

BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED

Jennifer Tucker '11 Adult Degree Program Commencement Speech May 22, 2011

I'm sure many of you have had the opportunity to read the message board sign of St. Paul's United Methodist Church, on Norland Avenue, from time to time. Last week it read, "Bloom where you are planted." Among all the messages I have read on that sign, that message seemed particularly personal to me, and appropriate for this moment in my life. My husband and I planted our family here in Chambersburg about eight years ago. Back then, I was a stay-at-home mom. I didn't know if or when I would return to school, let alone that I would come to Wilson College. Nevertheless, this is where I found myself and I have bloomed here.

I didn't know what to expect when I returned to college after almost a decade out of school. After all, I had spent years speaking "mothereese," and conversing all day with toddlers. I wasn't sure I'd be able to put together whole sentences anymore, let alone remember equations and memorize theories. What I found at Wilson was an educational system that didn't simply ask students to read and memorize the body of knowledge and ideas already available, but instead encouraged students to think, explore, and develop their own ideas. The professors here at Wilson encouraged students to make their own contributions. My student research project this year serves as a prime example. I was afforded the opportunity to embark on a very complex project. The professors here supported and encouraged me every step of the way. After it was said and done, I didn't feel that it was just another project, but that it was a very tangible contribution to a greater body of scientific research.



I'm certain college is challenging at any age, and in any phase of life. But, returning to college as an adult student, particularly with young children, can present added challenges. I have three young children, nine, seven, and three. My youngest was only four months old when I came to Wilson. It might have been an overwhelming experience, but immediately I found encouragement. During a J-term class that met all day on Saturdays, one professor allowed me to take a break, and even use her office to nurse my son, making what could have been an impossible schedule work out perfectly. Over the past three years, I have sometimes had to bring my older children to classes when they had snow days, or even needed to leave class early to attend an event important to my children. The professors here have been more than understanding, supportive, and flexible. This represents one of the unique advantages of a small college. Professors are truly able to get to know the students, and understand that even excellent students can't always put school first.

Adult students, with spouses and/or children, know what it means to have to put aside school work for the sake of family. We have found ourselves trying to read in the park while other parents chatted, scribbling notes for an essay while sitting in the car, waiting to pick up a child from practice, and even rehearsing a presentation while cooking dinner. We've lost whole nights of sleep to get things done, and still had to be on our game for the morning routine with the kids. Achieving balance between school and home is a difficult and sometimes impossible task. It didn't take me long to realize what a valuable commodity time was. You can take time from one task and put it toward another, but you cannot escape the reality that there is a finite amount of time to go around, and it never seems like enough.

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No matter how hard you try to ensure that your responsibilities as a wife or mother aren't neglected for the sake of school, there are inevitable sacrifices that your family ends up making. I would love to stand up here and take credit for my diploma and the awards I have received, but in reality, they belong to my husband and children as much as they do to me. They have risen to the challenge, taking added

responsibilities on themselves to ensure my success. Last school year, when my husband was deployed halfway around the world with his National Guard unit, my daughter, the oldest of our three children, helped me with meals, helped her brothers get dressed, and even listened to me recite presentations while counting how many times I said “umm.” I hope that my children go straight to college, rather than taking the long road that I have, but I hope that I have shown them that it is never too late to accomplish your goals. It just may take extra effort. And, I sincerely hope that the dedication and effort they have watched me put into my education has provided a good example to them.

I'm sure I'm not alone in those hopes. Many women here at Wilson, whether they be in the adult degree program, like me, or the Women with Children program, understand the unique challenges of attending college while raising children. Yet, they perform the task beautifully. I have had the opportunity to meet many wonderful mothers here, who maintain the precarious balance between being a mother and being a student. While there have been many times that I have felt overwhelmed by the experience, I stand in awe of how some of them are able to accomplish it with even greater challenges on their plate. It is mainly a testament to their dedication, but also in many ways a testament to the unique support for such amazing women that Wilson College offers.

Wilson College challenges students to fulfill their true potential and to expand the possibilities they envisioned for themselves. While I am excited to be moving on to graduate school, a part of me really wishes I could stay here. Just as the sign at St. Pauls' said, “Bloom where you are planted,” I have bloomed here. As I leave here, I feel I have the knowledge, the experience, and the confidence to be successful in any arena, and I will. I'm sure we all will. It has been an honor to attend Wilson College with all of you, and I wish you continued success.