

Roadblocks to Regalia:

10 stories of overcoming obstacles
to reach a college degree



In 2012, TG awarded a grant to the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) for “Operation Degree Completion” (ODC). This two-step program was designed to help students and former students become alumni. The first step involved tracking down students who had disappeared from campus even after completing almost all requirements to graduate. The second step was very simple and reflected the quickly spreading trend of reverse transfers. Program staff reviewed student records to see who had potentially completed their associate’s degrees if they were to transfer their credits back to their original community college. The processing was minimal, and the outcomes were tremendous. Partnering with UCO to make ODC a reality were Oklahoma City Community College, Oklahoma State University-Oklahoma City, Rose State College, and the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. For more information about this program, please visit www.uco.edu/degreecompletion.



As a nonprofit corporation, TG offers resources to help students and families plan and prepare for college, learn the basics of money management, and repay their federal student loans. TG’s philanthropy program, established in 2004, seeks to improve higher education access and completion, particularly for students from low/moderate-income families. To date, TG has awarded more than \$48 million in competitive grant funding to support direct services to students and families, organizational capacity building, and educational research. Information about TG is available at www.TG.org/philanthropy.

The phone rings. On one end: a graduation specialist ready to share the good news. Answering on the other side: an unsuspecting former student whose life is about to be changed.

In 2009, President Barack Obama stood on the steps of Macomb College and issued a challenge: “We



have to ensure we’re educating and preparing our people for the new jobs of the 21st century,” he said. We must return the United States to first in the world in the education of our citizens. We must ignite an effort to guide more Americans to their college degrees. We must do more to ensure that many more can fulfill their dreams.

Imagine you were in that audience and held the ability to make this challenge a reality. Imagine being able to help people fulfill the dream of a college degree with a simple phone call.

Through a generous grant from TG, a non-profit philanthropy based in Round Rock, Texas, President Obama's challenge turned into a call to action known as Operation Degree Completion. Many times, that “call” was literal. Program staff had the incredible privilege of serving as “guardian angels.” They made life-changing contacts and reopened doors previously viewed as permanently shut. Once people realized the powerful reality of what this program offered, the thanks poured in. Today, less than 8% of the world’s people hold a bachelor's degree. A handful more have obtained an associate’s degree. With programs like Operation Degree Completion, hopefully, those numbers will quickly rise.

This is not a how-to guide. This is a collection of dreams come true. They are stories of belief in former students and portrayals of the exuberance needed to fulfill unmet dreams.

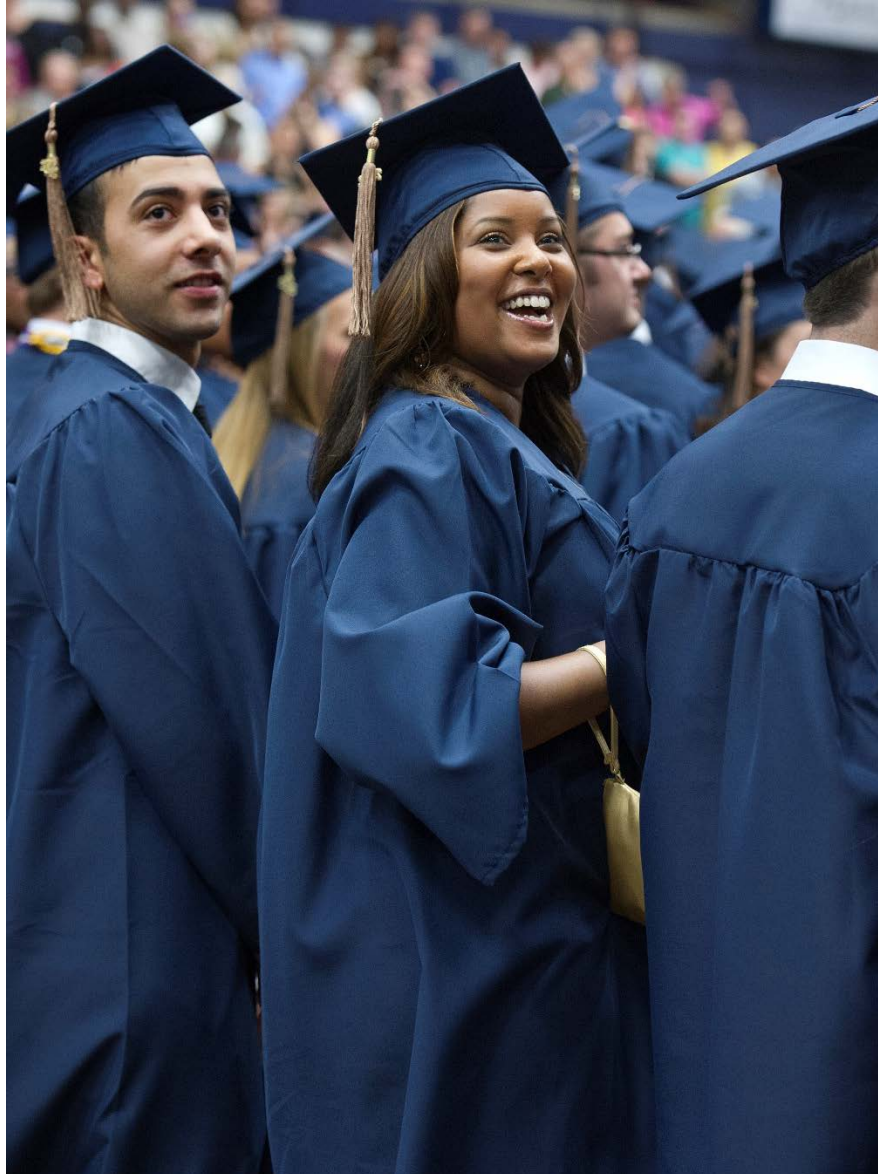
The best part of all of these stories, though, was the awarding of a college degree. If you’re ever curious about why someone might want to work in higher education, please attend a commencement ceremony.


In three years, 2,037 students received an associate’s or bachelor’s degree due to Operation Degree Completion.

While some consider it the end of college, others see its true meaning: the beginning of a new chapter of life. Adorned in caps and gowns, graduates bring together hundreds of years of tradition and success as they walk across the stage. Pomp and circumstance are often overshadowed by the shouts of joy at being the first in the family to accomplish their goal of a college degree. Sniffles and tears reflect a culmination of sacrifice and diligent pursuit of something greater, and sighs of relief echo through the halls after students have finally surpassed any self-doubt. It is the best day on any college campus.

President Obama challenged our country to return to first in the world in higher education as measured by the number of citizens with post-secondary education credentials. Between September 2012 and

August 2015, 2,037 students received an associate's or bachelor's degree due to Operation Degree Completion. All those students had incredible, life-changing stories and were part of our significant strides to turn President Obama's call to action into a pathway to commencement. Enjoy ten of our favorite success stories. The stories are real. Only the names have been changed.





“Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.” Thomas A. Edison


Imagine searching for something for five years and finally finding it. There is so much joy and excitement that you hold onto that item and don't want to let it go. This first story involves tracking down a student who seemed to have disappeared. His email address and phone number had changed, and he did not respond to multiple social media outreach attempts. He was so close to graduating! It was a golden opportunity that seemed like it would never come to fruition.

This is a story about James. James was a student-athlete at a major Division I institution. He was likeable, but he found himself in trouble from time to time. After a crazy injury, his goals and dreams on the field were seriously derailed . . . at least, so he thought. James transferred to another university to try to play sports again and to fulfill his degree. He worked hard at rehabilitating himself physically and began focusing even more on his classroom studies. After a couple years, James did return to the playing field. He competed well, but his eligibility ran out before his degree requirements were completed. James left school and did not turn back.

Fast forward to almost a decade later. Operation Degree Completion staff were determined to track James down. No attempts were successful. It appeared he was off the grid. However, James had a special story which craved a happy ending, so they kept trying. Finally, in 2014, a Facebook message was sent to his account. Since the ODC team member was not already Facebook friends with him, it went to a folder that most people never see, called “Other.” It was like it had landed in a Facebook black hole: Efforts went in and nothing ever came out.

A few months later, though, the phone rang! James discovered the “Other” folder and was intrigued by the message. After a lengthy conversation, he began to understand how close he was to a degree. In fact, if he just declared a different major, his degree would be complete. He was overjoyed. Immediately, he applied for graduation. Almost ten years after his injury, James was walking in his cap and gown.

Before receiving that Facebook message, James had been substitute teaching for over a year at a rough inner city school in Texas. He was encouraged by everyone he had worked with to become a certified teacher but was missing the required college degree. A few weeks after his degree was awarded, James took and passed a secondary school math certification exam. James began interviewing for math teaching positions and was quickly hired as a high school Algebra 2 teacher! In a few weeks, James went from being a substitute teacher to a certified math teacher in an inner city school. He checks his “Other” folder on Facebook much more frequently.



“You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.” Eleanor Roosevelt


There are so many reasons students leave college. For Jennifer, she reached a moment in her life when everything seemed overwhelming. She had a nervous breakdown and left her classes, taking a semester of all Fs with her. Not much had been going her way. Life happened. Things began to change when she received a phone call from an ODC staff member offering her the glimmer of hope she was desperately seeking. Jennifer was a timid person with shakiness in her voice and was suspicious about the person calling to help her graduate. She had already come up with several reasons not to finish her degree.

Jennifer also owed a large debt to the University from her last semester. However, unlike many students, she had been paying \$100 a month for at least two years to pay down her balance. It was a clear indication of the dedication she had inside. She knew that paying off the debt was the right thing to do, even if she never graduated. Sadly, she was just four credit hours away!

After some strong convincing, Jennifer agreed to come in and meet with the advisor. She was delightful, but very insecure. During that initial conversation, she was readmitted and enrolled in her final four hours. She even applied for graduation! Several times during that meeting, Jennifer was overcome with emotion and began to cry. She said, “On Tuesday, I was a college dropout, but on Friday, I was applying for graduation.” What an incredible milestone for her!

Jennifer needed encouragement, though, as those last four hours were daunting. On multiple occasions, she called her advisor, fearful that she could not pass the classes. With constant encouragement from her advisor and through a multitude of tears, she did pass her classes. Her degree was awarded. Jennifer was invited in so she could personally receive her diploma. It could have been mailed to her, but she wanted to come in and receive it from the ODC advisor. She was also given an alumni license plate frame to always represent her new degree. More than the frame, though, Jennifer wanted hugs and took lots of pictures.

With the diploma in hand, Jennifer was beaming! She was confident and believed she could accomplish anything she set her mind to. Perhaps that is why she started a new job once she became a college graduate.



“Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.”


Dr. Seuss

There it is: a too-good-to-be-true moment when your phone rings to notify you of a degree you’ve already earned. Do you believe the guy on the phone who claims to be able to get it for you? The caller ID shows your last community college, but spammers sure seem smart these days. Not only that, but why complete the associate’s degree if you are working toward your bachelor’s? These were all thoughts Stacia had when she answered the call and weighed her options. She finally decided, and the answer was no. She was not interested in the unique offer to send her a diploma.

The man on the other end of the line was a vice president at that community college. Like many administrators who wear multiple hats, he was personally working on this degree completion project. He was determined not to give up on Stacia. He called her back; again, he went over her options and explained the value of her just saying “yes.” The answer was still “no,” but she had listened a little longer.

Stacia was working her way through college. She had attended the community college for three semesters and was working hard to pay her way through the university. She had a good job and worked as many hours as she could. Her pay went straight to her university bills. During an HR meeting at her job, she listened to a dialogue about her company’s pay scale: Earn a degree and receive a raise. Coincidentally, the community college VP called her a third time the next day. Armed with a promotion opportunity, she investigated this too-good-to-be-true phone call and found out it was legitimate. This time, she said, “Yes!” That afternoon, she was awarded her associate’s degree; the next day, she received a \$5.00 per hour raise.

In tears, Stacia called back to thank the persistent community college administrator. Completing her associate’s degree also saved her additional hours towards her bachelor’s. The entire thing still sounded too good to be true. Fortunately, though, she’d kept listening.



“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.” Albert Einstein


Quintrell worked at the local tire shop. It was about two blocks from the university campus. He had been attending the university on and off for several years but had not been back in almost three years. He was a very intelligent guy who ran into several obstacles that required him to increase his working hours and decrease his time for school. He knew he was close to graduating but was not sure how close.

On a cool afternoon, one of the degree completion advisors drove to a meeting on the other side of campus. It was not normal for him to drive from one side of campus to the other, but he did so this time due to a lunch break immediately following the meeting. Unfortunately, he ran over a nail on the way to lunch after the meeting. The mostly-flat tire had just enough air to make it to the tire store where Quintrell happened to work.

There were three cars already in line at the tire store when the advisor arrived. Quintrell encouraged him to leave it, but the advisor still had to get back to work on time, so Quintrell offered to drive him back to campus. During the brief drive, Quintrell asked the advisor what he did. The best he could offer was that he helped people graduate. Immediately, Quintrell began telling his story about how he was very close to graduation and what a blessing it would be in his life if someone could just help him overcome that last hurdle.

Upon arriving at the office, the advisor did some research and found Quintrell was one hour short of graduating. Coincidentally, the advisor was teaching a one-hour course the following weekend. It was exactly what Quintrell needed to graduate! Quintrell called the advisor to tell him the car was ready; little did he know his degree was almost ready, too! Within three hours, the tire issue was fixed, Quintrell was enrolled in his last credit hour, and he had completed his application for graduation. Throughout the process, he kept saying it was the best flat tire ever. As it turned out, the tire was unfixable but still under warranty. The advisor received a free new tire. It was a win-win situation for them both!

One weekend later, Quintrell made an A in that weekend course. Two months later, he dropped by the advisor's office to show off his cap and gown.



“Laughter is timeless, imagination has no age, and dreams are forever.” - Walt Disney

A trip to the most Magical Place on Earth often is years in the making. For some it means a stroll down Main Street USA, and for others it is a getaway from reality about which they had only previously dreamed. For Sandra, though, a trip to see Disney World in Florida represented so much more. It was a victory, a celebration, an acknowledgement of eight roller coaster years needed to accomplish a goal.

Back in 2007, Sandra began pursuing a marketing degree at the local metropolitan university. Every semester seemed to be a different struggle that prevented her from taking many classes. She was a single mother and needed to work full-time to keep food on the table for her son and herself. She overcame many personal hardships in her relationships at the time; nevertheless, she always tried to enroll in at least one semester per year to keep chipping away at her degree and keep her mind sharp. At one point, she owed a lot of money to the school and was going to take another long break until she could pay it off. That break had lasted two years when the phone rang, and on the other line was her guardian angel.


Sandra was close to graduating. Unfortunately, she did not realize how close. The guardian angel was an ODC advisor who explained all Sandra’s options for returning to school and completing her degree. Although Sandra owed the university a large sum of money, the angel was not deterred. She began working with Sandra on a scholarship opportunity and soon had her reenrolled. The angel believed in the value of a degree and knew Sandra’s commitment to achieving her goals. During this time, Sandra had been working full-time at a local arts and crafts chain. Between the angel’s scholarship assistance and Sandra’s persistent efforts, the balance was paid off.

Sandra graduated with her Bachelor of Science degree in marketing the following summer after over eight years of effort and with no balance left on her account. She immediately applied for a position as a “Sales Development Specialist Rep” at a local food service company. A bachelor’s degree was required, and she received the position. She loves this job and sees it as a career. Sandra and her son live a stable, comfortable life. Even after a recent round of cuts at her company, those with a bachelor’s degree were spared.

Sandra no longer has to worry about not being able to find a job. She also pointed out that there is a huge difference between her family members who have a degree and those who do not. She feels that those who have completed college have so much more than a piece of paper: They carry themselves differently. They know the true meaning of hard work and discipline, which she hopes to instill in her son.

Sandra still chats with the advisor she calls her “guardian angel.” They are currently chatting about pursuing a master’s degree. Last year, she called to tell the angel she had never previously taken a vacation with her son but had recently made the journey to Walt Disney World. It was an incredible experience and a reminder of the *magic* that can come from an angel.






“What you get by achieving your goals is not as important as what you become by achieving your goals.” Zig Ziglar

Decades ago, Jim went to college right out of high school, flunked out, decided to join the army, got married, and ended up having six children. Jim was, and still is, extremely successful in the banking industry and had no financial need to return to college. However, after seeing his wife complete her master's and begin her doctorate, in addition to putting all his children through college, he, too, wanted the satisfaction of completing a college education. He says, “I didn't want to be the dumbest one in the whole family!”

Jim started at a local community college by taking all his basic courses. He had over 60 hours and was contacted by a degree completion specialist working at that community college. Jim was told that based on his current work, he could change his major and receive his associate's degree. This would be a great first step toward the bachelor's degree he was interested in pursuing! He was very surprised and excited to finally be able to get something out of the time he had invested at the community college. Jim graduated from that community college in December 2013 and is on track to graduate with his B.S. in December 2016.

He says that the satisfaction of a degree is something that cannot be bought and proudly displays his new degree in his home. Jim has had a very successful career, but his accomplishments are being redefined each day by his achievements in the classroom.



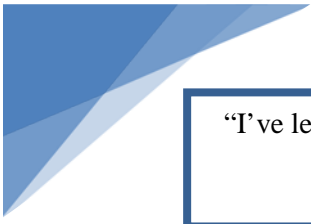
“It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves.” - Edmund Hillary

Kyle and Megan are a husband and wife who attended a local community college. They were pursuing aviation technology degrees but dropped out due to a mountain of bills. They assumed they had at least six classes left before they could ever graduate. They had just had a baby girl and were going to keep working full-time to make ends meet. The thought of going back to complete their degrees looked more and more impossible. That's when the phone rang. Megan received a call from a degree completion advisor explaining that she may be a lot closer to a diversified studies degree than an aviation technology degree. She was shocked. All she needed to do was pass a science course with a lab to graduate with the associate's degree. One class away!

Kyle and Megan have a unique last name. Unaware that they were married, the degree completion advisor asked Megan if she knew Kyle, who happened to be home and sitting next to her. He was in the same position! All they needed was one more course to both be graduates! Sadly, though, Megan and Kyle did not know how they could pay for both to take an additional class (at a cost of approximately \$900) while balancing full-time jobs and a young daughter. Determined to see this family succeed, the degree completion advisor secured tuition waivers for both of them. All they had to pay were the fees and the costs of the textbook, which they shared. They both took the course in the summer of 2012 and graduated with their associate's degrees. Megan went from being a mechanic to a higher-level administrative position, which has been a blessing for her. Kyle is still a mechanic but is exploring the possibility of a different career now that he has a degree and options.

Their degrees have been life-changing. They both received a pay raise after completing the degree, and that is what has impacted their family the most: not living paycheck to paycheck. Kyle is considering continuing his education by pursuing a bachelor's degree. Megan also has plans to open up her own business in the near future and says she would never have had the confidence to do so had she not finished her degree.

One phone call was made and a family was forever changed. Apparently, there was another way over that mountain.



“I’ve learned that you shouldn’t go through life with a catcher’s mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back.” Maya Angelou

Life has never been easy for Sabrina. She got pregnant her junior year of high school with a baby girl. While all her friends were preparing to take their ACTs their junior/senior year, she was becoming a mother and working at Sprint full-time to ensure she could provide for her newborn. She had always wanted to go out of state to college, move away, have fun, and live the traditional college life on campus, but because of her circumstances, she stayed at home, living with her mother. Sabrina visited the local university four separate times with intent to enroll. When she found out she would have to take placement tests, she panicked and decided again to wait. Once, an advisor even suggested starting at a community college, but she said, “No way!”

When her daughter was about two years old, the little girl was diagnosed with cancer. Two days after the diagnosis, Sabrina found out that she was pregnant again. Her daughter went through multiple surgeries and chemo treatments, and Sabrina continued to work at Sprint full-time to support herself, her daughter, and her soon- to-be son. After her son was born, her daughter was off chemotherapy and doing much better. When the baby boy was around six months old, Sabrina knew she needed to go to school to get an education, obtain a bachelor’s degree, get a better job, and pursue her dreams. So she went back to the university for a fifth time; this time, she was determined.

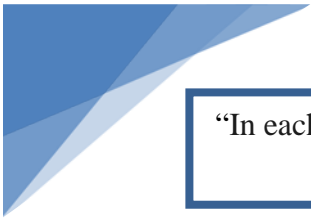
While waiting in the admissions office, Sabrina looked up to see an admissions officer who had met with her previously. He immediately recognized her. “We are getting you admitted today,” he said. She was so excited. She took her residual ACT and was admitted on the spot. She enrolled and started off with developmental math and reading courses, along with history and humanities. She failed both history and humanities her first semester, not having any idea how to study for college courses, nor any support in her life. Her first semester was a wake-up call: After failing those classes, she retook them, worked hard, and made Bs the second time around!

Over the next five years, she continued to face multiple obstacles. At one point, she lived in an apartment with her mom about eight miles from campus. She had been laid off at her job and was struggling to find another since she had no degree or other experience. She also had class at nine a.m. but no car, so she walked the entire eight miles each direction, beginning at five a.m., to make it to her intersession class. She encountered so many hurdles during her time at the university, but she was able to overcome them. Her kids were her constant motivation.

In May 2014, Sabrina walked at graduation, as she thought she was done with her bachelor's in broadcasting/professional media. Unfortunately, there was yet another obstacle in her path: Her overall GPA was too low. She just needed to make an A in one more class in order to have an acceptable GPA. A degree completion specialist contacted her and convinced her to come back to school, again. When she went to enroll, she found she owed too much money to the school and had a hold on her account. The degree completion specialist took her personally to an advisor in financial aid who strongly believed in her story and took the opportunity to make a difference. The advisor overrode the hold and let her take one more course. Sabrina made the grade she needed and received her B.A. that December.

Today, Sabrina recalls that December day as one of the most memorable and special days of her life. The impact of the degree is beyond measure. She is now living in Chicago, studying for her GRE, and applying to a master's program. She is also in the process of applying for a film director position at Columbia College Chicago, which is her dream. She said this degree means the world to her and her family, as she is the only one of them with a degree. She would never be where she is today without her bachelor's degree. Her daughter has been inspired by the entire story and even tells Sabrina that she wants to move to Oklahoma so she can go to the same university when she is old enough, just like her mother.






“In each family a story is playing itself out, and each family's story embodies its hope and despair.” Augustus Napier

Daniel was hard-headed. He had several obstacles in his life keeping him from graduating. His GPA was on the minimum border. He had one class left to graduate but kept hitting roadblocks. His three brothers and father all graduated from the same university, but he was ready to give up and walk away. In fact, he did give up for a year. Daniel was frustrated . . . and mad . . . and sad . . . and embarrassed. His family was frustrated, too. His mom recounted, “I have three other sons and my husband [who] all graduated from there. I prayed all the time for him to finish too. He just kept hitting roadblocks, and as a parent there was nothing I could do. I was so frustrated that if the university sent something to my house, I put it straight into the trash.” Daniel was married and ready to move on. Unfortunately, he had no diploma in hand.

The phone rang. On the end of the line was a degree completion advisor from the university he had given up on. There was still hope. The advisor was absolutely convinced Daniel could do it, given one more try. She implored him to try again, which he did. As his mom explained, “She gave him her cell number to text with questions and said text every day if you want until you get this degree, and he did. She told him what to do, and he did it. Now he is a graduate too.”

The family was overcome with excitement. Daniel’s wife and mom went to that university campus a few weeks later with flowers in hand. After meeting with the degree completion advisor who made the call, they presented her with the flowers. “I didn’t even know what I was praying for,” the mother said through streaming tears. “I mean God could part the Red Sea, but . . . hmmm; He put [the advisor] in his life for this reason I brought her those flowers because I had to hug her neck, and her name is now in the fabric of our family’s history. I don’t take that lightly.”

Now, Daniel, his father, and his three brothers are all proud alumni.



“The difference between school and life? In school, you're taught a lesson and then given a test. In life, you're given a test that teaches you a lesson.” Tom Bodett


Sometimes, calls about degree completion can become much more complicated than we expected. One of the greatest stories involves Tom. Tom worked hard and was very close to his degree but met the love of his life and moved from Oklahoma to the west coast. He was very athletic and passionate about life. He was an avid snowboarder, which is rare in itself for an Oklahoman. Sadly, due to a tragic snowboarding accident, Tom passed away a few years ago.

Tom's wife faced the decision no one wants to make about organ donation. Since she was seven months pregnant, it was certainly a lot to deal with. However, she knew it was the right thing to do. Tom did not survive that mountain, but there are three organ recipients who have new chances at life due to his wife's heroic decision.

The University was not aware of any of this until that crazy cold call when Tom's wife answered the phone and had to let us know that Tom had passed away. We don't think it was a coincidence that it happened to be the one-year anniversary of his death. Moved by Tom and his wife, the university granted him with a posthumous degree that Tom was only three classes from achieving on his own. Two months later, Tom's wife and daughter showed up at graduation and received his posthumous bachelor's degree.

In many of these stories, you heard of degree completion staff being referred to as guardian angels, overcoming what seemed to be insurmountable odds that kept students from graduating. In this story, we were reminded how it may have been our own guardian angel, in Tom, who led us to connect with his wife on the anniversary of his death.

A college education can change generations. Thank goodness Tom's daughter will always know her dad was a college graduate, and more importantly, a heroic organ donor.



For more information about the University of Central Oklahoma and
Operation Degree Completion, visit www.uco.edu/degreecompletion.

