

Erica Thoman with mathematics professor Dave Cobb

TO TRUST MYSELF

As Brazilian author Paulo Coelho writes in his novel, “The Alchemist”, “When you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it.” Before coming to Donnelly College, student Erica Thoman wanted to believe that this quotation could be true for her. She was contemplating making some big changes in her life, and for her to be successful, she needed it to be true.

In 2018 Thoman was a wife, a mother of three, and a long-time employee at a Plaza-based financial services firm. What had begun as a file clerk position in 2006 had blossomed into a 12-year career that provided numerous promotions and lots of opportunities for personal growth. Thoman’s supervisors regularly encouraged her to get her degree so she could keep moving up the corporate ladder. Yet, even with so much going well, there was a tug at Thoman’s heart to make a move she had wanted to make for much of her life – she wanted to become a teacher.

Thoman spent part of her childhood not far from Donnelly’s campus. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she and her siblings eventually were all living in separate places. By the age of 13, Thoman was living with her dad when she became involved in reckless, dangerous and sometimes illegal behavior, a similar path to that of her brother who was a few years older and living with a friend. She ran away, became a ward of the state and finally landed with her older sister, who was also housing their mom. When Thoman was 15, her mom found a duplex near Washington High School in Kansas

City, Kansas where they would live together. Unfortunately, Thoman’s brother was unable to move with them. During this same period, he was convicted of a crime and sent to prison, where he remains today, 22 years later. Losing her brother to prison was a devastating blow for Thoman, as he had long been her protector, confidant and friend.

While the new home provided stability for her, it wasn’t enough to keep her in school. After dropping out of high school at the age of 17, Thoman obtained her GED and tried attending classes at a couple of local community colleges. When she realized none of those schools were a good fit for her, she decided she wasn’t ready for college. Instead, she focused on starting her life as a young adult, working, getting her first apartment and spending time with friends.

Within three years, Thoman was in a relationship and had become a mother to her son, now 13. It was during that time that a family friend told her about the file clerk job that she eventually obtained when her son was only 10 weeks old. But by the time her son was 8 months old, she had become single. Having seen firsthand the difficulties a single mother faces, Thoman moved back home so she and her mother could support each other on this new part of her journey.

For the next decade, Thoman’s job provided her with the stability she needed to raise her family. And while her professional life was going well, she was ready to use her God-given gifts in a new way. It was 2018, and Thoman was finally ready to turn toward her future and pursue her college degree.

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For as long as she could remember, Thoman had dreamed of becoming an elementary school teacher. As early as first grade, she recalled thinking teachers were the “coolest people in the world.” After having three kids of her own she knew this dream was more than just something she wanted to achieve, it was what she was called to do.

When it came to choosing a college, Donnelly was one of the few schools Thoman considered. She knew from past experience that a large community college would not be a good fit for her, and she remembered that a few friends had attended Donnelly in the past. After being accepted, she found the enrollment process for non-traditional students easy to navigate. She also noticed that everyone, faculty and staff alike, “seemed to genuinely care about students’ success.” She experienced this “Donnelly difference” in her first encounter with her academic advisor, Matt Emory. In her previous college experiences, she had found academic advising transactional, impersonal and non-productive. By contrast, her initial meeting with Emory was warm, caring and focused on her goals. She was also delighted to receive the prestigious Henry W. Bloch scholarship. This award is covering full tuition and fees for six semesters while she completes an associate degree at Donnelly and will pay for an additional six semesters while she completes a bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education at UMKC.

As a Donnelly student, Thoman has found that small classes and one-on-one attention from faculty have been critical to her success. She frequently visits the Tutoring Center and has developed relationships with many faculty members,

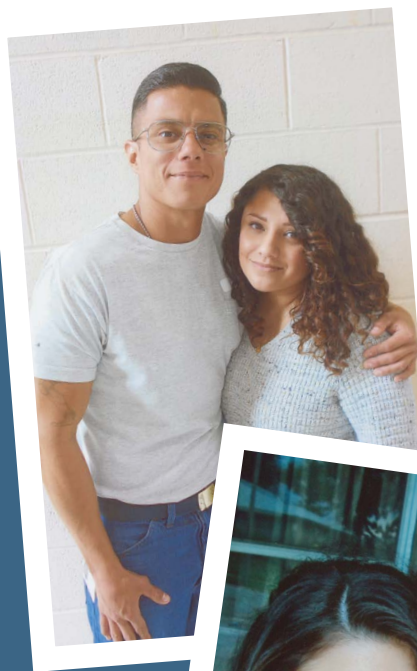
including a special bond with mathematics professor Dave Cobb. Thoman describes Cobb as “maybe the best teacher of all time” and “such a character.” She is especially fond of the daily “dad jokes” he tells to lighten the mood for students struggling with an intimidating subject like math.

These experiences were a relief to Thoman who said that while she felt comfortable at Donnelly right away, there was a part of her that still doubted she was supposed to be in college. It was October 2018, just two months after she enrolled, when Thoman was invited to attend SHINE, Donnelly’s annual gala. She was scheduled to serve as a student representative that evening, talking about her experiences with alumni and guests. The week before SHINE, Thoman was nervous about what to expect. She tried reminding herself that she had made the right choice in returning to college and that her life was meant to be on this path. Before she went to sleep, she wrote her favorite quote in her journal, hoping the universe was indeed working to help her achieve her dream.

The next evening, during the program at SHINE, Thoman was listening to Mariana Valles, a recent Donnelly graduate, when Valles recited the quote that Thoman had entered in her journal the night before – “When you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it.” At that moment, Thoman knew that indeed, the universe was conspiring to support her. “That gave me confirmation that I am in the right place. This is my school, and this is where I belong.” **D**

Today Thoman and her brother remain close and continue to inspire each other. Through Donnelly’s satellite program at Lansing Correctional Facility, Daniel Ramos has begun taking college classes. He is scheduled to be released in March 2020.

Nearly 10 years ago Thoman lost her mother, Janie Ramos, to cancer. She credits her mother with instilling in her the strength and drive she has today, and she feels she owes it to her mom’s legacy to be successful. She remembers her mother as a woman who was close to God and full of grace, especially when battling the illness eventually ended her life.



Erica Thoman with her brother, Daniel Ramos, and mother, Janie Ramos

