Determination and dedication win

By CHERYL ZIEMKE
CORRESPONDENT

Jason Patry, 38, of Venice never saw himself as he is today, a summa cum laude graduate of State College of Florida with an AA degree.

He graduated in December and plans to continue his academic achievements at SCF by being in the inaugural class for a bachelor's degree in energy technology management. He was an Outstanding Graduate Award finalist at SCF and his family couldn't be prouder.

This is a long way from his high school dropout days. In his own words, he was a goof-off when it came to school work.

"School wasn't important," he said. "I wanted to live life. Get to work, earn money. I delivered furniture, back-breaking work. The furniture delivery firm was called Fast Furniture, and you had to literally run or the owner fired your butt. I ran with sleeper sofas up and down the hills of Massachusetts." So he wasn't afraid of hard work, just school work.

When he moved his family to Florida he proved his work ethic again to his new employer, Charlotte County Utilities. It was a dirty job and almost unbearable in the heat, but it was steady. His pay wasn't the best, though he was awarded every pay raise by earning every incentive increase.

He passed tests, moved up in his department and went the extra mile. In the wake of Hurricane Charlie it was he and one other employee who restored the sewer system in Maple Leaf Estates. He was proud of his awards, but as the economy improved and prices increased, the county-owned utility company's pay raises couldn't keep up with the private sector offerings.

He left CCU and went to work for a local plumber. This was a decision he regrets, not only because of the downturn in the economy and his employer going bankrupt, but because of the benefits and health insurance coverage he lost.

For a few years with the private company things went well. The pay was great, four times what he earned at the county. He was able to buy a modest home in North Port and his wife, Renee, opened a flower shop. They were living the American dream. His son, Brandon, now 17, remembers fun times.

Then the work stopped coming in. They had to close the flower shop as the economy worsened. "People weren't buying flowers," Renee said.

They started picking up odd jobs, and he got his handyman's license. Together, Renee, Brandon and Jason would clear out lots and clean up yards to supplement his unemployment. Worst of all, in 2008 their youngest child, Josephine, now 12, was diagnosed with brain tumors. They couldn't get health insurance and they couldn't afford her treatments. They made up too much for Medicaid.

This is where Jason falters when telling his story. You can see how much this man was taken down. They lost their home and had to file bankruptcy. And his little girl was sick. How was he going to fix everything?

He applied for any and every job. When IHOP opened its doors he applied to be a dishwasher and the manager laughed and said, "I can't hire you, you'll be gone the first good job comes along."

He become very despondent. Renee had the idea first.

"I saw what a smart man he was," she said. "I saw how hard he worked when he wanted something and how he always obtained it. So I told him, 'you should go back to school.'"

"I laughed at her," he said. "Me? I never thought I could do it. But just for the heck of it I went and took their college assessment tests."

Though he did have a GED, when he decided to go back to school in 2009 he didn't meet the college requirements in some classes, so he was required to take remedial classes that didn't earn him any credits toward his AA degree. This might have discouraged some enough to quit, but not him. Besides, Renee would have had none of that. They are a team.

She researched financial resources and came up with student loans and grants to apply for.

"I remembered hearing they gave you money to live on too, so I figured at least that way we would have a roof over our
heads,” she said. “We chose to rent in Venice because of the safe environment and closeness to everything. We can walk to the store or take the SCAT bus. There is free entertainment and things for the kids to do. We lost everything, and we only had each other. I wanted it to be the best it could be for them.”

“I have to do this, for my family,” Jason said of his thought processes at the time.

He went full throttle on his education plan and it wasn’t easy. Renee can attest to that.

“Especially at first,” she said. “He would grime, growl and groan, ‘Why do I have to know this?’” and I told the kids to leave Daddy be. It was a good lesson for all of us.”

He agreed.

“I won’t let anyone stand in my way. If it happens, I own it,” he said.

He feels that letting the kids see them struggle shows them life is not always about what money can buy, and that hard times can fall on anyone. He wants it ingrained in them to persevere and give it their best shot. They constantly encourage one another and help each other out.

“This is the hardest thing I have ever done. I have spent eight to 14 hours a day studying to maintain all As,” he said. “But I am determined to be above average.”

His children have been getting the message.

“My Daddy works hard,” said Josephine. “Sometimes I don’t like being so quiet.”

“There is no way I can slack,” Brandon said.

Jason plans to continue his education at SCF, and Brandon will join him there once he graduates from Suncoast Polytechnical High School this spring. While Dad is continuing his energy studies, Brandon is leaning toward a more creative degree, in film animation.

Josephine’s condition has stabilized and she is enjoying her new middle school.

Renee is the coupon champion and will never pay full price for anything again, but that’s another story.

The Patry family has been through a lot the last few years but they have each other and their determination to make the best of things.

**VENICE RESIDENT JASON PATRY WAS AMONG SIX FINALISTS FOR THE OUTSTANDING GRADUATE AWARD AT SCF WINTER 2011 COMMENCEMENT HELD ON DEC. 16.**

**PHOTO PROVIDED BY STATE COLLEGE OF FLORIDA**

**MARY WARD, AN OUTSTANDING STUDENT**

By DEBBIE FLESSNER
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Sometimes the road to success has a few detours along the way. Mary Ward was one of six finalists for the Outstanding Graduate Award at State College of Florida’s Winter 2011 Commencement Dec. 16. Though her degree is in paralegal studies, her employment background is varied.

“I had a prior degree in general art, so it took me two more years to get this degree,” she said. “I am an artist, but I had also been working for awhile as a paralegal. I needed to go back to school to help me get ahead in the field.”

As an Outstanding Graduate contender, Ward was in the company of five other worthy candidates, but she had accomplished quite a bit herself.

“I was vice president of the SCF Paralegal Club, and I try to give back to my community,” she said. “I used to take bread from Publix (when they used to do the bread giveaway) and take it to the schools and the YMCA.”

One of the other ways she tries to help out the community is by offering job-seeking assistance to those who need it, because she herself was once in that tough spot.

“I try to give back to the unemployed people who are like me,” she said.

**SARASOTA RESIDENT MARY WARD WAS AMONG SIX FINALISTS FOR THE OUTSTANDING GRADUATE AWARD AT SCF WINTER 2011**

One thing she definitely is not is unemployed. She’s a single mom holding down three jobs.

“I have been doing medical transcription for a doctor for the past five years,” she said. “I also fill in at O’Leary’s (a restaurant on Sarasota’s bayfront) and I’m a paralegal.”

And according to the SCF website, her post-graduate plans include obtaining a bachelor of applied sciences degree in homeland security and possibly later pursuing a law degree.