish homework was while her kids were in school, though there were times when it was necessary to work while they were home.

“Many nights I worked well past their bedtimes,” said Matesich, who graduated from Grand Valley State University in May and will be teaching fifth grade at Wellston in the fall. “I tried to work on homework while they were in school so I could devote time to them when they returned home. There were times when I had to ask them to be patient with me while I struggled to meet deadlines with papers and projects.”

She also had the opportunity to share some of her homework with her oldest daughter, Heather. An English major, Matesich enjoyed calling Heather, a creative writing major at Johns Hopkins University, to discuss topics she was covering in class.

“There were many times that our telephone calls were about a certain author, a specific piece of literature I was studying, or a favorite poet or poem,” Matesich said. “She was always able to give me insight. I like to think that occasionally I was able to do the same for her.”

“It was a real bonding experience for us.”

Besides Heather, 24, Matesich has three more children: Gavin, 25; Erin, 21; and Kaitlin, 10.

While trying to balance such hectic schedules can be frustrating for parents, it can be beneficial for children to observe and experience their parents’ journey.

“It’s made them more self-reliant. They have to plan ahead,” DeYoung said. “And it’s good for them to see that even when you’re older there are still goals and still things that you have to work toward.”

Seeing their mom in school was a good experience for her children, said Matesich.

“They saw me work really hard and realized nothing comes easily. Having them see me work toward a personal goal was invaluable,” she added.

Gustavson, a full-time employee at Pure Waterworks in Traverse



Record-Eagle/John L. Russell

Bill Gustavson plays Monopoly with his wife Judy and children, from right: Jake, 17, Philip, 16, and Tory, 16. Gustavson has an open-door policy where they are concerned. “They can come up anytime to talk to me, and I’ll stop (doing homework),” he said.

City, is trying to instill in his children that their lives will be enriched by learning.

“I want to display that no matter how hard things are, you really can do both,” he said.

While kids can learn from their parents’ experience, parents learn something important too. No matter how hard they work, their success is, in part, tied to the support they receive from their family.

“With all the public understanding that education is a continuing process, whether it is done formally or informally, and that learning is linked to workplace success, returning to school for a formal degree or certificate is still a very scary proposition,” Cotto said. “Especially for adults with families, returning to school — or going to college for the very first time — is not a decision taken in isolation or lived in isolation.”

“Children and spouses have to take on additional roles as well, in order to help around the house, in order to help with finances, and to help with support and encouragement.”

DeYoung understands that very well.

“I’m really lucky. I’ve got two kids who are awesome,” she said. “They’re excellent students and very easygoing. They encourage me and that makes it worthwhile — you don’t feel like you’re doing something selfish.”

So what type of person can be successful with such a demanding schedule? According to Cotto, only a special one.

“They have a vision of themselves at the end of their educational plan,” she added. “This may be about a career change or about development within a career, but it is a vision that motivates them through fatigue and frustration.”

Matesich knew when she went back to school exactly what she wanted, and had very defined

goals.

“When I was younger, I didn’t have a focus on a specific goal, which caused a lack of motivation,” she said. “I also think that as a ‘non-traditional’ student, many of us go into it thinking we couldn’t possibly compete with young, fresh-out-of-high-school students, or that we may have lost our ability to concentrate, memorize or study, so we are driven by a fear of failure at first.”

“Once we prove that we are capable of success, we are driven by the great satisfaction of success.”

Gustavson and DeYoung also believe they make better students now than when they were just leaving high school.

“When I was younger, I wasn’t prepared. I hadn’t made goal setting a priority at all,” said Gustavson. “It’s just a world of difference now — the willingness to strive, the maturity level, the drive.”

Gustavson also feels his attitude towards his fellow classmates has changed since his first attempt at college in the late 1970s.

“I seek out to help where I can,” he said. “I strive for their excellence as well.”

For DeYoung, age isn’t the only factor that makes her a better student — or what will ultimately help make her a better teacher.

“I’m going to be a much better teacher because I’m a mom,” she said. “And being older and having that much experience is going to make me a much better teacher than I would have been at 21.”

And even though DeYoung is strongly dedicated to finishing her degree, she hasn’t lost focus on what’s truly important in her life.

“If it ever interferes with being a mom, it can go by the wayside,” she said. “Being a mom comes first.”

Jill Jenkins is a local freelance writer.

Retirement isn’t end

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was off on a great adventure,” said Dobler.

He spent 25 years as a public school administrator after having taught for the first eight years of his career. Then he decided it was time to retire after taking stock of what he’d been able to accomplish and realizing that there was still plenty he wanted to do while he was in good health. Since the age of 4 he had been regimented by a school calendar — first as a student, then as a teacher and finally as an administrator.

“I want to spend time with my granddaughter, learn to cook and maybe do something else for a change,” he said. “I still have tons of passion for education and I will miss it, but I’m going to celebrate.”

Lemieux is now retired after 34 years of teaching and coaching, most recently as an elementary physical education teacher at Traverse Heights and Blair Elementary Schools. He decided to retire after taking stock of his career

and realizing that he and his wife had a lot to do while they were still healthy. Like Dobler, he has also decided to head out of town at the beginning of the school year in September.

“I’ll be backpacking across the Grand Canyon for five days starting on Sept. 19,” Lemieux said.

He conceded that the beginning of the year will be difficult, but that it was time to move on.

His wife, Marcia, also retired in June after 26 years of working in education. She finished her career as a speech therapist for the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District.

Lemieux says that while it’s time to do other things, he will miss the kids, the camaraderie, the interaction and communication that make a school such a great place to develop in a career.

“I’ve been fortunate to work with good people. It was the interaction with them and the kids that made the job so rewarding,” he said.

While Dobler and Lemieux gave retirement some careful consideration and came to gradual realizations that it was time to move

on, Thornton Odinga made her decision instantly. One Friday last winter, after having a great day in the classroom, a light bulb went off in her head.

“I had an epiphany,” said Odinga. “I had gotten remarried on May 16, there were a lot of changes in my life and I realized it was time to go.”

After 30 years of teaching, she realizes that not being there for the first day of school at West Junior High will be emotional for her.

“I may go away that day. I’ve been so regimented for so many years that this will be a big day,” she said.

“I’m going to miss the kids and staff, they have become part of my family. I left with a good feeling after working with a good group of people. I won’t miss getting up at 4:45 a.m., though.”

Thornton Odinga also realizes that it’s important to have a life separate from a career and is looking forward to a new start.

“Teachers become emotionally involved with their kids. We can’t help it, so it’s important to have humor in our classrooms and laugh every day,” she said.

Stephanie Joseph Long is a local freelance writer.

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