



Top Picks

Nontraditional graduate fulfills dream of teaching locally

By The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

MELBOURNE — Because of her hard work and determination through the many hard knocks of life, Judy Smith now has the teacher career she always dreamed of.

Smith is an elementary teacher at Evening Shade's Math and Science School. A native of Evening Shade, Smith began substituting at the school more than 20 years ago. She became a teacher's aide in 1996 and worked in that capacity through 2007.

Her college education began in 2001. She spent time at Ozarka College in Melbourne, and the journey was finally complete last May when she graduated from Arkansas Tech University with a Bachelor of Science in P4 Education. She had a job waiting for her with Evening Shade Math and Science School.

Because Smith was 40 when she enrolled at Ozarka College, she said it was a struggle getting started.

"I finally got the nerve up to enroll at Ozarka College," Smith said. "I told myself that the years were going to pass whether I enrolled or not. In the end, I could either tell myself, 'I wish I had put out the effort,' or 'I'm glad I did put out the effort.' After all is said and done, I can proudly say, 'I'm glad I did it.'"

Ozarka College's partnership with ATU so that Ozarka's Associate of Arts in Teaching counts toward an ATU bachelor's degree allowed Smith to take her courses online.

"I am grateful for the online program offered at Arkansas Tech as I would not have been able to make the drive to a larger university to complete my bachelor's degree," Smith said.

Michelle Cooper, Associate of Arts in Teaching coordinator and Ozarka instructor, was impressed with Smith's determination to complete her goals.

"Judy overcame so many obstacles while going to school and kept a positive attitude the entire time, never complaining or making excuses," Cooper said.

The obstacles Smith had to overcome included fighting breast cancer with chemotherapy and radiation, going through a divorce and raising her daughter - all while working full time.

"If Judy can make it with the challenges she faced, I think anyone who is determined can, too," Cooper said.

Smith's advice to others is: "Don't give up on your dream. The hardest part is getting started, but the faculty and staff at Ozarka will help students with anything, and they will go out of their way to keep students motivated."

She also said it was so much easier to get the classes she needed with evening and summer scheduling.

Along with her love of teaching, Smith's family plays an integral part in her life. Her daughter, Lori, is a kindergarten teacher at Evening Shade. Her parents, Juney and Bobbie Smith, and brother, Randy, and his family have been a support system for Smith.

More information concerning the Associate of Arts in Teaching program is available by contacting Ozarka's Admissions Department at (870) 368-7371.

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