



"When you educate the mother, you help change the destiny of her children," says Susan Andersen, founder of the ANSWER Scholarship.

Learning By Degrees

When her 22-year marriage abruptly ended in divorce, Susan Andersen's world fell apart. To heal, this mother of two focused her energy on helping other moms go back to school. **By Julie A. Evans**

SUSAN ANDERSEN THOUGHT she had it all: a happy marriage to a successful businessman, two wonderful children, a nice home in one of Charlotte's finer communities, and a thriving career. Then Susan's life took a dramatic turn. After 22 years,

her marriage fell apart, and she found herself in the chaotic world of divorced parents juggling visitation schedules and haggling over holidays.

Luckily for Susan, she could fall back on her career as a sales director for Mary Kay Cosmetics. She was great

at her job, earning nine of those iconic pink Cadillacs over the course of many years with the company. But instead of just throwing herself into her work or hiding under the covers, Susan listened to her heart. She decided it was time to shake things up by focusing on other peoples' problems.

So, Susan took a sizeable portion of her own savings (an amount she declines to reveal, conceding only that it was in the low six figures) and founded the Andersen Nontraditional Scholarship for Women's Education and Retraining (ANSWER Scholarship) to help struggling mothers go back to school and earn their college degrees.

Susan's endowment fulfilled a promise she had made to herself nearly three decades earlier after receiving scholarship assistance for her own college education. At the time, she vowed to find a way to pay it forward. Divorce brought that dream back into focus. "I was now a single mom, and as I looked around at other single moms, I realized many were not as fortunate and were struggling. Without an education, a mom with children is destined for poverty."

Since 2005, the ANSWER Scholarship has awarded up to \$4,000 per academic year to 17 women through Foundation for the Carolinas, a community foundation that manages Susan's endowment fund and selects her scholarship recipients. At last count, nine women have graduated. And of those nine grads, five have opted to continue on for advanced degrees on their own.

Women who receive scholarships from Susan's endowment must meet certain criteria: The degree must be their first, and they must go to school full time at an accredited institution in North or South Carolina. "It sounds really daunting, but we made it a full-time requirement so that women would finish in four years, not spread it out over time and maybe never finish," says Susan. "This way, the women



Becoming a teacher was an early dream for Katrina Mitchell—one she abandoned for years but is now pursuing at Belmont Abbey College.

have an end in sight, and their children can see Mom start and finish something.”

Scholarship recipients also must be at least 25 years old, and—most importantly—they must have at least one school-age child living at home with them. Susan firmly believes that children who watch their mother work hard for a college degree will one day follow in their mom’s very large footsteps to pursue their own college dreams. “When you educate the mother, you help change the destiny of her children,” Susan says.

Marital status is not a deciding factor, although the majority of recipients have been single moms.

With full course loads, homework from demanding professors, and regular exams, college can be stressful for any student. Add in part-time or full-time jobs and the realities of parenthood—helping children with schoolwork, arranging childcare, shopping for groceries, cleaning house, cooking meals, and more—and the diploma may seem

like an impossible dream. Katrina Mitchell, 35, knows all about the frustration and fatigue that moms in college suffer. With help from Susan’s ANSWER Scholarship, Katrina is close to receiving her bachelor’s degree in education from Belmont Abbey College in Belmont, North Carolina.

Becoming a teacher was an early dream for Katrina, one she abandoned for a more lucrative but less satisfying career. “I make decent money working for a broker-dealer,” she says. “But I’m not happy. I just go through the motions every day.”

This vague sense of malaise crystallized a few years back when her grandmother passed away. The loss led to some soul-searching, which, in turn, led to thoughts of teaching. “My grandmother wanted to do so many things in her life and never got the opportunity. Her sudden death made me reevaluate my life,” says Katrina.

But going back to school hasn’t been easy for this mother of a boy, 3, and a girl, 11. To make it happen, Katrina used up all of her time off

from work. She often arrives at her job early and works through her lunch hour so she can be on time for class, which meets four nights a week. With support from her family—as well as a college professor selected by Susan to be Katrina’s mentor—Katrina hung in there. She left her corporate job in August to begin student teaching, and she’s glad she toughed it out. “When I was young, I didn’t have the drive and motivation to succeed, and I didn’t take school seriously. My mother never talked to me about school,” says Katrina, whose mother was only 14 when she was born. “Now, my daughter is my biggest supporter and so proud of me! She told me, ‘I’m going to work hard and go to school so you can be proud of me the way that I’m proud of you.’”

Like Katrina, Tonya Nichole Faulkner, 40, grew up in a home where college wasn’t even on the radar. Tonya wanted to break the cycle of poverty for herself and her two children. The ANSWER Scholarship fund provided the escape route. In 2008, Tonya became the first in her family to earn a college degree when she graduated magna cum



Tonya Nichole Faulkner became the first person in her family to earn a college degree.

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laude from Queens University of Charlotte with a BA in Human and Community Services. This spring, she is set to receive an MA in Nonprofit Management from High Point University in North Carolina. Her daughter is a freshman at Queens University, thanks largely to Tonya's positive influence. "I want my children to believe they can persevere through any obstacles to achieve their dreams," says Tonya.

Two of Tonya's brothers also returned to school, inspired by their sister's drive and motivation. "They figured if a single mom could go to

"As I looked around at other single moms, I realized many were not as fortunate and were struggling," says Susan Andersen.

school full time while working two part-time jobs, then they could do it, too," says Tonya.

Tonya hopes someday to become a philanthropist like Susan. She's already started her own nonprofit organization, Repairing the Breach Foundation, which aims to provide assistance for people in need by closing the gaps between human service organizations and those they serve.

For her part, Susan is extraordinarily proud of the women her organization has been able to help. But she modestly brushes off praise for her efforts, reminding people that she started the ANSWER Scholarship at least in part to fill a void in her own life. "Divorce was a very sad time for me, which is why I decided to do something positive," she says. "Helping others helped heal my pain." **A**