

Career shift, cancer didn't stop grad from achieving communication degree

by Alex Hummel - Thursday, May 09, 2013

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/27288/youre-finally-getting-the-old-man-off-campus-career-shift-cancer-didnt-stop-grad-from-achieving-communication-degree/>

Tim Thiede is the kind of guy who has nothing bad to say about much at all. So, he is naturally not one to groan about his former factory job. He's merely being honest with himself when he admits the work was not personally fulfilling to him.

"You'd go home and feel like you didn't accomplish much," said Thiede, a 48-year-old, single southwestern Wisconsin native.

"I was making \$14 an hour and had insurance," he said. "But, if you're not happy with it, why do it?"

When word of potential layoffs started circulating around work, Thiede figured he had nothing to lose. He made the decision to enroll at the then-nearby University of Wisconsin-Richland Center. Eventually, with some guidance from a faculty adviser, he pulled up stakes from the corner of the state where he had grown up. He continued pursuit of a college degree in a field that always fascinated him: broadcasting. Thiede enrolled in the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, continuing what would be a four-and-a-half-year long quest that not even a mid-journey bout with a rare form of cancer could halt.

"(His adviser) suggested UW Oshkosh because of the great radio-TV-film program," Thiede said. "I then decided to attend after a tour of the campus and also decided to attend full time since I was not married and had no children."

Thiede, who has since logged many hours behind the studio microphones of both UW Oshkosh's student-run 90.3 WRST-FM and his native-Richland Center's WRCO (as a summer intern) graduates with his degree on May 11. He credits the enduring support of his family back home and the unique family patchwork of residence hall co-workers, faculty and doctors that stitched together during his UW Oshkosh experience and survival from cancer with keeping him thriving.

"I say, 'You're finally getting the old man off campus,'" Thiede said.

Confronting cancer

The decision to come to UW Oshkosh wasn't an entirely easy one. He gave up a job. He forfeited his health insurance. Thiede said his family ties were – and are -- incredibly strong in southwestern Wisconsin, and, as he pondered his decision to attend college, his thoughts regularly focused on his aging parents and their needs. But, with their endorsement and encouragement, he made the decision to become a fulltime student at UW Oshkosh, even transplanting his life into the confines of nontraditional residence hall and community on campus.

Things were going well. Then, in January 2011, in the middle of his studies at UW Oshkosh, life threw Thiede and his career reboot a sharp curve.

“I was walking home from class and stopped and picked up something to eat and felt this pain,” Thiede said.

He drove himself to the emergency room where doctors told him he was likely suffering from appendicitis. “I said, ‘That’s weird because the pain is on my left side.’”

Follow up appointments with doctors confirmed the worst: Thiede had a rare form of appendix cancer. “First thing I thought was, ‘Call family right away,’” Thiede said, taking care to emphasize that family included his natural family and his UW Oshkosh Residence Life colleagues. “They were like family to me,” he said.

Luckily, Thiede’s quick action – in the thick of his studies at UW Oshkosh – saved his life.

Doctors told him waiting much longer to address the pain in his abdomen could have led to a rupture of his tumor. A course of chemotherapy was eventually prescribed, sometimes requiring tiring trips back and forth between his hometown and his college town. But Thiede said the support from both of his families was so tremendous, it allowed him to stay focused on his academic goal. The local hospital treating him reached out to help beyond medicine. Thiede, who had no health insurance as he pursued a new degree and life, had his medical costs largely covered.

“That’s one of the things that drove me,” he said. “I wanted to get my studies done... This was my dream and I wanted to achieve it... I came home from the hospital and then went back to Gruenhagen (Conference Center, where he was living). The community advisors in Gruenhagen put up a big banner – ‘Get Well Soon.’ They put cards up on my door.”

Thiede said the UW Oshkosh Dean of Students office staff was also at the ready during his recovery. UW Oshkosh Coordinator for Students with Disabilities Jim Schlinsog and his colleagues advised Thiede to consider taking a year off from his studies to heal, “not just physically, but emotionally,” he said.

“But I stuck with it,” Thiede said, adding that online courses and special accommodations helped him continue toward his degree at UW Oshkosh while conquering cancer. “I thought, ‘This is my dream. I wanted to pursue it. I’m not going to let cancer overtake me.’”

It didn’t. He still has a port in his chest. He still gets regular check-ups. But his cancer is in remission. His degree: achieved.

“He always was upbeat, positive and optimistic – he wasn’t going to let anything stop him,” Schlinsog said.

Degree in sights

Thiede’s not one to boast. But it’s not hard to notice the sense of accomplishment he exudes as he shares his story. He is equally proud of the team of peers and campus co-workers who, through his employment

in UW Oshkosh residence halls, provide a source of normalcy and camaraderie. The opportunity to work on campus and with so tight-knit a team was instrumental to his healing, Thiede said.

“Everyone who works here at Evans (Hall) really respects Tim, understands what he has gone through and basically loves his personality,” said Cason Schroeder, a fellow residence hall staff member.

“He was in here just today talking about how he did on his last final,” Schroeder said. “He was super excited to graduate.”

Thiede also gives tremendous credit for his perseverance and achievement of his degree this spring to the WRST-FM staff and colleagues at WRCO AM-FM in Richland Center. At the latter, station staff and managers gave him a rare opportunity: ample time to get behind the microphone, hone his craft and get on the airwaves in his hometown.

“Mom would bake homemade cinnamon rolls and take them to station,” Thiede said. “... I went to the bank and people said, ‘Yeah, we had some customers in here, and they said ‘Who is the new guy on the radio station?’”

Thiede will officially earn his degree alongside more than 1,300 UW Oshkosh undergraduate and graduate students at spring 2013 Commencement on Saturday, May 11. He said the network of contacts he has established in his experience at WRST-FM and in his summer internships will help launch his new career when the ceremonies end.

It will be the culmination of what Thiede describes as “a roller coaster ride” during his UW Oshkosh journey.

Given the confluence of supporters that emerged in his higher-educational home – people who rose up to help him heal and keep moving forward toward his degree -- Thiede said he and his family back home often wonder whether fate played any role in his choice to become a Titan.

“My mom and dad said, ‘Maybe there was a reason you came to Oshkosh,’” he said.

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