

THE DECREE

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Children Often Lead Parents Back to School, Degree



Ariana Atwell with son, Noah
Photos for graduation stories provided by the subjects

Ariana Atwell

When she was younger, Ariana Atwell was not so committed to school. As a result, her grades were mediocre and she began her collegiate career at a two-year college, Wake Tech in Raleigh.

The 24-year-old, a native of Grand Forks, North Dakota, took four years to earn an associate's degree. Even then she was still uncertain of her career path. Then her son was born.

“After having my son,” she said. “I made more of an effort to pick a career.”

Influenced in part by her mother, a bookkeeper and tax preparer, as well as her own desire to leave her job at the U.S. Postal Service, Atwell chose accounting and enrolled at Wesleyan's ASPIRE program. The evening and on-line classes would allow her to continue working full-time as a letter carrier.

Like many ASPIRE students, Atwell balanced a full-time job, family obligations, her social life and school. “It was hard to be in school full-time and work my 50-60-hour week at the post office,” she related. “Most evenings I came home exhausted and didn't get to spend much time with my son. I sacrificed a majority of my social life because I simply didn't have the time.”

At Wake Tech and Wesleyan, Atwell began to apply herself more. Guided by her professors, she honed both her study skills and her writing style. “I was pretty good in math, but my writing skills weren't the best,” she said. “I would write the way I talked and sometimes my teachers couldn't understand what I was trying to say.”

She credited the assistance she received from her family for helping her to finish her Wesleyan degree. “My family was my biggest support system and helped me with my son,” she said. “No matter how stressful it got to balance school with other parts of my life, they always encouraged me to keep going. You have to be really organized, determined, and disciplined to work full time and go to school full time and still make good grades.”

Atwell recalled that she came close to stopping her education. A stressful period almost derailed her progress when she was still at Wake Tech. “I had a breakdown in 2015, right before graduation, because I was so stressed with taking seven classes a semester and working long hours on top of my regular life,” she said. “I cried and let out all my frustrations and then I buckled down and kept pushing. My goal was to graduate and that's what I focused on. It wasn't easy and there were many nights I wanted to give up, but my son was a big part of my inspiration and he helped me to stay grounded.”

Atwell's already taken the next step in her career. Last January, in anticipation of her April 28 graduation, she accepted a job as a finance coordinator through an accounting temporary agen-

cy. Since then she's taken a permanent position at the firm, with the new title of Finance Associate Level 1. She intends to enroll in a master's program next fall and then sit for the CPA exam.

Letisha Banks

Letisha Banks graduated from the Goldsboro ASPIRE program at age 43, on her second attempt at college.

Like Atwell, she was led back to school by her child. She hoped to inspire her son through her pursuit of a college degree.

Banks' son is a student at UNC-Charlotte. “I've always stressed to him the importance of education,” she said. “I wanted to lead by example.”

Again, with her son in mind, she also wanted to finish a degree that she had begun



Banks

right after high school in 1992. “I also tell him that it's important to finish what you started,” she said.

Right after high school, Banks enrolled at UNC-Pembroke, in part because friends went there. She took classes for three semesters, but left after she recognized that the class sizes and the diversity of the student body were not right for her. “Because of feeling somewhat lost and ill prepared, I dropped out,” she related.

Along with hearing positive feedback about the college from friends, she was attracted to Wesleyan by the smaller class sizes.

During her second college experience, Banks, a double major in psychology and organizational administration, was able to strike a better balance among school, work, and the raising of her son. “He was in high school,” Banks said, “and there were many parental challenges,” among them the financing of his college education.

At Wesleyan, she said that one highlight for her was “the awesome instructors.”

Now more so than in the past, she said she enjoyed debating her professors in class.

Recognized as an “Adult Studies Outstanding Student,” Banks is now employed as a marketing executive at Curtis Media, a position she secured with the help of ASPIRE administrator Laura Estes.

Mylene Potter

After high school, Mylene Potter enrolled in her local community college to become a paralegal, her mother's field. But she found the course unfulfilling.

“It was what I thought I wanted, but a few months into the program, I became disinterested in the profession,” she recalled. “I tried to continue with my courses, but like a lot of my peers, I wasn't interested in school and wasn't quite sure what my calling was.”

So, Potter joined the United States Air Force, hoping for “a fresh start.” The 39-year-old Goldsboro resident served in administrative positions before she became a records specialist at Travis AFB in California. After leaving the Air

Force, while still in Germany with her family, she began to substitute teach at her children's school. Along with the classes she had taught to service members at Travis, that experience convinced her that she would make a career of teaching.

“I fell in love with the education profession,” she said.

Back in North Carolina, Potter worked for a time as an insurance agent, but she soon decided to return to higher education. With encouragement from her husband, and an endorsement from her father, Paul Thompson, a Wesleyan graduate, she registered for classes at the ASPIRE program's Goldsboro site. “Going back to college is hard enough as a working adult, but starting with a blank slate was daunting,” she said. “But I knew the support I needed was there.”

As with many ASPIRE students, there were plenty of challenges. There were rusty writing skills that required improvement. There were the late nights needed to complete homework after a full day at the office. There were weekend chores that had been left undone during a busy week. There was a period of unemployment (necessitated by her student-teaching). “It was somewhat of a hardship on my family,” Potter said.

When she was handed her diploma by President Clark, Potter became the first Goldsboro student to graduate with a degree in elementary education. While still working in insurance, Potter is now seeking a full-time teaching position for the fall.

“I never doubted that I wanted to be a teacher,” she said. “I love to teach and make a difference in the lives of the children. Nothing is better than seeing a student have that ah-ha moment after learning to spell or get their multiplication right.”

Seniors Celebrate On Sun-Splashed Graduation Day

The commencement ceremony returned to the outdoors April 28, as Wesleyan honored its 2018 graduates from the traditional and ASPIRE programs.

On a warm sunny day, the graduates and their families listened to a commencement address from Tarboro native Janice Bryant Howroyd, who connected with the crowd while she shared stories from her childhood and related advice and highlights from a career as the first African-American woman to lead a billion-dollar corporation, The ActOne Group.

Following the address, several awards were given during the ceremony. Senior Carolyn Davern was presented the Algonon Sydney Sullivan Award for academic excellence and service to the Wesleyan community, while Lucas Koons earned the President's Cup for attaining a high overall grade point average. Both Davern and Koons graduated summa cum laude.

Dr. Jay Quinan, an associate professor of psychology and the chair of the Education and Social Sciences Division, was named “Exemplary Teacher,” after receiving nominations from students. Dr. Steve Ferebee and former Library Director Kathy Winslow were granted emeritus status.

(Staff writer Johnathan Pickler interviewed five traditional-day students in the run-up to the ceremony.)

As the 2017-2018 school year approaches an end, it only means one thing... There will be a new graduating class in a couple of days. There are many seniors who will be walking across the stage on April 28th. I was lucky enough to gain info on some of our successful graduating seniors.

Adrian Moore had some words of advice for incoming freshmen. “Don't be afraid to step outside the box and get involved,” said Moore. “Meet different people and don't settle for anything.”

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NCWC Greenville Student Finishes 32 Years After First Try at College

At 52, Steven Lassiter is proud that he persevered, overcame his own self-doubts, and earned a college degree 32 years after his high school graduation.

A New Haven, Connecticut native, Lassiter earned a degree in criminal justice through Wesleyan's ASPIRE program, which he began in 2011. He works in the Greenville area.

Lassiter was interviewed by the Decree after the April 28 graduation ceremony.

Q. Describe your first attempt at earning a degree.

A. I first enrolled in college beginning in the fall of 1986 after completing high school. I never thought that I was good enough to attend college, but some friends and I decided to attend the local community college. I chose to study accounting since I liked math and numbers. I had planned to complete college and become an accountant. After a few weeks, the dream failed, and I left school and returned to the work force. I just didn't have the motivation and support needed to keep going.

Q. Then you moved to the area from your home state of Connecticut.

A. Work and family life led me to North Carolina in 1994. While working in manufacturing, I looked into Pitt Community College, but after taking a beginner typing course I once again returned to the work force. I didn't have the desire to find other courses, and family considerations outweighed the need to spend time chasing a college degree.

Q. Talk about your third attempt.

A. Many years later while working in criminal justice, I wanted to advance to a higher position. It became clear that I would need to get a college degree. The only obstacle was me. I kept telling myself that I was too old to attend college and that I had missed so much learning that I wouldn't be able to keep up with the changes that had occurred over the years. I sought input from professionals. One day I went to Pitt and found Phillip Baggett in the criminal justice department. Mr. Baggett informed me that the obstacles I had envisioned were only in my head. If I really wanted to get a degree, he assured me that it was possible. I then went home and talked to my children and family. They were excited and supported me. So I went back to Pitt and signed up.

Q. What led you to NCWC?

A. When I was completing my last semester at Pitt, my advisor asked me if I planned to further my education. I was excited about completing something I never thought I would ever do. She gave me a pamphlet for Wesleyan and put me in touch with a representative from ASPIRE.

Q. What was the biggest adjustment or challenge for you in terms of academics? How did you address the issue?

A. Besides being one of the oldest students in class, the biggest challenge was that I had last attended school in 1986 (25 years earlier). During that time,

I wasn't the greatest student, graduating in the lower 25 percent of my high school class. In college I was in classes with some students who weren't even born when I went to high school. Besides the age gap, I was a working adult with a full-time job and I was a single father of two children. It helped that there were some older adults in my classes and that the younger students looked forward to connecting with older adults for that life experience that can't be learned from a textbook. My family and friends encouraged me to strive for success. I'd always taught my children to work hard and not give up on their dreams and I used this to ignite my own desire.

Q. Why did you select criminal justice as your major?

A. I was working in this field and I enjoyed what I did for a living. Every day I wanted to elevate my level of knowledge to do more in the field.

Q. Describe your current job and talk about possible job or career changes you expect to make with your degree.

A. I work for the Pitt County Sheriff's Office stationed in the detention center. I've been there for the last ten years. On



Lassiter

January 28th, I was promoted to supervising sergeant in one of the housing areas. I supervise four detention officers of various skills and experience. Together we monitor a large housing unit divided into four separate dormitories. I have no plans of changing my career at this time, except that I'd like to get promoted. I plan to use the information and skills learned while

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Plyler Elected SGA President

By Quinn Tobias
Editor-at-Large

After three attempts at electing the new SGA president, the students chose freshman Will Plyler over junior Ariel Wilson by three votes.

Wesleyan held its first election in two years after Emanuel Williams, the former SGA President, graduated. The election process proved to be strenuous for first-year Director of Student Activities Elliot Smith.

During the first attempt, it was determined that the voters were improperly influenced at a balloting location. “I was made aware of an issue at the voting booth,” Smith said. “A student running the voting booth influenced the voters.”

While Smith declined to comment on whom the influence favored, Wilson revealed that she was the beneficiary. More than 200 students took part in the initial voting, but participation dwindled in the second attempt and the two candidates tied with 70 votes apiece.

Smith commented on the election process: “We followed the SGA constitution,” he said. “Whenever there's a re-vote, you lose participants.”

Both candidates acknowledged the stress of the multiple rounds of voting. “Three ballots have been a real exercise in faith,” Plyler said. “I prayed a lot about the outcomes.”

Wilson also expressed frustration. “This has not been fun at all,” she said. “It's frustrating not for myself but for the inconvenience of the students.”

As SGA President, Plyler hopes to increase retention at Wesleyan. “I want to

create an atmosphere that makes upper-classmen want to stay,” he said. He identified the current housing crisis as an area that can be improved. “Students are being shipped to Wesleyan Inn or forced to pay for a single dorm,” Plyler explained. “This could push students away. I'm on board with growing the school as long as it's not done at the expense of the upperclassmen.”

Having chosen Wesleyan due to the spirituality on campus, Plyler would like to increase Christian leadership at the school. “I don't want to get into office and convert everyone,” Plyler said. “But this is a Christian school and faith is important to me.” He said he had developed a previous relationship with President Dewey Clark; the two attend the same church.

In addition to the school's religious affiliation, the new music program attracted Plyler to stay in his hometown of Rocky Mount. He said he was encouraged to run for SGA president by friends and faculty and he feels he can make a positive impact on campus. He attributes his successful run to his campaign manager, Blaise Gourley, a freshman marketing major who helped by hanging posters and canvassing students.

After running unopposed, Joseph Lloyd returns as the SGA Vice President and Aayushma Shrestha returns for her second term as the SGA Secretary. Runner-up Wilson will work on the cabinet as SGA's Treasurer.

Despite winning the election his freshman year, Plyler is unsure of his future. “I'm not sure I want to hold the position for three years,” he said.