

PERSPECTIVES

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Starting Over Personal challenges led these students to rediscover their ultimate purpose

Second chances

For select students, a reentry scholarship program gives new meaning to starting over

by KARA PETROVIC

As the cell gate slammed shut, Damion Alexander listened to the bars rattling behind him. There he stood in the cold 8x12 foot, near-empty prison cell. A toilet, a sink, a metal bunk bed, a Bible and walls were all that surrounded him.

He'd been caught with contraband, cell phones to be exact, which earned him time in the "hole," solitary confinement. The prison scene wasn't new to Alexander. He'd been incarcerated a year after his conviction for selling cocaine in 2000.

He'd never been a religious man, but he says that changed after six months in isolation. "I was tired of trying to make decisions on my own," he says. "I picked up that Bible and read it from beginning to end."

He says he'd never used drugs, and that he only turned to selling cocaine to support his family. Soon after graduating from high school in 1994, he started working full time and met his girlfriend, Kesha. When they had their first daughter, Khadijah, complications early in the pregnancy revealed problems with the baby's brain development. The umbilical cord had wrapped around her neck, and Khadijah now suffers from cerebral palsy.

"I was trying to work full time after her birth, but I kept getting calls to leave and come to the hospital because of the baby," Alexander says. "I started selling drugs to support my family. The way I was raised, I didn't think a man should have his family on Medicaid. I'd always been a 'Say no kid,' but for me, it was the best option at the time."

His "best option" landed him eight and a half years behind bars.

Alexander was released from an Arizona state institution in May 2008 and transferred to a halfway house in Kansas City. Once he stepped outside the prison walls, Alexander says he was "determined to do whatever it took not to go back."

A year into the work force, Alexander was holding true to his promise. His job at CKS Packaging started at \$7.65 an hour, but he continued to land raises and was promoted from front packer to machine operator. Prior to his incarceration, he'd attended the University of Alaska Anchorage. He loved education but says the idea of going back to school after his release never seemed realistic.

However, Alexander's former senior parole officer says she knew he had potential and handed him an application for UMKC's Benard Osher Reentry Scholarship Program.

"I first learned about the scholarship through one of our community partners," Chee King says. "Some offenders express interest in going back to school, and when they don't, we still encourage a degree and a career. I knew that Damion had some former college experience."

At first, Alexander says he didn't want to give up his full-time job and return to school because he thought it was too late to earn an education.

"I prayed a lot about it. I asked God what I should do, and he led me here. I'm glad I applied and happy they saw something in me. Not only am I getting a do over in life," he says, "but I'm beginning to realize that I have a purpose."

Alexander enrolled in his first communication classes through the UMKC College of Arts and Sciences last fall to pursue a communication's degree. He wants to share his story as a motivational speaker and says the scholarship will help him do just that.



Damion Alexander

“Not only am I getting a do over in life, ... but I’m beginning to realize that I have a purpose.”

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Alexander isn't the only awardee benefiting from the scholarship program that provides 10 nontraditional students – aged 25 to 50 – the chance to start over. The program, which began in fall 2007 thanks to a \$50,000 gift from the Osher Foundation, targets students who have experienced an interruption in their education of at least five years.

Candidates must also be a newly admitted or continuing student at UMKC, enrolled in a minimum of 12 hours, demonstrate financial need and maintain a 2.5 GPA. Awardees receive \$7,000 a year.

“For many of these students, the Bernard Osher Scholarship is their educational life line,” says Liz Barton, scholarship coordinator. “It provides our students a second chance to not only receive a bachelor’s degree, but the chance to do so with less monetary stress. The scholarship opens the door for nontraditional students to get involved and make an impact on campus by enriching classroom discussion and changing the way we as an institution interact with nontraditional students.”

The scholarship has helped other Osher Scholars discover their purposes as well. Although each scholar’s journey to UMKC varies, they’re all reaping the same rewards: second chances.

Moving on

If there’s one thing in life that Osher Scholar Angela Dimond wanted, it was the chance to start over.

Her mother, Joyce, split soon after her birth. She was raised by her grandparents. Joyce always promised to visit, but by age 13, Dimond says she could count on one hand the number of times she’d seen her mother. Yet when Joyce began writing and calling regularly to check in, Dimond hoped to rekindle the relationship.

“By this time, I knew my mom had been making progress,” Dimond says. “She’d been in rehab and told me that she wanted a relationship with me. I’d always wanted to know her, so when she invited me to California to live with her, I jumped at the chance.”

Dimond says her mother soon realized that having a teenager in the house was more than she could handle.

One morning, the house was unusually quiet when Dimond woke up. She slid out of bed to find Joyce.

“Mom?” she called. No answer.

“Mom?” she called again as she headed into the living room, but again no answer.

She headed back toward the bedroom hallway and pushed the door to her mother’s room open. She expected to find Joyce in bed, but an empty room met her gaze instead. All that remained was a crumpled piece of paper on the bed’s mattress and hangers in the closet.

The letter was short.

I’m moving to Wisconsin with my ex. Rent is paid up until the end of the month. Have a nice life.

“It had only been four months, so at that point in the relationship I wasn’t surprised,” Dimond says. “Instead, I started thinking ‘How am I going to survive? Take care of myself?’”

Returning to Dallas to live with her grandparents was out of the question, as her grandfather was sick and in and out of the hospital. With no other family to turn to, Dimond dropped out of school and followed her boyfriend to Washington state. The relationship lasted only five months, and afterward Dimond found herself “couch hopping” at friends’ apartments back in California or sleeping on the beach while working a telemarketing job by day.

Weeks before turning 17, Dimond was arrested for violating probation and spent two weeks in juvenile hall. She’d been caught at 15 stealing a bottle of vodka. Still a minor after her release, Child Services placed her into foster care for the next year.

Dimond was wed two months later at age 18. Dimond says she went from “street rat to Suzy Homemaker” in a matter of weeks. The marriage, however, was short lived.

During the separation, Dimond began dating her friend and now fiancé Tommy. The couple learned they were pregnant and moved to the Kansas City area to be closer to his family. After her son was born, Dimond says her priorities changed.

“I was holding my three-month-old son, and I began to wonder how he sees me,” she says. “And all I could think of was that he’s going to see me as a complete mess. Although I’d gotten my GED, I never thought college would happen for someone like me. But then I said to myself, ‘Why are you just settling? You can make yourself who you want to be.’” She registered for classes at Maple Woods Community College the next day.

“I still remember coming home from kindergarten saying, ‘I want to be a paleontologist,’” she says. “Some advisers tried to persuade me from taking geology as my first class, but I took



it anyway and quickly realized that it was exactly what I wanted to do with my life. Makes sense I guess. I was the only girl I knew who had a rock collection.”

Dimond received the Osher Scholarship and began studies at the UMKC College of Arts and Sciences last fall after graduating with her associate’s degree from Maple Woods in 2008. Dimond says her favorite geology teacher at Maple Woods, who is also a UMKC alumna, recommended UMKC’s geology program. She hopes to earn her bachelor’s degree by 2011, but says graduation may be pushed back with a new baby at home.

“Thanks to the scholarship, I’m able to go to school and be a mother at the same time,” she says. “I’m able to work harder in my classes, because I’m not having to work a part-time job. My life hasn’t been predictable, but it’s turned out pretty well.”

Never giving up

Osher Scholar Adania Godwin will be excited to graduate from the School of Nursing next spring, but the 34-year-old says it’s been a long road. Her struggles started with a rap at the door that turned her life upside down.

Knock. Knock.

“Mrs. Adania Godwin?” a man asked.

She nodded.

“You’ve been served.”

“With a knock on the door, I found myself facing an unexpected divorce,” she says. “Words of divorce were never spoken. An argument never occurred. I was dependent on my husband at that point. I wasn’t working because I was focused on school. He took the money and told me to get out. He left us with nothing.”

Desperate to keep it together for her three young girls and with nowhere else to turn, Godwin sought out her counselor at the UMKC School of Nursing who put her in touch with the Osher Scholarship Program.

“One door closed but another one opened, and the Osher Scholarship stepped in. I’m here today because of the generosity of strangers,” she says. “This scholarship has blessed and changed the life of my entire family.”

Godwin says this isn’t the first time she’s had to start over. After graduating from high school in 1994, she enrolled at Wichita State University, but she dropped out after a year and a half. She eventually returned to Kansas City and landed a job as a patient care technician in the rehabilitation department at St. Luke’s Hospital – a position she held for nine years.

After Godwin had her first daughter, she says she wanted a change and started thinking about going back to school.



Angela Dimond is following her childhood dream and studying geology at the College of Arts and Sciences.



School of Nursing student Adania Godwin says hardwork and determination has paid off. “I didn’t know if I could do it, but so many people were pushing me along,” she says.

“One door closed but another one opened, and the Osher Scholarship stepped in. This scholarship has blessed ... my entire family.” -Adania Godwin

“While working at St. Luke’s, I knew I liked nursing,” she says, “but I was frustrated, because I was in an assistant role. I didn’t have a lot of options or flexibility. I didn’t have a voice, but I knew I could be the nurse.”

Godwin enrolled in some classes and tried to juggle them with work and raising her daughter, but she eventually dropped out. It took another six years before she tried college again.

“I finally got really serious with my schooling in 2003,” she says. “I was married and had two more young girls at home, but I was determined to go back to school and finish. I didn’t know how, but I was going to do it.”

Godwin applied to UMKC and was awarded a general scholarship from the UMKC Bloch School of Business and Public Administration, which awards more than \$130,000 annually to its students.

“I began general studies in fall 2005,” she says. “I learned so much about myself and got back so much confidence. People here encouraged me where I didn’t believe in myself.” The encouragement, she says, got her through one of the roughest times in her life: her divorce.

In January, Godwin pushed graduation back a year to pick up a minor in humanities and healing, and says she will continue working as a student nurse at Kansas City’s Veterans Affairs Medical Center until graduation. Her hard work is paying off. Godwin already accepted a full-time job with the VA starting next May. Yet with graduation within reach, Godwin says her educational journey is just beginning. She plans to work at the VA for a year before returning to UMKC to pursue a master’s degree in nursing education.

“I want to be the next voice that pushes somebody along, just like the ones I had who encouraged me,” she says. “I want to be able to give back and say, ‘Don’t give up. If I could do it, you can do it.’”

Staying strong

Osher Scholar Shauna Tuiono-Horn will never forget the first time she saw her fiancé, Justice, collapse to the floor and uncontrollably convulse for six minutes. The seizures began a few years after Justice was assaulted in an attempted robbery in North Carolina.

He was only 20 when three men approached him outside a gas station with the baseball bat. One blow to the head crushed the right side of his skull. It took surgeons hours to remove all the skull fragments from his brain tissue. He wasn’t expected to make it through the night.



For Shauna Tuiono-Horn, an education means the opportunity to provide for her husband, Justice, and children, Justice Jr. (left), Shanice and J'shon.

Horn didn't know him then. The couple didn't meet until two years later when the two struck up a conversation in a Wal-Mart break room.

"It was love at first sight," Horn says. "We were engaged six weeks later. I'd always been a very headstrong person. I initially wanted to go and finish college, but he came along and changed all of that."

Horn says they were inseparable until mid-July when she boarded a three-hour plane ride to Arizona. Earlier that year, she'd been recruited and awarded a full ride volleyball scholarship to Eastern Arizona College. A couple of months later, Justice's seizures began.

"I got a call at school that he was in the hospital," she says. "The surgeons who worked on his brain injury told him that seizures were possible later in life. After the first one, he began having them more frequently. I left school with all intentions of going back, but after I saw what was happening I couldn't go back."

The following June, the couple had their first son, Justice Jr., and welcomed their daughter, Shanice, 10 ½ months later. Throughout their marriage, money was tight. Horn couldn't work in fear of leaving the children with Justice, whose seizures continued. Their third child, J'shon, was born in 2001.

Horn eventually took a pharmacy technician job in 2002 after doctors found a medication to help control Justice's seizures. A year later, Horn says she knew an education was the answer she'd been searching for, and she enrolled part-time at UMKC as a pre-pharmacy major.

"I wasn't happy doing pre-pharmacy, so I looked into other things," she says. "I knew I wanted a bachelor's degree and began thinking of other things that interested me. I knew I always enjoyed speaking with the pharmacy representatives at work, so I decided to pursue a business degree through the Bloch School."

Just when the stress of work, school and motherhood began to wear on Horn, she got a call from UMKC's Program for Adult College Education, which provides nontraditional students help with arranging academic courses.

"They called and told me that the University was looking for students who fit the Osher Scholarship's criteria," she says. "I received it, and I can't say 'Thank you' enough. Through my struggles, my kids have learned how important an education is, and they are sold on going to school one day.

"I'll never take my education or the opportunities it's awarded me for granted. My experience – thanks to the Osher Scholarship – has been priceless." 📌

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-Shauna Horn