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Helping single moms get college degrees

1 woman's generosity has guided 17 to graduation

By Jessica Milicevic

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Visit the ANSWER Scholarship Endowment's website at www.answerscholarship.org.

Going to college can be a stressful experience; add children and a full-time job to the mix and graduation seems nearly impossible.

The 17 women who've received scholarships from the ANSWER Scholarship Endowment in Ballantyne are taking the impossible and making it into a reality.

Most are single mothers in their 30s and are the first of their families to attend college.

"These women are so inspiring," said Susan Andersen, founder of the endowment. "I know their stories, I see their struggles, and sometimes wonder how they do it all. It's amazing."

The women who receive scholarships have to meet several requirements; they must be the parent of at least one school-age child and must work toward a four-year degree or two-year nursing degree.

The women also must attend accredited schools within Mecklenburg and surrounding counties.

Andersen said women have attended Queens University of Charlotte, UNC Charlotte, Belmont Abbey College and Wingate University. All 17 women have graduated and five are continuing their education, getting a master's or law degree.

Andersen, 48, lives in Ballantyne and started the endowment in 2006 after a divorce from her husband of 22 years in 2005. Having done work in the community with mothers and their children, Andersen decided to take her experience and turn it into something positive.

"That's partly where the name comes from," said Andersen. "Helping others was the answer to healing my pain."

Andersen said when she was in college, she received a four-year partial scholarship that enabled her to go to school. She said she always felt thankful and wanted to find a way to pay it forward.

"That's why I decided to help moms go to college," said Andersen. "I wanted to take my blessing and give it to other women."

Andersen began the endowment with her own money. She said that although she was divorced and a single mother of two, she had a steady job with Mary Kay and wasn't struggling financially.

"I know that when most women become single mothers they struggle a great deal," said Andersen. "I realized that I was very fortunate."

The endowment also accepted donations from individuals that helped sustain the scholarship pool for two years.

In 2008, the economy took a toll on the foundation, and it had to cut back on the number of scholarships. The endowment awards scholarships ranging from \$1,000-\$4,000 and can be used for tuition, books or any other academic needs. At the time, there were four women who had received scholarships and would need continued assistance to finish school.

"The reason I started an endowment was to create sustainability," said Andersen. "I want to be able to provide women with scholarships the entire four years they are in school. I don't want to ever not have enough money to finish what we started with them."

In December 2010, the endowment received a \$10,000 grant from the Leon Levine Foundation. Andersen said she felt blessed to have received the grant, which will go directly into the endowment.

"To get a stamp of approval from someone like the Levines is huge," said Andersen. "If they thought enough of us to give us the grant, it will open the door for other corporations to donate as well."

She said the money will ensure the growth of the endowment and allow them to give out more scholarships next year.

Andersen's hope for the next three years is "to be able to give out 25 scholarships every year," she said. "This grant is bringing us closer to that goal."

Another goal is to encourage the children of scholarship recipients to attend college. She said it's a value she instilled in her own children, who are now 18 and 21 years old. Her daughter, Emily, attends Auburn University. Her son, David, will begin college at Georgia Tech in the fall.

"I know that if a child sees its mother go to college, there's no excuse for them not to go," said Andersen. "I want to break a cycle. When you educate a mom, you change the destiny of her child."

Scholarship recipients are required to attend school full time, but Andersen said the women are also full-time mothers and many work full time. Andersen works full time as a Mary Kay consultant and remarried three years ago, so she understands what it's like to be busy.

"Their plates are incredibly full," said Andersen. "After years of giving out scholarships, I realized how they were struggling. At ANSWER, we don't just want to give them money for their education but also help them through it."

This fall, the endowment began a mentoring program for scholarship recipients. Many of the mentors are past recipients who have been through the same difficult times as the current recipients.

"They meet once a month and have each other's contact information," said Andersen. "It's a way to encourage the moms while they are in school. They can talk to someone who's been there and can tell them, 'It's going to be OK.'"

Andersen said she hopes the endowment can live on forever.

"When you start something, you don't always anticipate the outcome," said Andersen. "I never thought I'd be here helping these women have better lives."

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