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Bachelor’s degree awarded posthumously, fulfilling dream of UWO student who died last year

Written by Grace Lim, University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

Mary “Christina” Moodie had a simple but powerful goal: to finish her college degree so her children could see the value of higher education. On Aug. 1, in an intimate ceremony inside the Chancellor’s Office at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh, her dream was fulfilled.

Chancellor Manohar Singh handed Christina’s diploma to her family, which included her husband, Barry, and children, Emmett and Kate; her parents, Alan Meyer and Mary Altenburg; and other family members. Also present were Provost Ed Martini, COLS Dean Anne Stevens, Registrar Jennifer Bonack and Chief of Staff Alex Hummel, who helped coordinate the posthumous degree conferral.

“Christina’s life reflected courage, devotion and a deep commitment to her children’s future,” Singh said. “When her family asked us to consider a posthumous degree, it was clear to everyone that we would honor her in this way, ensuring that her legacy endures through her children and through this University.”

Christina, a communications major, died unexpectedly of an underlying heart condition on July 3, 2024, at her Stevens Point home. She was 34.

With only a few credits left before graduation, her mother, Mary Altenburg, reached out to the University in hopes that Christina’s commitment and achievements could be formally recognized.

Posthumous degrees at UWO can be awarded if a student is within one semester of completing their studies and the request is endorsed by the registrar, college dean, provost and chancellor. Christina met those criteria.

Christina’s mom was deeply appreciative of the University’s efforts.

“The ceremony in the Chancellor’s office was more than a symbolic gesture—it was a profoundly meaningful moment for our entire family,” she said.

At the ceremony, Christina’s father, Alan, read her application essay, written in 2023, filling the room with her voice and her promise.

“The most significant success and challenge I have come to in my life is becoming a mother and raising my children. Caring for them and teaching them has been my greatest joy and the hardest thing I have ever done. It has developed a new level of patience, compassion and wisdom that I would not have without going through the last nine years of childrearing.”

Christina explained how she began her bachelor’s degree before her children were born but paused her studies to focus on her family.

“That was incredibly difficult for me,” she wrote in her essay. “I was so set on finishing my degree that it was hard to stop without completing it. Being there for my family is a high value for me so I knew I had to make that hard choice. I promised myself that when they were older that I would go back and finish the work I had started.”

Years later, Christina kept that promise.

“Now that my children are older, I am hoping to finish the goal that I had set for myself, completing my bachelor’s degree,” she wrote. “Finishing my degree is important to me because I want to set an example for my children. I want to show them how valuable higher education is and I want them to see me work hard to accomplish my goals.”

Bonack, the University’s registrar, said that reviewing Christina’s academic record and her application essay underscored just how deeply she wanted to finish her degree for her children.

“Christina was a very beautiful and gifted writer, which was evident in her essay,” Bonack said. “What struck me was her dedication to completing her education because she wanted to set an example for her children by finishing her degree and showing them that she was able to work hard and accomplish her goals. Her children were her greatest success in her life, and she wanted them to know that she was doing this for them.”

Christina’s mother, Mary, said being able to hold her daughter’s diploma in her hands brought a measure of comfort after a year of grief.

“Losing Christina so suddenly last year left a void that words can’t fully express. But seeing her dream fulfilled and knowing that her dedication and hard work were recognized, brought a sense of peace and healing that we truly needed,” she said. “She worked tirelessly toward her degree, not just for herself, but to set an example for her children. Receiving her diploma in person, surrounded by those who cared about her journey, helped us honor her legacy in a way that felt deeply personal and true to who she was.”