

TO: The Eastern Kentucky University Faculty Senate
FROM: Senator Michael T. Benson
DATE: March 3, 2017
RE: March Campus Report

Given some personal events in our family's life of late, I have been thinking a great deal about relationships: how important they are, how that is what really is remembered by people when individuals pass from this life, and how vital it is that we pay attention to those around us and how we can help them.

In this vein, I was particularly struck by a letter recently shared with me by Jerry Wallace. Tim Ross received this letter from a graduate named Devella in which she recounted her own "Eastern Experience" and how much it has meant to her and her family.

Amidst all the negativity which surrounds us, a letter like this helps remind all of us of why we come to every single day: to change lives and make dreams come true. I would like to share the gist of it with you.

Devella Teegarden, now Devella Steffen, recounts how college was one long struggle. She was a single mother with three small children – the oldest was 6 when she started at Eastern – and she was coping with the death of her beloved father. "There were nights I cried," she wrote, "and, because money was scarce, I was unable to eat. My children lived mostly on cereal and peanut butter sandwiches. I never wanted pity and, being a veteran, didn't want society to know that we were struggling."

It's not that Devella ever knew luxury. As she was growing up, her father worked in our campus heat plant, while her mother was employed at the local K-Mart, making just a little over minimum wage. It added up to just enough to put food on the table. As she shares in the letter, she remembers longing to someday own a "beautiful shiny car" like the ones she saw in a nearby subdivision.

Once a student at Eastern, she found "remarkable" professors who supported her ability to reach goals that she never thought possible. As Devella put it, their aspirations for her seemed more like a "pipe dream" at first.

As time went on, her confidence and determination to succeed grew, thanks to the "incredible support" she received from faculty and staff in the College of Business and Technology. One of the best days of her life, she recalled, was Dec. 19, 2009. That is when her mother and three children watched proudly as Devella crossed the fall commencement stage to accept her diploma, which to her represented "financial freedom, freedom to apply for a multitude of positions that, otherwise, could not have been afforded to me."

Just a few days later, she joined the Department of Defense as a GS-9 help desk tech. "I was making more money than I ever thought possible," she said. "EKU changed my life."

But this was one gift that kept on giving. Today, she is a systems administrator and records manager at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, commanding a six-figure salary with a GS-12 rank and VA disability. "My tears," she wrote, "are because of the joy I have with my family. I was able to buy a house that has four bedrooms, and land to boot. Never in my life did I think that would happen. We eat actual food. I finally

get to cook real meals that consist of fresh produce. My daughter found out that she loves carrots. This thrills me to no end. Because of ECU, I bought my mom a car ... a nice red car with a sunroof because that is what she wanted. In August of 2016, I was finally able to buy the vehicle of my dreams – a 2016 Jeep Wrangler Sahara with upgrades. ECU gave me that ability. Best of all, Christmas is filled with love, food and toys. We even get to choose a child from the angel tree every year, and my daughter collects canned goods to give to the local church for her birthday.

“Honestly,” she concluded, “I never thought college was possible. Through ECU, not only was it possible, it was life changing. Thank you.”

This is just one recent example. Countless Eastern graduates have shared similar stories, either in person or in writing. It is inevitable, with performance funding looming, that we get caught up in numbers or metrics or degree production or kinds of programs or whatever. But let us never, ever forget that at the end of the day, it’s really about the Devellas of the world who come to us with their “pipe dreams,” and the generations of changed lives we set in motion simply by believing in them.

Last week, you all received a very positive report from Provost Vice on Feb. 23 at the conclusion of the recent visit by our SACS-COC site team. Allow me to add my thanks to all of you who have contributed to what promises to be another successful reaffirmation. As Dr. Vice noted, our 100 percent compliance with all the SACS-COC core standards and all federal standards is quite a feat.

One example of our academic quality and commitment to student success is our nationally prominent mock trial team, which again this year has qualified for the American Mock Trial Association’s first level of nationals, to be held later this month in Memphis. This means we are already among the top 192 teams nationwide, roughly the top third of teams.

It is also encouraging to see various academic departments, spread across three academic colleges, come together for a noteworthy regional stewardship project. Faculty and students from the disciplines of sociology, animal studies, agriculture, wildlife management and aviation have pooled their time and talents to address the growing presence of free-roaming herds of horses in rural southeastern Kentucky. The work included a recent aerial survey from an ECU aircraft of herds in Breathitt County, and may expand to include additional counties in the months and years ahead.

Thank you for your continued service to ECU. Enjoy the imminent Spring Break, and the fact that students are happy it’s back at the regularly-scheduled time of year!