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Daughter opens door to the UO

By Bob Welch

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“Teach your parents well.”

— Graham Nash

It was her first day of school and Beckie was scared.

Everything was new.

Would the other students accept her? Could she find her classrooms? Was she dressed right?

Fortunately, Beckie Jones of Springfield had her daughter to lean on.

“There’s nothing more ironic and special than having your daughter walk you to class on that first day of school,” says Jones, now 40, recalling her debut at the University of Oregon in September 2011.

Jones, who had previously taken classes at Lane Community College, graduated last month with a degree from the UO’s School of Journalism & Communication.

Daughter Noelle, 19, is studying history, humanities and creative writing at the UO.

The Joneses’ story, which also involves Beckie’s husband and Noelle’s father, Jeremy, is a tribute not only to a family that values education, but to a UO program they credit with opening the door of possibilities.

The family arrived in Springfield in 1995 from California. Jeremy, now 41, was making about \$100,000 a year as a manager of a Mattress Land store on Gateway. But when the economy slumped in 2008, the company went out of business.

Jeremy, who had a degree from a junior college, worked briefly for another mattress company but that didn’t

work out. Beckie, amid some stints at LCC, did volunteer work in the schools and worked part-time as an educational assistant with the Springfield School District.

“I was bouncing around trying to find a career,” Jeremy says. “At one point I thought we were going to lose our house to foreclosure.”

The only silver lining seemed to be Noelle. In an attempt to increase the number of low-income students who enroll and succeed, the UO offers a program called SAIL: Summer Academy to Inspire Learning.

And because the school she was attending at the time, Springfield Middle, had enough low-income students to qualify for the SAIL program, Noelle was nominated by a teacher to attend.

It changed her life.

SAIL offers low-income students a chance to attend a free one-week class each summer for four years. The idea is to help such kids realize that college is a possibility.

It worked.

“Once I got on that campus I realized this is an actual place, not just an idea that was unattainable for me because we didn’t have the money,” Noelle says.

She started taking College Now courses at Springfield High School; by the time she graduated in 2011 she already had earned 72 college credits and a 3.78 GPA.

She started at the UO last fall and soon was offered a job working part time in the psychology department as a research assistant.

Meanwhile, as Noelle was soaring, Beckie and Jeremy were not.

“She’s getting an education and a paycheck and we’re sitting home unemployed and I’m thinking: What’s wrong with this picture?” Beckie says.

“Our careers were going nowhere,” Jeremy says, “and the bottom had dropped out for us. So, we decided we had nothing to lose.”

They enrolled at UO, too.

With money in savings and with loans, they decided to finish up degrees they had started two decades before.

Their mentor as they made the transition back to college in their late 30s?

Noelle.

“The SAIL program gave a huge gift to our daughter, who then passed it on to us,” Beckie says. “They set up a chain reaction that led to us going back and completing our educations.”

She and Jeremy credit SAIL for helping them to feel comfortable on campus.

“I think what we do is personalize education for people,” says Lara Fernandez, SAIL’s executive director. “It

gives education a personality that people can attach themselves to so instead of a big foreign place they might have to go to spend a lot of money. It makes education comfortable.”

At times, father and daughter were having friendly contests about who could get the higher GPA. “But, then,” he confesses, “she’s the one who edited all my papers.”

Last June, Jeremy graduated with a degree in sociology — and a 4.05 GPA. On Sept. 8, Beckie graduated with a degree in journalism and a minor in communication.

Fernandez says she’s never seen anything like it in the program’s seven years.

“We’ve had parents who got curious and maybe took a class or two, but this is quite the circumstance,” she says. “To really take the plunge and go for it. Amazing.”

No, Beckie and Jeremy haven’t landed big-time jobs since graduating. But they have lots of irons in the fires, hope and an appreciation for their back-to-school experience.

They’d like jobs. But neither has ruled out another possibility that Noelle is considering, too: grad school.

At this rate, there may be no keeping up with the Joneses.

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