

UW Oshkosh staff make dying wish come true

by Allison Reineck - Tuesday, November 16, 2010

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/7081/uw-oshkosh-staff-make-dying-wish-come-true/>

In the midst of his senior year, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh student Eric Salzwedel learned that his father had terminal cancer.

Salzwedel, a human services major from Columbus, Wis., and his family had high hopes that George, Salzwedel's father, would see his son graduate at the Dec. 18 commencement ceremony.

But due to the rapid spread of the cancer, Gretchen Lambert, a caregiver at Southern Care Hospice, understood that time was not on his side. After learning that one of George's last wishes was to see his son graduate, she made a phone call to UW Oshkosh.

"Gretchen contacted the Dean of Students office. She explained the situation with Eric's father and said it was his wish to see Eric graduate, but his prognosis was grim," said Debbie Gray Patton, assistant dean of students.

The staff from the Dean of Students office and other departments of the Student Affairs division is no stranger to the emergencies students and their family's experience. UW Oshkosh Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Petra Roter said the Student Affairs division serves as an advocate and support for students and parents. However, the request to perform an early graduation ceremony was a new one.

"I like to think that our staff addresses each situation as unique and keep in mind what is important to the individual presenting," Roter said. "This personalized approach is student-centered and integral to the mission and values of the division and its staff."

Fulfilling a father's wish

On Nov. 2, Gray Patton contacted Lisa Danielson, UWO registrar, to see what could be done for Salzwedel and his family. Between the two staff members, they were able to prepare for a recognition ceremony in a matter of hours.

"I was sitting at my desk working when Debbie came to me and told me Eric's story," Danielson said. "I then checked Eric's records regarding his graduation and whether or not he would graduate if he passes all his classes this fall."

Danielson knew they needed to act fast.

"It wasn't a question of 'if,' it was a question of 'when,'" Danielson said. "I wanted to make this special for the family by bringing a few moments of happiness to a family that had so much sadness."

At about 4 p.m. Danielson went to the Chancellor's Office to explain what she needed for the recognition

ceremony. Together, Danielson and Mary Simon, administrative assistant to the chancellor, gathered commencement gowns and items for the recognition ceremony.

“I rushed home around 4:45 p.m., fed the kids and got in the car by 5:15 p.m.,” Danielson said.

An hour later, Danielson performed a surprise “graduation” ceremony at the Salzwedel home in Columbus. Salzwedel was presented with a diploma cover and moved the tassel from one side of his graduation cap to the other.

“In a way I was shocked that someone from the University would come down to do this for me and my dad,” Salzwedel said.

Salzwedel’s father was extremely happy to witness his son’s graduation. “He was alert and gave a small speech about how proud he was of Eric and that he will be watching Eric cross the stage in December,” Danielson said.

Salzwedel’s mother, siblings and other relatives were there to witness the event as well.

After completing the ceremony, Danielson left the Salzwedel home, and as she drove back to Oshkosh, she thought about how emotional she would be during the December ceremony. The next morning, Lambert notified Gray Patton and Danielson that George had died.

“I did not know that George was within hours of passing when I met him,” Danielson said.

For both Gray Patton and Danielson, fulfilling this request was a life-changing experience.

“This had an incredibly profound impact on all who were involved,” Gray Patton said. “You really don’t know going into a situation how much a simple request can mean.”

UWO’s caring, compassionate community

Prior to the special graduation ceremony, Salzwedel had received support from other UWO faculty and staff members.

“My human services professors were very understanding and offered a lot of support,” Salzwedel said. “I had stayed home the entire week prior to my special graduation, and after I came back for a day, one of my professors pulled me out into the hallway and told me to spend as much time with my dad as I could.”

Salzwedel believes that many people stereotype large, public universities as being uncaring of their students, but he says his story proves them wrong.

“I’m very blessed to be a part of this University, and I am so thankful for what the University did for my dad,” Salzwedel said.

Many people might see what was done for the Salzwedel family as going the extra mile, but UW Oshkosh Chancellor Richard H. Wells was not surprised when he learned what Danielson and Gray Patton had

done.

“I am often very pleased, but not surprised, by the deep care and understanding many of our faculty and staff demonstrate during the tough times we all go through as we pass through life,” Wells said. “We are truly blessed to be among so many caring people.”

As for Roter, the remarkable story instills her with a sense of pride.

“Our staff has made a dream come true, guided someone to overcome what was seen as an insurmountable obstacle, provided a helping hand and took the time to listen and care,” Roter said.

“We are blessed with committed, experienced staff who know that if our students are to be successful, we need to provide them with the skills and resources to overcome the obstacles life throws at all of us.”

Read more about Eric Salzwedel’s story in the media:

- NBC 26 — <http://www.nbc26.com/global/story.asp?s=13486874>
- Portage Daily Register — http://www.wiscnews.com/portagedailyregister/news/local/article_568f71ee-ee21-11df-9f50-001cc4c03286.html
- NBC 15 — http://www.nbc15.com/home/headlines/Local_Man_Granted_Final_Wish_Day_Before_he_Dies_108006774.html
- The Northwestern — <http://www.thenorthwestern.com/article/20101125/OSH0101/11250470/Man-s-dying-wish-to-see-son-s-graduation-granted>
- The Chicago Tribune — <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-wi-finalwish-graduat,0,3795584.story>