



Team Gouge

By Celia Tarnowski
Photos by Jeff Frey

Discovering the Benefits of a College Education and Reinventing Careers

Any adventure is more enjoyable when you experience it with someone special. From marriage to enrolling in college as nontraditional students, John and Sherri Gouge are “traveling companions” on life’s journey. This partnership made reaching their goal of graduation in 2007, all the more meaningful. John and Sherri have been together since they were Northwood School sweethearts some 20 years ago. Married for 15 years, they have four children and strong family and community ties to northern Wisconsin.

When the Gouges found their careers at a crossroads, they took a leap of faith and decided to pursue professions they felt passionate about, even if it meant going back to college as nontraditional students who were juggling family and other full-time commitments. They graduated from Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College-Superior in 2007, John with a technical diploma in Welding and Sherri with an associate degree in Nursing. They both feel it was a great move personally and professionally and are already working in terrific jobs in their chosen fields. John is employed as a taconite facilities worker with BNSF railroad, and Sherri was recently hired by Miller Dwan Medical Center in Duluth in the rehab/mental health float pool.

Many nontraditional students come to WITC after working in the field for a number of years. Some just want to expand their current skill set, others, like the Gouges, enroll in a program because they want to change careers and recognize a credentialed education is the best way to start and the surest way to be successful.

John and Sherri Gouge

“Once I got into the class I discovered it was everything I had thought it would be and more!”

Sherri’s job history includes many years working in the service industry as a waitress and bartender, as well as managing a bar and restaurant she and John purchased with their parents.

When the local ambulance service requested they receive EMT training so they could volunteer with the local rescue squad, both Sherri and John went to WITC’s Rice Lake campus to take EMT courses. Sherri’s positive experience as an EMT volunteer led to her getting her Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) diploma from WITC-Superior.

While nursing assistants are in high demand around the area, the availability of work in their small town was not enough to support full-time employment. Sherri put her career as a nursing assistant on hold and went to work for Jack Link Corporation as an inventory control manager for six years. A natural caregiver, the desire to work in the medical field was always in the back of her mind, and she began giving serious consideration to going back to school to pursue her nursing degree.

During this time, Sherri’s grandmother was very ill battling cancer. A devoted granddaughter, she spent many hours at her side attending to her needs and making sure she was comfortable. On her deathbed, her grandmother told Sherri, “You need to make me a promise and you need to make you a promise that you will finish nursing school because that’s where you belong.”

Sherri considers that last conversation with her grandmother to be a very defining moment stating, “There was no doubt in my mind that it was really time to finish up.”

John worked for many years as a Senior Customer Service Engineer for Xerox. There came a point where he felt he had reached a level in his job where there were no longer any opportunities for upward mobility or growth. John decided to leave Xerox to pursue a more lucrative career. He went to work for a material handling company selling forklifts and material handling supplies and service. His role there included sales of equipment and service, as well as managing territory operations.

After a company downsizing, John attempted seeking other sales positions, but had difficulty finding a position. Frustrated with the job market, John knew he had to make a change but wasn’t sure where to start.

Deciding on a career path, especially a new one, can be a bit overwhelming. WITC offers career assessment tests that can help narrow the field and highlight areas of strength that would transition well into certain careers.

In John’s case, Sherri suggested he start by asking himself what he liked to do. John says, “I like to weld, but I don’t

know how to.” Sherri, who was already attending WITC, suggested that he go to WITC and enroll in the Welding program.

John was a bit hesitant about going back to school until he took advantage of WITC’s offer to try a shadow day. *(Potential students can spend a day shadowing classmates enrolled in a program they’re interested in. This gives them a firsthand look at the coursework, the facility and the instructor.)* Test driving the Welding program convinced John that WITC was the right choice.

“The instructor was good; the course was great, I loved the facility. I decided to give it a try. Once I got into the class, I discovered it was everything I had thought it would be and more.”

John also talked to people in the community who had good things to say about WITC and saw the welding abilities of some of the school’s graduates, which really impressed him. “I thought, wow, I’d like to be able to do that someday, too.”

What appealed to both John and Sherri was the opportunity to approach school the way that worked best for them as individuals. Sherri took four years to complete her program so that she could balance coursework with her role as wife and mother. John chose to attend college as a full-time student, taking what he refers to as “the fast track” to his diploma.

During one of their years in school, more was added to the couple’s already full plate when they were awarded temporary custody of their 14-year-old nephew



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Nursing - Associate Degree

- Two-year program
- Offered at Ashland, New Richmond, Rice Lake, and Superior
- Program encompasses compassion and caring with a scientific approach to promote optimal health for the individual, family, community, and society. At completion of the program, individuals are eligible to become a registered nurse through the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX). The WITC Nursing - Associate Degree program is accredited by the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission and approved by the Wisconsin Board of Nursing.

Welding

- Technical diploma
- One-year program
- Offered at Ashland, New Richmond, Rice Lake, and Superior
- Students learn the latest skills from experienced instructors and receive hands-on training. WITC follows the American Welding Society Skill Standards to provide useful welding theory, fabrication, layout, print reading, welding symbols, math, and welding codes.

who suffers from spina bifida and is paralyzed from the waist down.

Managing family and college could be tough at times, but the Gouges felt the experience also gave them the chance to model positive attributes such as: good study habits, time management and commitment to their children: Kayla, 14; Brooke, 10; Thomas, 7; and Alexus, 6. John and Sherri's parents also pitched in to help with the kids when schedules overlapped and to offer words of support and encouragement every step of the way. "Team Gouge" definitely had their own cheering section that shared in their pride when they reached graduation.

WITC's caring and supportive environment is something both can't say enough about. Sherri speaks of her college experience in glowing terms stating, "It's worth its weight in gold. Especially when you get a top-notch instructor like John Palmer, John's welding instructor. He was involved and invested in both of us ... our children, our schooling and our success. He made going to school a dream come true! The Nursing - Associate Degree program is difficult, but I loved every minute of it. I would never change my decision to go back to school."

Without a doubt, education has played a key role in this couple's current career success. When John first graduated, he had the opportunity to interview for a pipefitter position with Local 11 out of Duluth – his welding coursework gave him the skills he needed to help land the job. "I felt very confident of my welding skills thanks to the techniques we learned in my program." John says with a smile, "When they asked who in the group had experience welding, I

had no problem raising my hand and saying 'I'm a welder.'" John also applied for the position he now has with BNSF as a taconite facilities worker after graduation. He explains that during the interview process, "BNSF was concerned about my level of welding ability because along with maintenance, there is a lot of structural welding involved in the job." The skills John acquired in the Welding program definitely prepared him for what is needed on his job.

The Nursing - Associate Degree program provides active and engaged hands-on learning opportunities so students may explore different working environments and get on-the-job experiences in a variety of sites. Included among Sherri's work sites were St. Mary's Hospital in Superior; St. Luke's Hospital in Duluth; Head Start programs and the mental health unit at Miller Dwan Hospital.

Sherri felt well prepared and appreciated by the medical community she did her clinicals with saying, "People who come from our school are very well respected. I've talked to many people in the medical industry who say they would prefer to work with a WITC graduate because of their level of patient care, bedside manner and willingness to do any and all aspects of the job."

John and Sherri now look forward to enjoying rewarding careers in professions they hand picked at a time in life when many would be too afraid to take a risk and try something new. Just one more thing they get to do as a winning team.

—Celia Tarnowski is a marketing and public relations associate at WITC-Superior.